

DISCOVERY IN TURKEY

THE CERAMICS OF MEHMET KUTLU BY ANN HAZINEDAR



"Everyone is Sacred," 5 ft. (1.45 m) square, grogged clay with sprayed porcelain laminate, brushed and trailed slip and glaze, slumped glass and decals.

For Mehmet Kutlu, "embracing the ocean" of his chosen medium is both a playful exploration of the unknown and a disciplined process of experimenting with materials, an approach for which his background serves him well. After an earlier career in engineering, he returned to university in Istanbul as a mature student, graduating from the Fine Arts Faculty of Mimar Sinan University. In the fifteen years since then, Kutlu has been working in his Istanbul studio with white and colored

porcelain, heavily grogged local clay, glass, slips, glazes, lusters, decals and "cotton wool clay."

Turkish history and culture resonate throughout Kutlu's work. One series of colored porcelain and slumped glass wall panels incorporates motifs from Ottoman miniatures; another evokes landscapes, others childhood memories. Large wall-panel portraits of friends place them in the context of the daily life and cultural inheritance of Turkey.



"Everything is Changing,"
10 ft. (3 m) in width,
molded and handbuilt
cotton-wool porcelain.

"Ceramics is a wide ocean through which the artist swims . . . The more lovingly the swimmer embraces this ocean, the richer will be the diversity of its cooling waters."

For panels incorporating slumped glass, an area of clay is carved out with attention to placement and size: too near the edge and the porcelain base will be weakened; too large or too small and the glass may slump excessively or not enough. To reduce the number of stress

points, which might cause cracking during firing, the clay is cut out in one smooth movement. Edges are beveled to facilitate slumping and smoothed with a lightly dampened sponge to prevent cracks.

At the leather-hard stage, an intersecting grid of ribs, cut from slabs, is luted to the back of the panel. As well as minimizing cracking and warping, these give the panel shadow and depth when it is hung. Holes pierced in the ribs on several sides of the panel afford the possibility of hanging the work in a variety of ways.

At the dry greenware stage, or after a bisque firing to 1652°F (900°C), designs may be softened and merged through sanding with glass paper before being fired at 2192°F (1200°C) in an electric kiln.

Slumped glass may now be incorporated into the design. For panels of approximately 16×24 inches (40×60 cm), Kutlu cuts 4 millimeters of window glass to fit just inside the supporting ribs that surround the carved-out hole. Decals may be applied to either or both sides of the glass. Areas where glass and clay come into contact are dusted with aluminium dioxide to prevent adherence and consequent cracking on cooling. The porcelain panel and the glass are now fired together, with the porcelain supported on kiln props to create space for the glass to slump. Kutlu fires the kiln up to 842°F (450°C) over three hours, and then more rapidly to between 1364–1436°F (740–780°C), judging by eye when the desired degree of slumping has been reached.

If a double layer of glass is to be included in the design, a second sheet of glass is slumped through a similar but smaller hole in



"Horses from Miniatures," 15 in. (40 cm) square, colored porcelain slab, with slumped glass and decals; by Mehmet Kutlu, Istanbul, Turkey.

another slab of clay. Finally, mirrors may be incorporated into the piece, creating the illusion of depth.

For his recent large panels, Kutlu uses a heavily grogged local clay. He may first sketch a design, or create one through playing directly onto the single, thick slab, and then carve the work into sections when it becomes leather hard. These sections, backs hollowed and grooved, edges beveled, are then laminated with thin porcelain slip, poured over each as it rests on a board of ridged slats. Onto this laminated surface, he builds up designs as with his small panels by pouring, trailing, brushing and spraying slip and glaze, and firing multiple times. He also adds decals and slumped glass. The divisions between sections are not disguised, but emphasized as an integral part of the design with grouting, shading with oxides, or by a technique discovered first by accident, and then developed by design: to achieve the color effects he was seeking in the porcelain laminate, Kutlu was forced to fire above the range of the grogged clay, causing it to warp. By experimenting with firing temperatures, he has been able to control the deformation so that the sections still fit together precisely, but each curves gently outwards. This gives the panels a softly cushioned appearance, echoing the intimacy and tenderness of the subject matter. "Everyone Is Sacred," though having the grandeur of a sacred mosaic, conveys a personal, humanistic message. The size of the panels also allows Kutlu to include several areas of slumped glass.

Invited to work at the Eczacıbaşı Vitra Art Studio in Istanbul, Kutlu had the opportunity to fire in large gas kilns. Experimenting with handmixing varying amounts of cotton wool into casting slip, using it immediately or leaving it overnight, he discovered that the connecting fibers in this cotton wool clay enabled him to incorporate different clay bodies into the same piece and to create distinctive textures within the fired clay body.

Bathroom furniture and fittings, exhibited in Eczacıbaşı Vitra's "Personal Traces" exhibition are familiar in form but startling in texture. In this exhibition's catalog Kutlu writes, "My work is given direction through errors in the making process, through contradictions, through the language of my childhood and through discipline...artistic inspiration is nothing but the high level of concentration that can be acquired through this approach." Mehmet Kutlu both embraces the accidental and draws upon an accumulation of technical knowledge and skills acquired through observation and experimentation. But though technical discoveries give his work impetus, they do not dominate. Rather, he selects them with restraint to create works enriched by an intimate relationship with the culture of his homeland.

To see additional works by Mehmet Kutlu, visit his website at www.mehmetkutlu.com.

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"Reflections of a Dream," 4 ft. (1.2 m) square, grogged clay with sprayed porcelain laminate, brushed and trailed slip and glaze, slumped glass and decals.

COLORED PORCELAIN

Kutlu employs a wide range of colors and tones in his work. Into a slip made from powdered porcelain (50k), sodium silicate (50ml) and water (18.5l) he mixes stains and oxides, (iron oxide, copper oxide and, for its speckled effect, manganese dioxide). He normally limits the amount of added stain or oxide to a maximum of 8% of the dry weight of clay to avoid incompatible shrinkage or excessive fluxing. The resulting clay may be used as casting slip, for slip trailing, or firmed to a plastic consistency. Different colors of plastic clay may be layered and rolled to create an agate body; small balls of different colored clays may be lightly kneaded together, rolled into coils, split, overlapped and rolled to produce linear or cloudlike patterns.

To build up a design on a white porcelain slab base, colored clay is torn, cut or extruded and patted, pressed, inlaid or rolled into a soft or leather-hard base to produce crisp outlines or softened edges. Soft clay is smeared in with the fingers to produce an oil-paint effect; for a watercolor effect a damp cloth may be placed onto the design and gently rolled. Dark colors may be applied under light ones to produce background shadows when fired. Clays may be layered and then carved to varying depths for a strata effect.

Colored slips may be trailed or splashed onto the surface of casting slip and manipulated through agitation or feathering. Newspaper is laid on the surface to pick up the design, then lifted up and transferred to the surface of the slab. Kutlu also trails directly onto the clay panel or onto plaster bats to create pieces for applied work. He may load his slip trailers with more than one color, so that streaks and patterns form during the trailing process. He may build entire panels with no slab base by slip trailing successive layers of patterns onto a kiln shelf, trailing onto wet slip or waiting for a layer to firm, each with a different effect.