



# Fantastic Tales

Danish Contemporary Ceramics  
The Ceramic House • May 2014





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**F***antastic Tales* presents a broad spectrum of contemporary Danish ceramics. The variety of forms - sculpture, tableware, wall pieces, installation and performance – shows the versatility of the ceramic medium and demonstrates the thriving and proficient use of clay within Danish art/craft/design today.

My relationship with Denmark dates back to 1997, when I lived and worked in Copenhagen. Over the intervening years I witnessed the expansion of ceramic production in the country, similar to the development of studio ceramics in the UK. Just as potter Alison Britton observed how UK ceramics had moved beyond the vessel in 1983 -

“It is evident ... that some different kinds of objects have appeared in the last ten years ... Some people have been made very angry by the slippery slope into uselessness, and into expensive one-off artiness. Others have been excited by what seems to be pioneering work and the levelling of absurdities in the conventions of evaluating different kinds of art” \*

- so Denmark made similar strides, and a studio ceramics movement developed, leading to the current pluralism and expansive practice. But while there are many similarities between Denmark and the UK in the trajectory and growth of contemporary ceramics, in the work exhibited in *Fantastic Tales*, one can identify traces of Danish ceramic history; revealed through forms, colours and techniques that are distinct to Denmark. History underpins the contemporary work, but it is put to new ends and utilised to tell a wide range of stories.

*Fantastic Tales* is the translated name of the first book published by one of Denmark's most famous names: Hans Christian Andersen. This title describes the personal stories and narratives expressed by each exhibiting artist, through the vehicle of ceramics; expression that overrides function.

My decision to curate a show of Danish ceramics in the UK stems from a desire to convey how exciting the contemporary scene in Denmark is, and to bring a collection of work together in the unconventional domestic context of The Ceramic House.

**J Kay Aplin**, Artist and Curator

\*Alison Britton. Sevres with Crazy Kay. *Crafts* magazine. March/April 1983, pp.18-23.



## Tendencies in contemporary Danish ceramic art

**Lise Seisbøll** Managing Director, Danmarks Keramikmuseum, Middelfart, Denmark

Contemporary Danish ceramics is flourishing like never before. The old Renaissance borders, between 'fine art' on the one hand and 'applied art' on the other, have been completely undermined during the last two-to-three generations of ceramicists. Up until the mid-1980s, in Denmark, only a few pictorial artists expressed themselves using clay. Few ceramicists (potters) went beyond classical shapes and techniques when making their often very fine and delicate objects, for more or less utilitarian purposes. But during the 1980s several Danish ceramicists established art groups, together with kindred-spirits from other countries, which heralded a change. For example Multi Mud and especially Clay Today, both founded by Danes. In the same period the first Danish studio ceramics centre - Tommerup Teglværk, now called Tommerup Keramiske Værksted / Tommerup Ceramics Studio Centre - was started. The following decade the International Ceramics Research Centre Guldagergård and the International Academy of Glass and Ceramics, in Bornholm - our Stoneware Island - were established. International contacts were initiated, inspiring young Danish ceramic artists - some embracing American studio ceramics, while others sought their stimulus from the Far East or Central Europe.

During this period of artistic development, Danish utilitarian design also expanded explosively. Denmark is part of the Nordic area; our unique code of design is generally recognised by the very stringent styling and mode of expression, combined with a subtle and softly moderate and restrained use of colour. Often both shapes and colours relate to nature and/or the natural sciences. This tradition goes back to early Modernism, when Functionalism and Bauhaus ideas had a huge effect on Danish ceramics. This was the period when the 'design concept' entered our Arts & Crafts circles. Since about 1990, shortly before the Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs established the Design Foundation (and afterwards a series of follow up initiatives), the concept of Danish Design developed vividly among ceramicists. First and foremost, this is a result of an ongoing combination of solid traditions and inspiration taken from abroad. And due to developments in digital communication and travel opportunities, today many ceramicists have the opportunity to travel and study outside Denmark - something which has continued to bring fresh new inspiration to Danish traditions.

