



This summer the ceramist Chris Keenan will take up residency at his spiritual home of Blackwell, showing a series of installations. Teleri Lloyd-Jones talks to him about advertising and apprenticeship. Location photography by Jenny Lewis

THE HOUSE GUEST

Anyone who has a Chris Keenan mug or rocking bowl has Ronseal to thank for it.

In the early 1990s Keenan bought a few pieces from Edmund de Waal with the fee he'd received for starring in a Ronseal advertisement. His connection to de Waal led to an apprenticeship and, fast-forward 20 years, Keenan is a firm favourite with his celadon and tenmoku wares. Known for mugs, vases and bowls – objects meant for everyday pleasure – this summer Keenan presents *houseplace*, a series of installations at Blackwell, The Arts & Crafts House in the Lake District.

The reason he secured this residency, he explains, is his feeling for the building. 'In a parallel universe, Blackwell is my house,' he says with a smile. And this summer he's moving in, not only his work but also a collection of his favourite things. When I visit his south London studio Keenan is getting the work together, making real those ideas that he first had during a few days spent at the house in January.



Right, top: Tenmoku and celadon rocking bowls
Right, bottom: Celadon and tenkou rocking bowls with incised or embossed surface

Keenan's aesthetic came with startling ease. For the first project that de Waal set him he worked with the tenmoku and celadon that are now his trademark



His days at Blackwell were divided between experiencing the spaces, detailing the exquisite interiors and the library, and getting to know the house's architect, Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott. The result is a series of ceramic installations made for particular places. Not only is this Keenan's most significant exhibition to date and his first residency, but it also reflects his growing interest in installation work, making ceramics that don't function in the traditional sense of a mug or a vase, but instead exist in arrangement and setting.

The line between tableware and installation work is a seam that his first master potter Edmund de Waal has been mining for the past few decades. 'I think Chris has always been experimenting,' says de Waal. 'I remember him looking at the very early repetition ware he was making, spending time beautifully arranging them on a board. I thought, "that guy cares about installation, he's just not calling it an installation". It's great to see him doing this out in public.'

Though approaching Blackwell as though he's moving in, Keenan is adamant that visitors feel welcome. It's not his role to legislate how people use his objects, he says. His practice has always had pleasure at its heart and yet this is a new way of working for the potter. The day I visit, his ideas for each piece are coming together, and we talk through the yet-unglazed forms: 'I know what I aim for the collection of functional ware to be, but for these I only know when they're made and they're in situ. It's when they have that material life that I can start to understand them.'

There has been little restriction by the curators and Keenan has been free to let his imagination roam. His first experience of a residency, the potter explains how he has experienced 'the place settling within me when I'm not there'.

His plans include an arrangement of vessels set at a window frame. The piece works from darkness to light, using Keenan's trademark combination of celadon and tenmoku, echoing the crack in a cloud



Alongside his series of new work, Keenan is showing a selection of his own beloved things, including the tin cup he scoops his porridge with every morning

that opens beyond the window in the Fells outside. For Keenan, certain spaces suggested specific ceramics, such as setting the dining table with plates and bowls – contemporary and flowing, and yet inspired by the Arts and Crafts obsession with nature and ready for the ghosts of the house. Elsewhere, Keenan invites visitors to get involved: at one, patterned ceramic tokens wait to be arranged and played with, at the other tactile cylinders hide a percussive secret.

Alongside his series of new work, Keenan is showing a collection of his own beloved things. Appropriately for an Arts and Crafts house, the collection shows his interpretation of William Morris's declaration to have nothing in your house that you know is neither useful nor beautiful. In Keenan's hands, this includes the tin cup he scoops his porridge with every morning and a simple plastic scraping tool, among others.

In his youth, he wanted to be an actor: 'I think I wanted to be someone else. It was a sporty school

and I was 'asthma boy'. Acting was something I could do to a standard and get respect for it.'

After training in Hull and London, Keenan worked for theatre companies across the UK. He was happy when he was working, but that wasn't often enough. 'You reach a point when you think "this isn't a good use of my time"... the idleness was crippling. What it did to my head wasn't good, it wasn't healthy.'

While working for a theatre company in Sheffield, the actor met Edmund de Waal; the potter's lodger was a member of the company. With money from the aforementioned Ronseal advert burning a hole in his pocket, Keenan bought some of de Waal's work and a friendship ensued.

