

# ceramics

M O N T H L Y

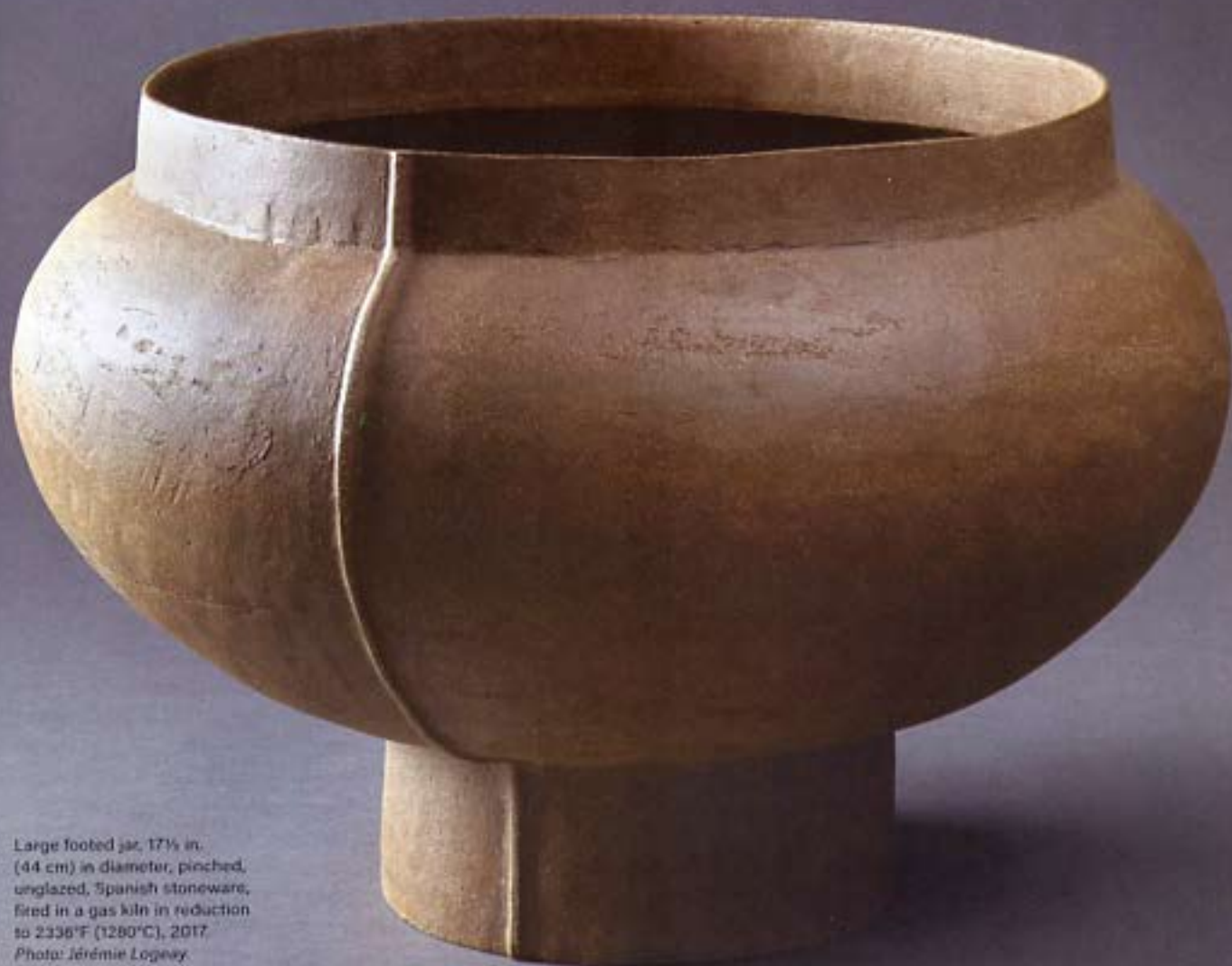


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Oct 2019 \$7.50 (Can\$9.50)