You can no longer separate pictorial artists from ceramic artists, in terms of expression or stature. Likewise the conceptual borders between art and design have diminished and we see, for example, ceramic designers creating installations. Up until 1990 one seldom saw ceramics exhibited in Danish art museums. Today you see it as frequently as you see exhibitions of art made with any other kind of artistic material. This development is interesting; finally the old value battle between (traditional) arts and the crafts seems to have disappeared. From my point of view, this development - like all cultural developments - has been initiated by the artists (here: the ceramicists) themselves. When new artistic tendencies appear, the establishment of intermediary institutions follows - such as schools, showrooms and museums - and as the last links in a chain, governmental and municipal funding starts to develop. So, when we witness a Danish society with lots of official cultural art and design promotion, initiatives taken by ministers, heads of the business world and members of the Royal family, and lots of museums and galleries presenting ceramic art, it is all a result of a vivid sense of creative development rooted in the world of the ceramicists themselves.

Many of our most celebrated Danish ceramic artists frequently exhibit abroad at, for example, Sofa Art & Design Fairs (Chicago), Mindcraft (Milan), and in galleries all over Europe. This also applies to the Danish artists J Kay Aplin has selected to exhibit in *Fantastic Tales: Danish Contemporary Ceramics*; the work of the participants demonstrates the broad range of contemporary Danish expression within ceramic art. We see stringent classical design developed by Anne Nielsen and furthered experimentally by Helle Hansen, Jane Holmberg and Pia Lund Hansen. For many years, both Lone Skov Madsen and Turi Heisselberg Pedersen have made sculptural works which refer to traditional vessels and plates, but both of them transform these into metaphorical sculptures, by refining shapes and textures. The same can be said about Mette Maya Gregersen who challenges clay and glazes to the chemical borders of existence. Some of the participants take Nordic vessels one step further conceptually, creating installations that remove all links to practical use. Louise Gaarmann, Charlotte Thorup and Heidi Hentze sometimes present such installations, and Christin Johansson's means of transforming industrial ceramics into installed sculptures needs a chapter for itself.

However, the ceramicists that may feel most at home under the headline *Fantastic Tales*, are the series of figurative Danish artists. Lone Borgen mostly decorates her often functional forms with transfers depicting natural and cultural history. The most sculptural artists in the show are Asger Kristensen, Karen Harsbo, Sten Lykke Madsen and Malene Hartmann Rasmussen. These four highly individual artists all confirm the very dynamic, tale-telling part of contemporary Nordic ceramics; there are no longer any limits to the storytelling capacity of clay. The exhibition *Fantastic Tales* provides an excellent snapshot of Danish ceramics today.



## The Ceramic House: a definition

**T**he Ceramic House: home, gallery, living work of art. The former; it is where I live, the latter, because I treat it like a site, as I would any of my public realm commissions, and apply permanent installations throughout the house and garden. And it is also a gallery, but no ordinary gallery space, far from it - my ambition is to show contemporary ceramic art of the highest standard within a domestic environment.

I am not setting a precedent here, there are many houses one can visit and see objets d'art in context. However, it is far more usual for the setting to be historical, grand; a stately home or museum. I display artwork within a contemporary home. Kettles Yard in Cambridge is an example of a dwelling with similar ambitions. Like Kettles Yard, The Ceramic House is a personal story, reflecting my taste in art and desire to be surrounded by beautiful things, and not just objects; the whole house is an artwork.

Using my home as a container for exhibitions gives me license to do things differently, to break the rules of a normal gallery. The standard of work exhibited could rival that of any well-appointed ceramics gallery in the world. Yet coming to The Ceramic House offers a different experience; it is not so much viewing art as living it, or observing it within a living and lived-in environment. It also provides the opportunity to view the artworks in relation to my own collection of ceramics and ceramic installations.

The Ceramic House is a fantastic tale in itself, and the *Fantastic Tales* exhibition is the most exciting in a series of exhibitions that has grown in ambition over the last four years. I am honoured to be living surrounded by this collection of ceramic art and I invite you to come inside my home and experience the fantastic tale that it is.