As Keenan became more disconnected from acting, he heard de Waal was thinking about taking on an apprentice. He wrote the potter a letter at the end of 1994, of which both de Waal and Keenan have kept copies. The pair met in early 1995 at a pie and mash shop in Woolwich to discuss the details.





'If I'm not going to be an actor any more, I want to be taught to make pots by Edmund de Waal. It sounds ludicrous'

CHRIS KEENAN

What was then a leap into the dark now sounds simple in retrospect. 'If I'm not going to be an actor anymore, I want to be taught to make pots by Edmund. It sounds ludicrous', agrees Keenan. It was a risk – he didn't know if he liked working with clay – but he was entirely serious about being an apprentice. 'I wasn't looking for a hobby, I was looking for another way to make a living,' he explains. What was particularly alluring was the prospect of learning a skill; acting hadn't given him any sense of progress.

From de Waal's perspective, there was little risk: 'I knew I could be in the same space as Chris and that he would be good company, which is critical. There's an awful lot of silence involved in studio life and you need to find someone who knows how to be silent with you. He loved making stuff. He's an unbelievably good cook and he mended things all the time. So there was a feeling that this person really understood working with his hands, he wasn't scared by the material world. And working with clay is just another material.'

As de Waal's first apprentice, Keenan got lunch, made up glaze batches, wedged the clay, swept the studio, answered the phones. Once in a while, they'd sit two potters' wheels side by side and the master potter would talk him through forms: cylinder, mug, bowl, jug. 'There was this whole feeling of me learning to teach, just as much as he was learning how to learn,' explains de Waal. 'I'm privileged to have been there at the beginning of this great career.'

Keenan's aesthetic came with startling ease. For the first project that de Waal set him he worked with the tenmoku and celadon that is now his trademark. Attracted to the combination because of the contrast, Keenan wasn't engaged with the thousand-year old traditions that the glazes brought with them.

The casual shopper might be forgiven for seeing Keenan's work as part of an Orientalist tradition. 'I can't make a claim for being steeped in the history of ceramics,' he says, 'I use them for their colour, I'm not a card-carrying Orientalist. I can't disassociate or disrespect the Japanese tradition the glazes come from, but I didn't sweep the floor for seven years in a Japanese apprenticeship.'

Over the decades since his apprenticeship, Keenan has explored the possible variety of tenmoku and celadon – keeping his forms elegantly simple, he's experimented with surface pattern. 'People find the questions for themselves very early on,' says de Waal, reflecting on Keenan's constancy. 'Not the answers, not the solutions, but they bring together a series of ideas that become mesmerizing for them. Within a form or a series of glazes or a particular bit of music... That can keep you going for a long time. For me, it's a white pot and 45 years on I'm still asking "why white pots?"'

Keenan moved into a studio at Vanguard Court. The cobbled London street has, over the past decade, been home to Julian Stair, Merete Rasmussen, Annie Turner; 21 years later he's still there, having shared a space with fellow potter Carina Ciscato since 2003.

Having developed a series of functional tableware – mugs, vases and later his rocking bowls – Keenan took to selling his pieces at shows and fairs like a duck to water. While others hated standing with their work, Keenan found it easy. In retrospect, he thinks this stems from the experience of rejection that felt so personal when he was an actor – it inoculated him against anyone disliking his work: 'It's not me. It's related to me, but it exists outside of me.'

His profile and list of collectors grew and soon interesting opportunities came his way. In 2004 Habitat approached him to design a set of tableware, produced in Japan – an experience he looks back on as entirely positive. In 2010 he took part in a group show at Siobhan Davies in which he created his first piece of site-specific work, a move that *houseplace* more fully explores.

Each opportunity brings its own challenges but Keenan has a belief in serendipity: 'I think saying yes is good. I experience doubt in the short term, it could all go horribly wrong. But why not see?' Why not indeed.

Chris Keenan's 'houseplace', 29 July – 9 October and 'stuff i live with; stuff i love', 29 July – 4 September are both at Blackwell, The Arts & Crafts House, Bowness-on-Windermere; ceramics are at the New Craftsman, St Ives, 16 July – 27 August and 'In The Window' at Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool, 1-31 July

Below: Celadon beakers

