

Borja's story – potting against the odds

Borja Moronta awoke one morning in 2016 with no feeling in his left hand.

Little could he have known how the accident would shape him.

“I thought the feeling would come back in five minutes, but it didn't. Later a doctor told me that a nerve was trapped between the bones. I'd need surgery on the elbow to release and relocate the damaged nerve. Three weeks after the surgery, I moved to Edinburgh from Madrid. Despite graduating with a degree in Architecture, I wanted to start afresh.”

When I first approach Borja, he's on the cusp of becoming a full-time potter. Thanks in part to a 4000+ Instagram following, tableware orders are rolling in, and he is soon to open a sell-out Christmas shop.

Borja took up evening classes in January 2018 on the advice of his brother who is a physio. A year after surgery, his hand lacked strength. Initially, it was 'just for fun'. But soon, he was hooked and talked nothing but pottery.

He said: “The whole week I was hoping Monday would come. Throwing gave me a lot of satisfaction – I felt content at the wheel.”



Almost three years on, Borja appears in clay-spattered

overalls. He is slighter than I imagined, and sports tortoiseshell glasses and a fisherman beanie. This is Borja the artisan: outside the studio, he is said to resemble one of his pots!

We are on the ground floor of a Victorian primary school, just north of Holyrood Park. The same building houses Edinburgh Design School and Ceramics Workshop, where Borja learnt his craft.

The architect in Borja is immediately apparent as he shows me round his shared studio. He seems proud of the space, which has been thoughtfully reconfigured in a functional, minimalist vein. It is bright and deliciously warm –the kiln has been on. And the lofty, paned windows are completely frosted over.

We go upstairs to see the two throwing stations and drying shelves, which face the windows. Glazing and firing happen below, where there is a small table and a comfortable wicker armchair.

I have no difficulty in distinguishing what remains of Borja's work, which is quietly refined. There's a clutch of elegant vases, a small pile of plates on a low, wooden shelf and the odd mug and bowl – all in characteristically muted tones. Some contain sprigs of dried flowers. But really, the pots speak for themselves.

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As a student, Borja was tasked to design a house in Japan where you could 'enjoy the cold.' Multidisciplinary research into traditional Japanese culture led him to a number of ceramicists, including Takashi Endo, a favourite. Borja said: "I admire the delicacy of his work. It's amazing in every

sense.” Speaking of one of Endo’s bowls, he is reverential: “If you hold it, it barely exists.” As an emerging potter at ECW, this predilection for light vessels was encouraged: potters paid for firing according to the weight of their work.

Borja’s approach is both personal and analytical: he makes objects that he would find useful. And function determines form, as in the Japanese tradition. ‘We tend to drink tea slowly and cradle the cup – the mug’s design reflects this. Whereas a coffee cup calls for a quicker drink in the morning – thus its smaller size. This cup also gets refilled, hence the saucer.’ Yet these pots are more than functional objects. Borja aims to be ‘very precise and refined so that you can appreciate the object.’

A distinguishing feature of Borja’s work is his colour palette. He explained: “I like muted tones. My studio is a safe, relaxing place and my work reflects this. I don’t see myself ever working with bright colours.”

Borja spent the first lockdown investigating glaze, which he describes as ‘alchemy plus chemistry. By researching (in books) you can find out a lot, but there are infinite combinations.’ Each type of pot is the product of over 250 trials in which the variables (oxides, glazes, firing temperature, clay pairings) are endless.

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Instagram has served Borja well. As he noted: “We are visual beings, so we are influenced a lot by what we see. Instagram breaks a barrier and gives me a much wider audience.” As a skilled and experienced photographer, Borja has been able to harness the benefits of social media. His Instagram photos exude professionalism and perfectionism – not that he is afraid to humanise himself in writing.

Studying architecture, presentation mattered. But Borja also acknowledges the influence of his former employers, Lesley Stewart (of the Pastry Section) and Scott Smith (of Fhior), who also thrive on Instagram. For both professionals, the spectacle is an integral part of our experience. And Borja has an ongoing interest in this aspect of his craft.

He concluded: "For months I've been thinking I would like to bring ceramics and architecture together by exploring the installation side of what I do. Ceramics should be a way of living and moving in space."