**J Kay Aplin**, Artist and Curator



## The Artists

Lone Borgen



Christin Johansson



Louise Gaarmann



Asger Kristensen



Mette Maya Gregersen



Sten Lykke Madsen



Helle Hansen



Lone Skov Madsen



Pia Lund Hansen



Anne Nielsen



Karen Harsbo



Turi Heisselberg Pedersen



Heidi Hentze



Malene Hartmann Rasmussen



Jane Holmberg



Charlotte Thorup





### Lone Borgen

Born: 1952 • Lives: Århus • [www.loneborgen.dk](http://www.loneborgen.dk)

“The potter’s wheel is the starting point for my ceramic pieces, which vary from the functional to non-functional; each piece is unique and describes a story or fairytale. While I use a variety of ceramic materials and processes, my methodology is consistent. Each work incorporates imagery from a variety of sources, using ceramic digital transfers or modelled structures, to create a contrast between the real and surreal. I am influenced by images and symbols that I have observed whilst travelling around the world, particularly nature, often in decay, and my subconscious mind. I find working with other artists and craftsmen inspirational.”



### Louise Gaarmann

Born: 1975 • Lives: Århus • [www.louisegaarmann.dk](http://www.louisegaarmann.dk)

“I mainly work in clay, taking a keen interest in the behaviour and function of the material and range of surface expressions possible. My pieces are usually unique - characterised by the meeting of opposites, for example, when a clean and natural form in clay is juxtaposed with a synthetic material such as plastic. I like playing with and interpreting sensual and tactile primeval shapes, where a bowl is the essential form, but is subject to mutations. My work asks: can clay appear as soft as textiles?”



### Mette Maya Gregersen

Born: 1973 • Lives: Silkeborg • [www.mettemayagregersen.com](http://www.mettemayagregersen.com)

“My work is concerned with the movement of waves, and how we relate to the distribution of their energy. A wave reflects constant movement over time, demonstrating that nothing can remain the same. Inspired by the way we move from one place to another, I aim to create structures that flow and develop in the same pattern, as we grow and understand our own patterns in life. Clay is like the human body, a constant changing material, affected by thoughts, visions and elements.”



### Helle Hansen

Born: 1960 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.helle-hansen.dk](http://www.helle-hansen.dk)

“The inspiration for this series of work comes from sailing trips on an old wooden ship. I constructed a set of parameters within which to make ceramics on a rocking boat:

- The pieces should be made effortlessly onboard with only the use of a cheese slicer
- The light should shine through the clay – for this reason I work with porcelain, fired at 1280 degrees
- The clay, with the help of the cheese slicer’s thinnest string, should be cut in long, thin strips (the strips are formed so that they can support themselves)
- All the objects should be unique; crooked as life itself, while expressing the sublimity and transparency of porcelain.”



**Pia Lund Hansen**

Born: 1980 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.pia-lund.dk](http://www.pia-lund.dk)

“I work mainly in porcelain and make one-off pieces, as well as serial productions. In creating my products I usually employ the processes of casting and dyeing, working with several layers of white and coloured porcelain. I draw inspiration from things that remind me of my childhood or nature, for example the patterns and colours of a mussel or a clam, which I interpret in clay and use as ornamentation. I like the surface of my pieces to be matt and rough-textured.”



**Karen Harsbo**

Born: 1963 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.kunstakademiet.dk/labs/keramik/](http://www.kunstakademiet.dk/labs/keramik/)

“This work has grown from my curiosity in the history of porcelain and the process of working with it. From the material’s invention in China and later laborious journey west along the Silk Route, to how European alchemists experimented to find its formula, and upon succeeding exported it worldwide during the Enlightenment. And now production has once again gone back to the East. It is a story that generates multiple routes and maps; routes of human curiosity and knowledge. I am interested in the people who have been part of this story - workers in the East and the West.”