Full and Beyond Time

# SYLVIE ENJALBERT'S COILED POTS

by Lucie Brisson



Large footed jar, 17½ in.  
(44 cm) in diameter, pinched,  
unglazed, Spanish stoneware,  
fired in a gas kiln in reduction  
to 2336°F (1280°C), 2017.  
Photo: Jérémie Logeay



**Above left:** Two vases, to 15½ in. (39 cm) in height, 2017. **Above right:** Footed pot, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, 2018. All pieces: pinched, unglazed Spanish stoneware, fired in a gas kiln in reduction to 2336°F (1280°C). Photos: Jérémie Logeay.

Sylvie Enjalbert muses, "It feels like it was in a different life." In the early 2000s she was an avid mountaineer and paraglider living and working in the tourism industry in the Atacama Desert of Northern Chile. In that previous life, a long-felt desire to be creative using her hands caught up with her and she found herself enrolled in a local pottery workshop where she learned coiling. Clay turned out to be a powerful encounter in the breathtaking, arid landscape of sand and adobe houses. Enjalbert reminisces about this crucial moment, "I had to go far away to find myself. Now I keep getting closer and closer to who I think I am, thanks to clay." She had left for Chile dreaming of flying hot-air balloons and came back to France six years later carried by the dream of making a living working with clay.

When I visited Enjalbert's studio in St. Paul, in southwestern France, it was early spring, and the contrast of the Atacama Mountains of South America and the lush green slopes of the Pyrenees couldn't have been starker. The Pyrenees were an imposing and inspiring presence shrouded in clouds beyond the studio's glass panels. Enjalbert tells me she most often works in silence, and it strikes me that she resembles her pots—serene, soft yet angular, down to earth. She explains, "I came back to the basics: my hands, a few wooden tools, the quiet, the slow working pace."

Upon returning home, Enjalbert took throwing and glazing courses, but she circled back to exclusively making coiled pots. Her inspiration comes from many sources: Yayoi and Jomon pottery, Mesopotamia, and pre-Columbian Americas to name some,

but mostly and less specifically, from any ancestral containers for foodstuff, even baskets. And more simply yet, she explains that the sources for her work include, "all the hands that have made things before mine . . . This is what moves me. Humanity. What mankind has in common beyond eras, cultures, and physical borders."

#### Timelessness and Minimalism

Enjalbert's pots all start from a pinch pot meticulously worked in the palm of her hand. The finished forms look self-evident and rootless. With no specific place, time, or culture to link them to, they are the universal essence of a vessel. Some have rounded bottoms and find balance on a single point; tiny handles or thin raised vertical spines accentuate the profile of others, while one series sports eccentric mouths. Recently, she has started to add feet to some of her vessels. Enjalbert's thumbs imprint the inside of the ⅝-inch (4 mm) thick wall, giving the piece its waving tempo while she hones its outside with rib tools. She tries not to rework or cut the lip after setting the last coil, leaving the touch of the maker visible. The clay is a Spanish stoneware that comes in three main shades: ochre, blue/black, and golden brown once fired—mineral colors of arid landscapes.

Enjalbert says, "I have a hard time imagining what one would use my pieces for because they are already full of something . . . yet I am unsure what . . ." Indeed, lines are taut and bellies are full. The pots seem contemporary cousins to Magdalene Odundo's and Sara Flynn's vessels, while the ensembles conjure up the calm

groupings of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. Finished to a bare simplicity—unglazed and raw, fired in gas reduction to 2336°F (1280°C), their surfaces beg to be touched and explored like a new lover's skin. Enjalbert likes this parallel, adding "touch is such an essential way of perceiving life."

