

ON REFLECTION **BOUKE DE VRIES**

The restorer-turned-artist uses shattered ceramics to create surreal sculptures imbued with stories from the past. He tells *Isabella Smith* about picking up the pieces



Bouke de Vries spent over a decade as a ceramics restorer before realising that the broken pieces he was handling every day could become something else entirely. Today, the London-based Dutch artist turns damaged pots and figurines into surreal sculptures embedded with stories. Some appear to have been exploded, their fragments frozen at the moment of deconstruction, while in others he uses centuries-old shards as a material to create three-dimensional collages.

De Vries' gallerist Adrian Sassoon commissioned the artist to create a spectacular threshold to a new retail space, Showroom, in Sotheby's London galleries, which opened on 28 September: a giant archway created from photographs of blue and white pottery, blown up to monumental size. From his garden studio in London, De Vries spoke to us about making an entrance and embracing the beauty of breakages.

**'Before I start working every morning I make a cup of tea, then give the dog a little milk in his Ming dynasty porcelain bowl. It's a broken piece and these objects were made to be used.'**

**I'm humbled by knowing** what my work can mean to people. My series of *Memory Vessels* seems to strike a particular chord. Each piece is made from a shattered pot, which I place in a blown glass vessel of the exact shape of the object before its breakage. The transparent glass is like a ghost or a memory of the vase's former self. One of these keeps getting reposted online – it has had around 150,000 likes by now. A friend recently told me that after the explosion in Beirut in August, people began posting it as a metaphor for their feelings: that they are broken but still surviving.

**I love working at scale** – it's a new challenge for me. For Adrian Sassoon's display at Sotheby's, my brief was to create something spectacular that would make an impact. I photographed individual fragments of blue-and-white ceramics, enlarged them to a giant size, then used these to create what looks like a crumbling archway around the entrance. Normally I make everything myself – I'm a bit of a control freak – so it's exciting to hand my designs over to fabricators for once.

**I am lucky to have** over 10 years as a ceramics restorer to draw on in my art. Restoration skills underpin so much of my work, so it's helpful to keep practising them. I get the broken pieces for my artworks from antiques dealers I restore

ceramics for – sometimes they have wonderful objects that are too badly damaged to be repaired. Restoration still makes up 30% of my workload and is endlessly interesting, whether I'm finding the exact colour match for an ancient glaze, or mixing up a material of the precise translucency to match a porcelain piece. I love the fact that something broken can be just as beautiful as when it's perfect.

**The most talked about work I have ever made** is *War and Pieces*, a big installation commissioned by the Holburne Museum in Bath in 2011. They gave me free rein to do what I wanted on an eight-metre-long table. I created a battle scene using thousands of porcelain fragments, referring back to 17th-century sugar sculptures. It's been travelling to museums ever since – to Germany, Holland, Switzerland, the USA – you name it. It's taken on a life of its own.

**An artist I'm in awe of** is Grayson Perry. What he's done for ceramic art is phenomenal: 10 years ago, the contemporary art world saw pottery as something to be ashamed of. I restore Grayson's

vases for him when they get damaged, so I can see all their technical complexity up close. A few times he's come to me with a perfect piece, smashed it with a hammer, then asked me to put it back together with golden repairs.

**My greatest ambition is** to make a public sculpture – an ambition that's finally going to be fulfilled in January. University College London commissioned me to make a piece connected to its history and programme, so I've based it on the college's connection to Japan. In 1863 a group of Japanese students known as The Chōshū Five came to the college, at a time when it was still illegal for Japanese people to leave the country. It was a milestone as their closed society was about to be blasted open by political change. In response to their story, I've designed a metre-high vase based on a 17th-century Japanese piece. Broken fragments of pottery will form the outline of Japan's islands. These shards allude both to the metaphorical 'breaking open' of the country, and to its frequent earthquakes. I'm excited to see this piece out in the open air of UCL's courtyard.' [boukedevries.com](http://boukedevries.com); [adriansassoon.com](http://adriansassoon.com)



Opposite: Bouke de Vries beneath his installation, created for a new exhibition by Adrian Sassoon (*The London Edit*, until 6 November) to mark the opening of Sotheby's Showroom. Left: a pair of *Memory Vessels LXV*, 2020

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