### Heidi Hentze

Born: 1975 • Lives: Bornholm • [www.heidihentze.dk](http://www.heidihentze.dk)

"I am fascinated by the surfaces and folds of architecture and origami, which I translate into simple, repetitive and geometric structures, without limiting their size. The walls play a crucial architectonic role, forming the structure and simultaneously being the decoration and the piece itself. The objects are reminiscent of tectonic architectural models but are not discarded, as is the common expectation of a maquette. Above all, I force the ceramic material to its physical limits, to capture the moment where my control as creator starts to fade. The subtle imperfections, in this strict order of creation, become the object, thus forming the perfect geometric imperfection."



### Jane Holmberg

Born: 1973 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.janeholmberg.dk](http://www.janeholmberg.dk)

"Wood as a theme came about in response to an exhibition in 2004, held by the creative cooperative WORKSHOP CPH. My interest in natural details led to the creation of this body of work. Over time, after several walks in the woods, it became a series of three sizes of vase, moulded over twigs, moving from exhibition pieces to a small production series. The *Tree Vases* are slip-cast in white porcelain and dyed black porcelain. Pieces of nature's beauty represent life that has been; quiet and mysterious, the twigs stand as petrified objects, as vases awakened by the life of flowers."



**Christin Johansson**

**Born:** 1974 • **Lives:** Holmbæk • [www.christin.dk](http://www.christin.dk)

“It’s just me and her... and the sound of vibrating porcelain. I can hear my own thoughts racing through my mind like the constant rumbling from the ball mill.

She crushes the porcelain and gives me a present. What’s it all about? I’ve never experienced anything quite like this before, as if Mother Earth is calling me through all her mediums. A feeling of peace of mind and body settles in and I get a sensation of happiness that I’ve been missing.

The sand in the hourglass is running out. I get up and walk out. The taste of cardamom lingers on the tongue.”



**Asger Kristensen**

**Born:** 1951 • **Lives:** Copenhagen • [asgerkristensen.tumblr.com](http://asgerkristensen.tumblr.com)

“These artworks: *Secret*, *Haute Couture*, *Hiding* and *Newborn* are part of a project about humans searching for their identity. In different ways humans protect themselves from the outside world, dress to appear as independent individuals; however their clothes become a kind of uniform, which also signals that they belong to a community. Each of the pieces has its own story; tales, which we in some way or another meet during our lives. The project was realised in December and January 2013-14 during a stay in house of the Danish illustrator, Anne Grete, in Provence.”