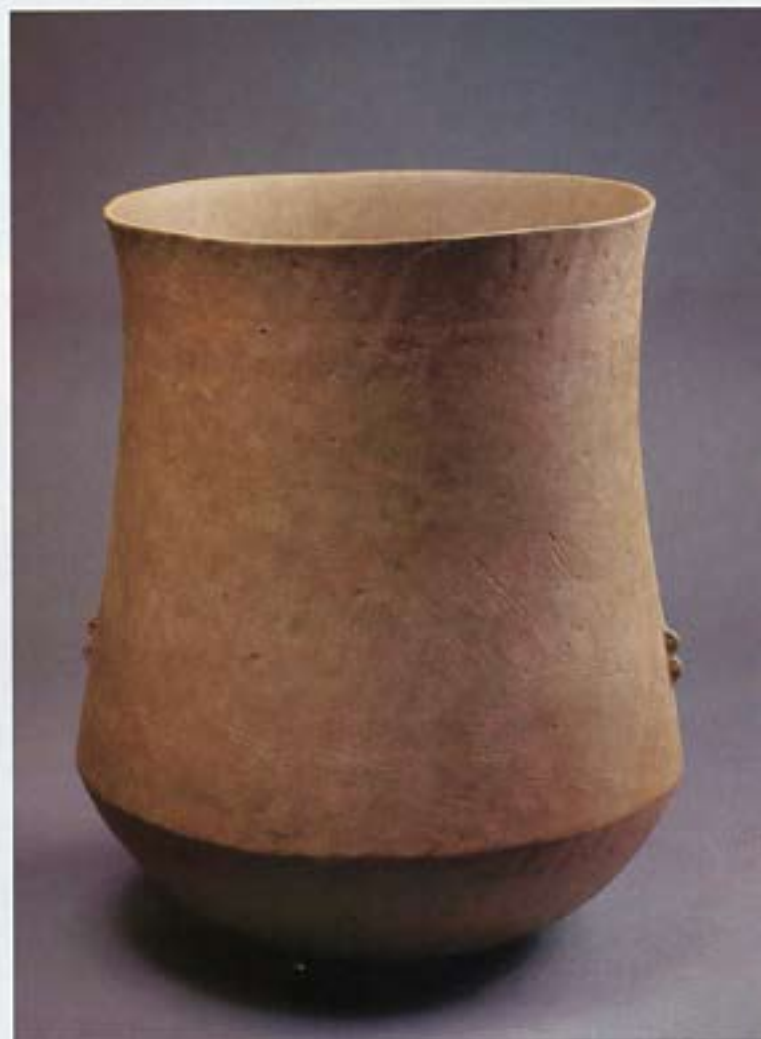
She doesn't strive to make functional items, but her pots clearly come from this lineage. At a loss when asked if the pieces are pots or sculptures, she likes unsettling the viewers by displaying them simultaneously on the ground and on plinths. "I make my pots like I would sculptures . . . Why should the two be antinomic? Is it necessary to close up a pot so it becomes a sculpture?"

Enjalbert has enjoyed working in Asia where this split doesn't exist, "it is a breath of fresh air!" She felt very comfortable in Japan (during a six-week residency in Shigaraki in 2015) and last fall in South Korea where she spent two weeks learning from Onggi master Hyang Jong Oh how to make large slabs. However, the most important change that happened during her stay in Korea was her lengthened and widened gestures. She explains, "My working motions were short and tight. Suddenly I opened up . . . Involving my whole body was such pleasure."

#### Growing Bigger and Harvesting Clay

Straight after her time in Korea, she embarked on a two-month residency in Jingdezhen, China, wanting to push her work into this larger-scale format she had just glimpsed. At home, Enjalbert was limited to the 23 inch (58 cm) height of her 7.7-cubic-foot gas kiln, so her work had remained in the realm of the hand, varying between 5½ to 15½ inches tall. In China, arms and torso in motion, feet rooted, she made pots reaching heights of 43 inches. Pots growing larger led to questions she had not foreseen, "I face technical challenges with pieces beyond 39 inches tall. I also wonder what makes sense aesthetically and how far I can push the pot." Faced with the question of how to go beyond a given size, yet keep the tight lines she strives for, Enjalbert has found sketching to become a new part of her practice. Back in her studio, working toward her upcoming solo show in Seoul, South Korea, in October (40 pieces including some new larger ones making their debut), it sometimes helps her solve problems and figure out solutions. In Jingdezhen, she had seen people drawing a piece in 1:1 scale on the ground prior to making, which also seemed interesting to try. Despite the deliberate and thoughtful making process, she only knows if a piece is successful once it's fired. Some go straight to the hammer. The ones she's unsure of are sent to what she calls purgatory (a platform above her workspace) for later reappraisal.

