

FRAGMENTS in COLOUR



OPUS in mosaic terminology describes how the tesserae or tiles are worked across a surface creating different visual effects. As an experienced mosaicist the guiding principle of my research has been how to challenge — and celebrate — conventional mosaic practices. Can the tesserae be THE integral element of the artwork, defining its shape, narrative, colour and texture? After all mosaic originated in Roman construction techniques, it did not start as purely decoration.

TESSARAE are the materials used to create a mosaic. My research required a NARRATIVE which I found in mudlarking on the River Thames. Fragments of discarded glass, marble and ceramic broken and weathered over centuries by the water are randomly revealed at low tide (*Image Top Left*). Although these are rich in cultural and craft history my interest lay in their potential to explore the principle of FRAGMENT to FORM (*Image Top Centre*). As a bonus, being a born and bred Londoner, this chance personal connection offers me an opportunity to continue their story in an unexpected way. Here lies my interest in both the Japanese art of Kintsugi⁽¹⁾ that honours the broken and not least the monumental artwork of Claus Oldenberg⁽²⁾ who challenged the context of everyday objects.



COLOUR in Byzantine mosaic art was used in juxtaposition, relying on the optics of the location and the viewer's eye to blend tesserae.

Real gold leaf tiles were an essential component due to their luminosity in dimly-lit churches. The French pointillist Jacques Seurat⁽³⁾ searched for such luminosity in his paintings by juxtaposing colours just as the Byzantine mosaicists had done centuries before. In fact the contemporary artist Udo Rondinone⁽⁴⁾ uses fluorescent paint on his gigantic granite 'Magic Mountain' series of sculptures. From a mosaicist's viewpoint he is stacking tessera and crudely cladding with luminous colour.

Colour has always been integral to my mosaic work so how could I bring colour to the muted and worn mudlarked fragments from the river? I decided to employ the artificial colours of the man-made City of London.

Further, I am still exploring how to underpin my intuitive approach to colour choices with structure and reason. Polly Apfelbaum⁽⁵⁾ says colour is the integral structure of her artwork and paradoxically while her process is intuitive she also has systems. I decided that yellow through to gold would be an appropriate starting point (*Image Top Centre*).

MORTAR holds the tesserae in place. A piece of marble tesserae found is impossible to date. However if it is embedded in a chunk of mortar then the timespan can be traced. In fact mortar is essential to the mosaic process. I have been experimenting with three ways of making; the fragments either INFORM the shape, ARE the shape or contained WITHIN the shape of the sculpture. Mortar as a visible element holds everything together (*Image Top Right*). However mortar worked in the three dimensions of a sculpture does not provide adequate structural strength. Therefore I have been experimenting with hidden central rods and pins. I have focussed on combining traditional ceramic slip-casting techniques (*Image Bottom Left*) with contemporary polystyrene and concrete sculpting. Plus I have recently returned to the material Jesmonite.⁽⁶⁾ For it's easy to cast in colour, is tough enough to drill and polish. As it is the same weight as concrete, lighter polystyrene sections can be placed on it. Bonus: it is ideal for small fast repeat fragment casting too (*Image Top Right*). Here can be the answer to my reluctance to making models!

INTERSTICES describe the spaces between the tesserae. They are usually small and standardised, essential to the mosaic process. For they give structure to the design and physical strength to the work. However if you expand the interstices they become NEGATIVE SPACE. Such expansion gives the tesserae space to become forms in themselves. It reveals the ambiguity of their shapes. For me the work of ceramicist Betty Woodman⁽⁷⁾ achieves this. Her shapes have autonomy but also a distinct relationship between them created by the interstices. My drawing process has an intuitive freedom which I would like to translate into my making. Maybe I have to ask what my drawings need? Unravelling what I did do has given me permission to ask what I could do.

ANDAMENTO describes the flow of the tesserae across a mosaic surface. I have become an experimental maker investigating traditional and contemporary making with found materials. Can I achieve a flow with my new methods of making? The North American artist Corita Kent⁽⁸⁾ talked of the importance of a structured approach. With STRUCTURE you are then free to break the rules. I am intrigued and encouraged by the work of Francesca di Matteo⁽⁹⁾ and her combining a mortar-like material with more traditional ceramic work to create the visual tension of 'well-made' and 'unmade'. The concept of 'sloppy craft'⁽¹⁰⁾ is something I am still exploring.

REPETITION in the working of tesserae to create a whole has a meditative quality. Mudlarking is meditative too, skimming the exposed river bed with your eyes for treasures. The essence of a found object then becomes a catalyst. It provokes an enquiry into creative practice. I am keen to strike a balance between the INTUITIVE, the CONCEPT and the AESTHETIC. The goal is to develop a rhythm of making that will allow my work to be about colour as well as form and space, about 'mural as architectural object', about 'contrasting totems'. Both exquisite AND ugly. All of this is underpinned by the 'independence' of colour.

All work and photographs are by Liz Tiranti

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