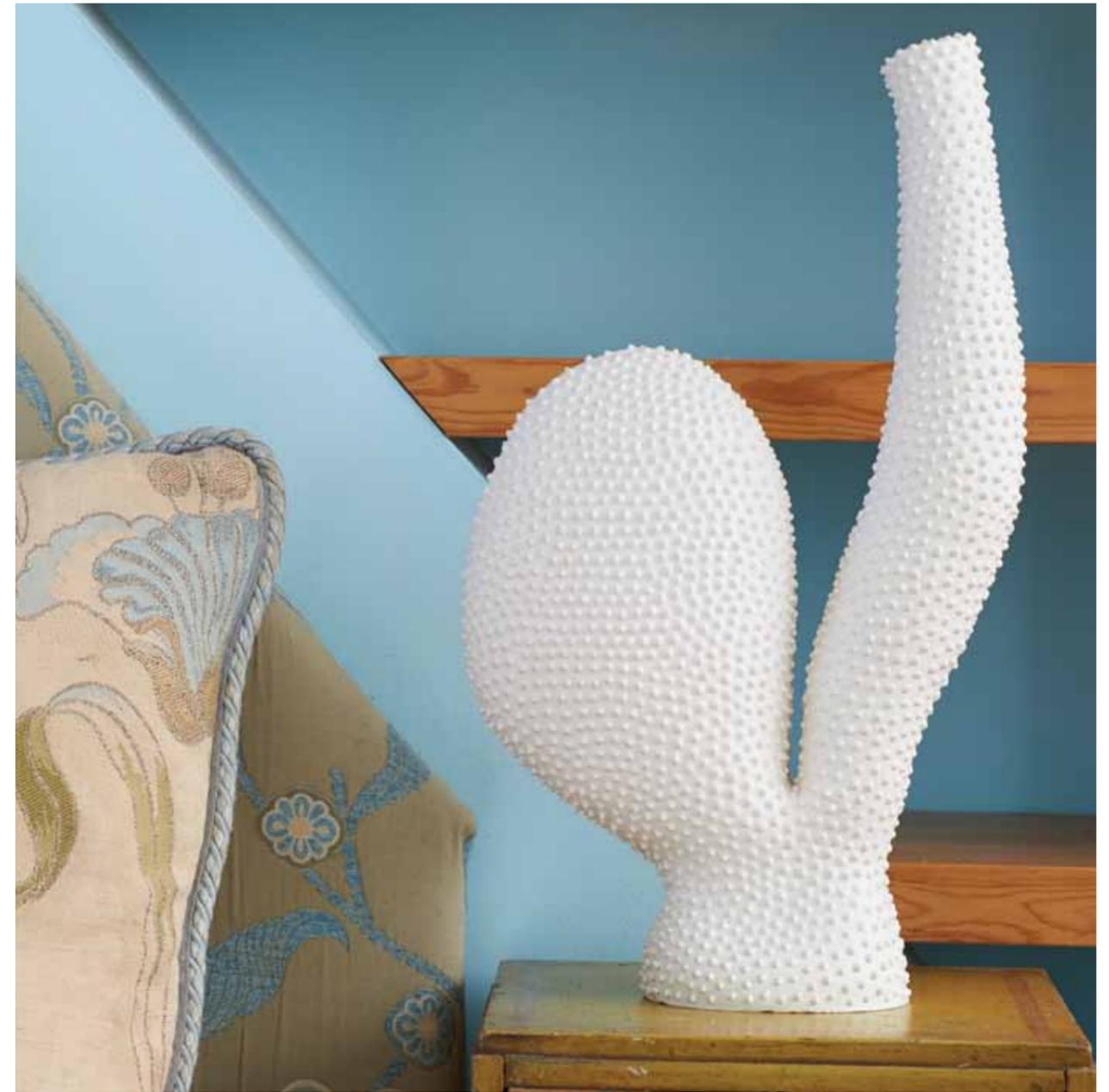




### Sten Lykke Madsen

Born: 1937 • Lives: Copenhagen • [tinyurl.com/owzcv2b](http://tinyurl.com/owzcv2b)

"To me, beauty does not reside in the glaze applied to the outside, but in the way in which wood and time burns itself deeply into the sculpture itself; the sculpture which, upon being taken out of the kiln, looks almost like nature. At that point it no longer looks like something I made, but like something that is much older than me; similar to finding a stone resembling a fledgling bird on the beach and feeling very lucky. I want the figures to look as if they have shaped themselves, timeless and silent, fossilised in a state of understanding and conjured up for their own sake. You should ideally be able to recognise a figure the first time you see it. And when you have become familiar with it over years, it should still be able to surprise you. Then I think I have succeeded."



### Lone Skov Madsen

Born: 1964 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.loneskovmadsen.dk](http://www.loneskovmadsen.dk)

"The forms in my work are issued in what are frequently very extended series. There is a clear connection between the consistency that I establish in my investigation of surface, material and ornament, and my exploration of form systems. It is the repetitions and the variations in the sequences that absorb me. The *White Objects* are based on the concept of the vessel, and deliberately simulate familiar functional objects. Still, the ceramic works are artificial signs, which derive their focus and strength through the exploration and study of form, fabric and ornament."



**Anne Nielsen**

Born: 1949 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.bkf.dk/anne-nielsen](http://www.bkf.dk/anne-nielsen)

“For the past 20 years, I have experimented with two kinds of ceramic technique: ‘Neriage’ - laminated clay and ‘Intarsia’ - inlaid clay. I colour white stoneware with oxides and stains, and then laminate thin slices of different coloured clays together, after which I can start building my vessels in striped or squared slabs. When working with ‘Neriage’, it is possible to obtain the same decoration inside and out. I get a lot of inspiration from my travels; horses in Mongolia, parrots in Australia, ornament in Damascus, woven mats in Zaire, Africa and red coral reefs in Indonesia.”



