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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





MASHED-UP MODERNS

Set up by Phil Root and Giles Round in 2011, the Grantchester Pottery emulates the collaborative spirit and handmade aesthetic of the early 20th-century Omega Workshops. But as the walls of the duo's Cambridgeshire studio attest, a dizzyingly diverse blend of ingredients – from Hockney and Habitat to Eric Gill and Diaghilev – flavours their cultural stew. Jessica Lack lifts the lid. Photography: Annabel Elston



Phil Root (left) and Giles Round, wearing their own creations in the Window Room at Wysing Arts Centre near Bourne. Just next to their studio, the space is used as a lunch room for artists on residencies. The duo's mural was inspired by the 1930s Italian ice-cream parlour *Marine Ice* in Camden



Top: paint breaks up on the bare breezeblock walls of the studio, so the artists had to plan the murals carefully. Above left: 'I grew up in the London of Rodney Kinman swing chairs and Terence Conran,' says Round, 'so this Hockney/Habitat-inspired pattern [next to the fuse box] is home to me.' The screen is made of linen and oil-painted with a Modernist design. Above right: 'Phil likes to call this wall "The Picassa", because it is a mash-up of three different Picasso paintings,' says Round. Above is a Diane von Furstenberg sky, while the skirting's pattern is directly lifted from Omega Workshops



Top left: a "bastardised" version of Frank Lloyd Wright's headed notepaper appears in the top left-hand corner. The mural on the right-hand wall is nicknamed the 'Diane von Furstenberg Acid Camo'. Top right: the two lemons reference Omega Workshops. 'Bloomsbury were keen to embrace abstraction, but they could never quite go all the way,' says Root. 'These lemons kept appearing in their paintings...' Above: the back wall is a composite of artistic influences ranging from set designs for Diaghilev's ballets to Hockney. The profile alludes to Eric Gill. The eyes to the left are a recurring motif

'WE LIKE buying cheap emulsions with comedy names, especially if they are called after bands,' says Giles Round: 'Tangerine Dream, Crystal Castles. And you can blame Raf Simons's autumn/winter collection for this,' he says, picking up a cup the colour of soured French mustard.

Our conversation takes place in the Grantchester Pottery, an artist-run studio founded by Phil Root and Giles Round in 2011. Based at Wysing Arts Centre in the scenic Cambridgeshire countryside, the duo invite other practitioners to collaborate with them in the creation of artworks. Past contributors have included Sophie von Hellermann, Michael Fullerton, Dietmar Lutz and Anne Low – not that you would know this because each work is anonymous and stamped only with the Grantchester Pottery logo, a simple GP in homage to Hans Schlegel's JLP design made for the John Lewis Partnership in 1962.

The artists met while on residency at Wysing; Round had come up from London, where he was known for creating austere, architectural sculptures, and Root, a painter, had just returned from living in France. 'We met in the ceramics studio,' says Root, 'which was unloved and dilapidated then.'

'We think it was built by hippies,' continues Round, 'because it is very rudimentary – it really couldn't be more basic. There is something very straight and functional about it and that appealed to us – there's a similar aesthetic going on with our work.'

The idea for the Grantchester Pottery began round the large table in the studio. 'I was making some tiles for an exhibition,' says Root. 'And in my naivety,' joins in Round, 'I was trying to make a full table service for an artists' dinner. It was the most laborious thing ever because it took nine weeks to make a meal.' Two things emerged from this experience: a desire to continue experimenting with ceramics and a fascination with Cambridgeshire. Wysing is situated a few miles from the village of Grantchester, a place famous for skinny-dipping and Rupert Brooke's poem 'The Old Vicarage'. Brooke was part of the Bloomsbury set, and it was this connection, together with an interest in early-Modern utopian ideas about cottage industry, that inspired Round and Root to set up the pottery.

'We began to wonder if it would be possible to create a studio where we could make reasonably cheap everyday ware, a Bernard Leach kind of dream,' says Round. 'But, unlike Leach, we realised pretty quickly that that is all it is, a dream,' says Root. 'The trouble is,' says Round, 'it takes seven years to learn anything, and historically most of the decorative-arts companies run by artists last six, so we knew we didn't have enough time to learn how to make ceramics properly.'

It was at this point that the artists began looking at the Omega Workshops, a pioneering collective set up by the Bloomsbury painter and critic Roger Fry in

1913. Fry's aim was to create affordable furniture, ceramics and textiles by up-and-coming artists like Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. The problem was that these artists were not trained craftspeople and as a result the objects they made were utterly amateurish.

One-time collaborator Wyndham Lewis described it best when he said: 'The chairs we sold stuck to the seats of people's trousers; when they took up an Omega candlestick they could not put it down again; they held it in an involuntary vice-like grip. It was glued to them and they to it.'

Fry was not deterred; in response to the criticism, he wrote about the rough-hewn quality of the artist's hand rather than the excellence of the work. 'Fry's ambition gave us a bit of comfort,' says Root, 'and the confidence to try anything.' Which the artists certainly have done. They have written a cookery book, made an ice-cream parlour inspired by the old Marine Ices in Camden, set up the Grantchester Free Press and the Grantchester Catering Corps, which they describe as 'a psychedelic version of the WI'.

Yet by far the strangest aspect of the Grantchester Pottery is that it is not a pottery at all. It is a conceptual artwork by two artists, who make, among other things, pots. 'We chose the name because it sounded so archetypal,' says Round, 'like an English company that had existed for a very long time. But it did mean there was a rumour going round that I had gone mad and become a potter in the countryside and dropped out of the art world altogether.'

'It also gave us the freedom to do whatever we want,' says Root. And that does seem to be their worldview; their exhibition in the ICA's Fox Reading Room in 2013 featured walls covered in prints of Eric Gill's penis, a woodcut indicated where asbestos could be found and they got over the perennial problem of the exit signs by marking them out in acid peach paint. It is safe to say Root and Round have a love of 1980s Habitat and Postmodern architecture that is matched only by Darien Taylor in *Wall Street*. Their synthetic colour palette comes from Diane von Furstenberg, while their wallpaper designs are usually mistakes they've then magnified to vast proportions. 'We often get the printers ringing us up to ask if we really want to create something quite so jarring.'

In many ways the Grantchester Pottery vision is similar to that of the Japanese Wabi-sabi, an aesthetic that embraces imperfections, roughness and irregularity. Their teapots are wonky and dribble, their ashtrays are clunky and their milk jugs look like K-9. And that is where the beauty lies: they take formalism and screw it up, revealing themselves to be inventive mavericks in the process ■

'The Grantchester Pottery Paints the Stage' runs at Jerwood Space, Union St, London SE1 (jerwoodvisualarts.org) until 22 Feb. Visit thegrantchesterpottery.com



The breezeblock wall is covered in a pattern that was originally designed by the Grantchester Pottery as endpapers for a publication called *Decorative Grammar*. The shapes are punctuation marks that have been cut out, scanned and overlaid to resemble a 'mashed-up visual score', before then being painted on to the studio wall. The bottle is a prototype