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SEP/OCT 2018 | DISPLAY UNTIL 11/12/18

BRIGHT SPOT

DYNAMIC ARTISANS ARE MERGING CERAMICS WITH LIGHTING TO CREATE THEIR OWN SCULPTURAL WORKS OF ART. WE EXPLORE FOUR WHO ARE AT THE FOREFRONT.

WRITTEN BY SHANNON SHARPE

Thanks to a force of renowned craftspeople, lighting has evolved in recent years from mere fixture to work of art and, in some cases, status symbol. Likewise, ceramics have had a similar trajectory from their humble origins. Today's clay forms are both vessel and mode of artistic expression, and a new breed of ceramicists has emerged, combining these two mediums to create luxurious, one-of-a-kind fixtures.

ERIC ROINESTAD LOS ANGELES

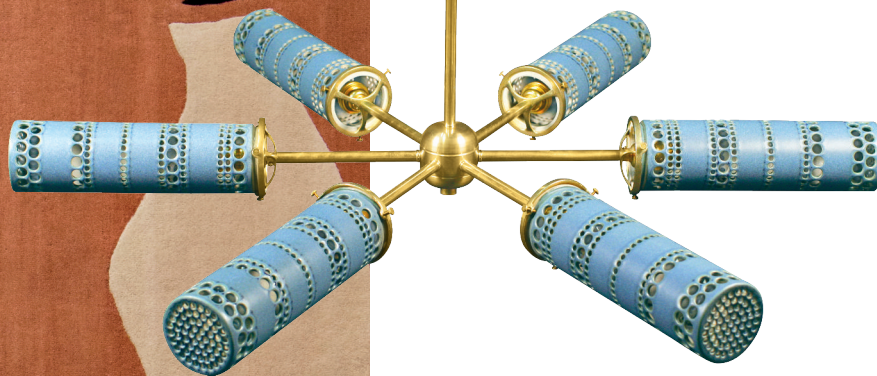
An evening ceramics class is what first drove Eric Roinestad's passion for clay. "My friend persuaded me to take it," he says. "After that I was hooked." It was a hobby until five years ago when furniture company Lawson-Fenning approached him about selling his precise, wheel-thrown vessels. His progression into lighting was spurred by David Alhadeff, owner of The Future Perfect. "He really pushed me to explore the possibilities of light," Roinestad says. "He encouraged going bigger, more sculptural and more complex."

The resulting dramatic pieces are inspired by everything from his California environment to ancient Etruscan forms to both historical and modern architecture—all designed with the goal of creating a visual dialogue. "Just because something has a function doesn't mean it can't be sculpture," he says. It's further evidence of the ongoing convergence between art and design. "People are just more aware of sculptural ceramics," he points out, "whether it is a light or something else."



PHOTO: COURTESY THE FUTURE PERFECT.

Clockwise from top left: Giselle Hicks' collaboration with Moving Mountains combines geometric forms with glowing orbs; Morse code inspires Ryan Mennealy's lighting; Brutalism informs these rugged candle holders from John Sheppard.



GISELLE HICKS

SNOWMASS VILLAGE,
COLORADO

Artisan Giselle Hicks has spent 20 years working in ceramics, but in all her material explorations and travels—she's lived, studied and worked in California, New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Montana—she never experimented with designing lamps. Then she was approached by Syrette Lew of Moving Mountains, a Brooklyn-based design studio committed to working with artisans. Lew wanted to collaborate with Hicks for the Sight Unseen Offsite annual design showcase. "She said she loved my vessels," Hicks says. "Then, she asked if I would be interested in making them into lamps. It was kind of a curveball for me!" But Hicks was game and jumped at the opportunity to take on the challenge.

The timing was perfect, not just because—as Lew pointed out—"lighting is popular right now," but also because of the resurgence of the artisanal movement, in which the handcrafted is seen as a luxury. "A handmade object just feels special," says Hicks. "It's a richer experience to feel like an object has a story and someone put their hands on this thing and made these decisions for you."

RYAN MENNEALY

LAKE FOREST, CALIFORNIA

Designer Ryan Mennealy makes lighting that speaks to people. Or at least sends a message—through Morse code. "I wanted to secretly say something," the former set-designer-turned-ceramicist says of why he decided to incorporate inspiring words into his work through a series of holes representing dots and dashes. "Putting positive affirmations in the world is something that drives me."

Mennealy's lamps also communicate in a less literal way, instilling an unspoken connection through each one's uniqueness. "There is something special about a piece that someone took the time to make and there is only one," he says. "People are purchasing something they take pride in," he explains. "At a certain point, price doesn't matter. It becomes an heirloom piece." And as the demand for the handcrafted continues to grow, so does the realization that the lines of what defines art are now blurred. "Lamps can be works of art," he says. "They just happen to light up."

JOHN SHEPPARD

NEW YORK

Two years ago, after spending more than a decade as a magazine art director, New York ceramicist John Sheppard switched careers to pursue his hobby of making pottery professionally. His foray into lighting was experimental, simply a way to make bigger objects and play with function. "It's an interesting design challenge," Sheppard says. "Not only do I have to think about form and finish, but also how the light interacts with those things."

Almost ironically, Sheppard partly credits technology for the evolution of lighting from functional object to art. "Part of the reason fixtures are more sculptural, and people are taking more risks is due to LED technology," he says. "A lamp no longer has to hold a traditional bucket of bulbs. People can now make different types of forms." Plus, he observes, there is a beauty to balancing the swiftness of lighting with the imperfection of ceramics. "Refined and polished is the opposite of what I do," he says. "My work is individual, and people are drawn to that. They know that this particular thing was made just for them."