**Turi Heisselberg Pedersen**

Born: 1965 • Lives: Copenhagen • [www.turiheisselberg.dk](http://www.turiheisselberg.dk)

“Throughout my career, I have striven to develop the vessel as abstract form; the vessel as an independent object, one might say. Working in clay, to me, is associated with many underlying culturally bound references, but also strongly connected to nature. My recent work is inspired by surfaces and colours in nature, geological structures, the patterns in landscapes, plants and the many shapes nature creates. Out of this, works with organic, flowing forms or edged shapes have emerged, with expressive surfaces, reliefs and fluted structures. Working with rhythm, volume, movement and texture, I aim to capture an emotional perception and visual reading of natural phenomena.”



### Malene Hartmann Rasmussen

Born: 1973 • Lives: London • [www.malenehartmannrasmussen.com](http://www.malenehartmannrasmussen.com)

"I work in mixed media, making and arranging multiple components into complex narrative tableaux of visual excess. The dialogue between components and the way one's subconscious can direct the composition interests me. My aim is to create visual poetry based on my own personal story.

I try to create a place beyond reality, a deceitful echo of the real world, which bends the perception of what is real. I want my work to look like a very skilled child could have made it, clumsy and elaborate at the same time. Initially the viewer may, mistakenly, be drawn to my figures thinking they are toys; however closer examination reveals their rather darker narrative. They invite you into an absurd and surreal world where things are not what they seem; a frozen moment that indicates a story and mood but at the same time is open for the viewer to filter through their own references, to make sense and contribute to the story themselves."



### Charlotte Thorup

Born: 1973 • Lives: Bornholm • [www.charlottethorup.dk](http://www.charlottethorup.dk)

"For the last six years I have focused on making ceramic wall pieces. I work with stoneware and porcelain, and combine these two contrasting materials in the work, which is reduction fired in a gas kiln.

One repetition after another.

One module after another.

A shape – a sound which continues.

My fascination with this.

Noticing the slight variation in the repetition.

An anomaly, a shadow or an imperfection.

Precisely disturbing the monotonous balance

– and infusing the works with life in return."





## J Kay Aplin

Born: 1971 • Lives: Brighton • [www.kayaplin.com](http://www.kayaplin.com)

My new installation *Botanical Structures III*, and indeed the whole *Fantastic Tales* project, was conceived during a residency at Guldagergård International Ceramic Research Centre in Denmark, in summer 2013.

The residency enabled me to experiment with materials, a luxury after twenty years of creating architectural ceramics for the public realm. My standard process, throughout this time, has been to press-mould stoneware ceramic. The residency enabled me to develop a technique for slip-casting porcelain, to create wall pieces, designed to be hung and not permanently fixed to a surface.

My work responds to place, a legacy of being a public artist, and this installation is no different. The individual pieces are inspired by the Danish summer landscape, and are

a product of cultural exchange. As I take the Danish artists' work out of the traditional white cube and clean Danish aesthetic and into The Ceramic House, so I am bringing some Danish influence to bear on my work. The subtle references to being in Denmark, experiencing the ceramic culture, and meeting artists working in different ways, has influenced how I translate my thoughts and feelings into clay.

I returned to Guldagergård this spring to realise these developments into two versions of a work, one with oxidised glazes, exhibited at the Regency Town House, Brighton, and the piece in *Fantastic Tales*, was fired in a 30-hour soda wood firing; a chance decision to try something new that I believe will have a lasting impact on my work. A further version of the work, combining both elements, will be exhibited at the Danish Biennial: Ceramic Context 2014, in Bornholm.

## Credits

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For further information about The Ceramic House and the featured artists please visit [www.theceramichouse.co.uk](http://www.theceramichouse.co.uk)

Sign up on the website for updates and news about events, exhibitions and opportunities.

The Ceramic House is on Facebook and Twitter @kayaplin. Please comment: #ceramichouse #FantasticTales

Dedicated blog about the 2014 Danish-Brighton project [www.a-n.co.uk/link/KayAplin-Denmark](http://www.a-n.co.uk/link/KayAplin-Denmark)

The Ceramic House is open year round by appointment.

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