As well as changing scale (she has applied for a grant to buy a larger kiln), Enjalbert has started harvesting local clays with a friend, potter Laetitia Pineda. The first tests are promising, but digging all the clay for very large pieces would be incredibly hard work. The final answer might be a mixing of local and store-bought clays. Her reverence for the material is evident when she shows me a bag containing the last stoneware mined from a Shigaraki pit that her friend Otani (from Otani Workshop, whose creative energy she most admires) has gifted her: "it's such a beautiful present, I feel intimidated."



**Top:** Eccentric one, 9½ in. (24 cm) in diameter, 2015. **Above:** Large ochre jar, 19¼ in. (49 cm) in height, 2015. Both pieces: pinched, unglazed Spanish stoneware, fired in a gas kiln in reduction to 2336°F (1280°C). Photos: Jérémie Logeay.



1 Adding a coil to the scored and slipped rim of the vessel. 2 Working and refining the lip of the pot. 3 Adding handles to the pot. 4 Refining the attachment areas around the handles using a modeling tool. 5 Adding a vertical coil to the side of the pot to create a raised spine. 6 Reinforcing the seam and refining the raised spine using a wooden modeling tool. 7 Enjalbert adding a coil to a pot, with two other pots in progress on the table and the countryside and slopes of the Pyrenees visible through the studio windows in the background. Photos: Jérémie Logeay.

Akin to nature changing every day without us taking notice, Enjalbert quietly pushes her work forward. "I've been pulling on the same creative thread for seven years," she explains. "I always try to go further using the same basics: the unglazed pot . . . How can I keep evolving with the medium?" After she had some very nice surprises come out of the anagama kiln in Shigaraki, she had thought that further change might come from wood firing. She acquired bricks to build a kiln before deciding that gas firing definitely produced softer surfaces on her work; the bricks remain in a pile in the yard.

Enjalbert's pots touch the universal in ourselves. They echo the work of all the working hands from the dawn of time and the need of bodies and souls to be fed. In her statement she writes that "the pots which [she] makes nourish [her] in an essential way." Through clay she's found a sense of accomplishment. That is clearly as much about making something she loves as it is figuring out who she is on a more existential level.

"My dreams have been carrying me in life," she muses. She did not end up a pilot in the sky. She's firmly landed on earth, in the full and humble maturity of her art.

*Sylvie Enjalbert's next solo show will be held at Gallery LVS, Seoul, South Korea, October 4th–26th. Find out more at [www.sylvie-enjalbert.com](http://www.sylvie-enjalbert.com), Instagram: @sylvieenjalbert, and Facebook: @sylvie.enjalbert.50.*

*Photographer Jérémie Logeay has been taking pictures of potters and their pots since 2007. He also just directed his first documentary film on potter Rizü Takahashi. Find out more at [www.jeremielogeay.fr](http://www.jeremielogeay.fr) and Facebook: @jeremie.logeay.*

*the author Lucie Brisson apprenticed with Simon Levin and Micki Schloessing. She is enjoying making electric-fired pots and still dreams of her future wood kiln. To learn more, visit [www.luciebrisson.com](http://www.luciebrisson.com).*



**Above:** Large ochre jar, 19¼ in. (49 cm) in height, 2015. Photo: Jérémie Logeay. **Below:** Ensemble, 2014. Photo: Lisa Renberg. All pieces: pinched, unglazed Spanish stoneware, fired in a gas kiln in reduction to 2336°F (1280°C).

