



Julian Stair's new caddies, made of high-fired red stoneware and glazed porcelain, photographed in his studio. Above them hang the tools of his trade

Julian Stair's latest ceramics seem simple





# PLEASE TOUCH

...tative handling reveals hidden tactile depths, as Sarah Howell discovers. Photography: Bob Smith ▶





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Above: Julian makes a coil shape like the one on the dish (right) with a deft prod; the wheel does the rest. Top right: he slices the caddies to make them asymmetrical, then laboriously fits the sides

At first sight Julian Stair's new pots look simple, straightforward and quite unlike anyone else's. There is a grave intensity about them. The more you look, the more you notice unexpected subtleties, but you have to handle them – take the lids off the teapots, turn the unglazed red stoneware caddies upside-down – for them to reveal their secrets. Fluid spirals decorate the insides of lids and the bases of caddies, echoing the ziggurat shapes of the pots and evoking the speed and energy of the wheel on which they were thrown. 'As a boy,' says Julian, 'I used to watch *Antiques Roadshow* and be bowled over when Arthur Negus demonstrated that the insides of Georgian bureau drawers were just as beautifully made and detailed as the front that was for show.' He wants his pots to have that quality and he likes people to hold and examine them. Once at an exhibition he put up a notice saying 'Please touch'. It didn't work. The timid visitors just thought he'd missed out the words 'do not'.

Julian works in Camberwell, in an airy, ordered studio which was once a suitcase factory. Everything there, from the floor to the old ghetto-blaster for keeping up with the cricket, is frosted white with clay. He shares the studio with Edmund de Waal – 'We coexist incredibly well,' says Julian. They began sharing a space in the

mid-Nineties when they were both independently making thrown porcelain pots – throwing was still at that time rather out of fashion. Both have since gained international reputations. They share an intellectual approach to their work and are both passionately interested in historical and critical writing about ceramics, but their pots are as different as their characters. In the studio each has a favourite, rather battered chair which seems to symbolise their approach. Edmund's is spindly, austere, elegant and oriental, but Julian's is a robust old Windsor chair, very sturdy and very English.

After Camberwell in the Seventies, when his ceramics were, like everyone else's, more sculptures than pots, Julian went to the Royal College and halfway through the course realised he wanted to learn to use the wheel. There turned out to be no-one there who could teach him how to throw, so he taught himself. His early vases and bowls were often tightly decorated with incised patterns and lines. 'In the past,' he says, 'I used to lay on surface decoration; now I'm more relaxed and confident, it evolves through the process of making.' In 1986 he began entirely independently to produce plain, white-glazed porcelain tableware – he soon discovered that Joanna Constantinides had simultaneously decided to▷