

Question Three: The Materiality of Surface.

Name: Nancy Leather.

Student Number: 2404204.

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In agreement with Giuliana Bruno, I will be defying the assumption that surface is superficial or materialistic (EMPAC, 2023, 1:45). Exploring how important events or happenings materialise on the surface of our lives and as it does with art. The prefix "sur," derived from Old French meaning "above" or "over," when combined with "face," which refers to the base or front of an object (Etymonline, no date), this implies that the material nature of a surface is revealed through the object's exterior, meaning the viewer can form their own interpretation of the medium. Bruno describes "surfaces having the capability to project time, space, atmosphere and effect" (Doktorski, 2020, para. 2). Exploring how historical, social and political experiences are inscribed onto the surfaces all around us; skin, art and architecture (BOMB, 2014, para. 6). Supporting Brunos statement by picking up on Jaques Derrida's idea of hauntology and expanding on the discussion through Mark Fisher's contemporary interpretation of hauntology. Bruno suggests that our skin is the primary surface, acting as the first point of communication through touch. It is through touch that we initially connect, bridging the external world with our internal experience (BOMB, 2014, para. 8). Building on this idea, I will be pulling upon Edmund Husserl's philosophical theory of phenomenology zoning in more specifically on the phenomenology of touch. For this essay two illustrated case studies will be examined in response to these theoretical frameworks thinking about how this links to the medium of ceramic.

Hauntology, Derrida's theory, combines the concept of haunting and the philosophical theory of ontology. The combining of words, 'haunt' and 'ontology'. 'Haunt' or 'haunting' is described by Warren Boutin (2024) as a resonating presence of a ghost of time, that lingers after the initial encounter, leaving an imprint on our minds, emotions even going as far as to form future realities. 'Ontology', a philosophical theory that explores the existence of forms (Buchanan, 2010, p. 352). Combining these two notions it can be inferred that hauntology is the lingering presence of the past that dictates the societal forms of the future. Derrida backs up this assumption through his book of *Specters of Marx* (1993). Leading from Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels idea that "A Specter is haunting Europe- the Specter of communism" (1848), that is explored in the *The Manifesto of the*

Communist Party'. Derrida decided that even after the Fall of certain political, social or environmental ideologies they still haunt the future. Derrida believes that the main Specter of now is Marx's theories and ideology in critiquing capitalism and the elite. (1993) Using the fall of the Soviet Union as a symbol of communism's collapse and its impact on shaping contemporary political and social structures. Through art we can pinpoint the times in which art developed from being a form of beauty to a form of critique and rebellion. The first major rebellion art movement was Dadaism an avant-garde movement that emerged from the first world war, critiquing the horrors and injustice that occurred during the early 19th century. Haunted by Dadaism came the rise of surrealism, a consequence from the second world war (Coats, 2024, para. 4) The present, a capitalistic society full of inequalities and injustice has seen a rise in art that is haunted by these issues, communicating opinions and stories of personal memories in the present times. Contemporary works are haunted by the original movements that advocate for art to be seen as a cultural symbol. Mark Fisher's response to hauntology has much more of a modernist response, taking analysing hauntology to be a more personal phenomenon. *Ghosts of my Life* by Mark Fisher developed the idea that hauntology is not only a memory haunting but also the absence, lost futures are what shapes art and culture. 'Lost futures' the memory of what could have been. Fisher argues that hauntology stems from nostalgia and idealized memories. Nostalgia and the concept of lost futures help society accept cultural and societal limitations, evokes the idea for society to recognise failures and possibilities, haunted by events that never were (2014). The elements discussed fuse together to create the concept of unintended consequence. An event that unintentionally shapes the notion of design but also that haunts the narrative and how a piece of art or an art movement would have never occurred if an event didn't happen.

Phenomenology is closely linked to ontology; both explore the notions of existence. Where ontology is the existence of things (Buchanan, 2010, p. 366) phenomenology is defined by Edmund Husserl as "a descriptive philosophy of the essence of pure experience" (Phenomenology Online, no date). Husserl aims to capture experience exactly how it is, with no theoretical analysis or explanation, to just simply experience. Supporting Bruno's theory that communication begins with touch and how this transcribes our personal ideologies into the physical realm. Ceramists main form of communication and connection to their practice is touch, to understand their medium through the feel of the material. Phenomenology, the philosophical concept of the way in which humans experience the world through their senses and lived experiences (Phenomenology Online, no date). Focusing on experiences after we have lived through them, the elements of everyday life that shape our perception of reality and individuality as crafters. Furthermore, Husserl explores the concept of the 'lifeworld' within phenomenology in his book *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), emphasizing that the lifeworld came before all scientific

explanations and that lived experience is the foundation of all knowledge, implying that you also live through immediate experience. The idea that you gather information from emotional senses of the present and how they shape and influence the knowledge within existence. Lifeworld links to Derrida's hauntology and how lived experiences dictate the events of the future. Within phenomenology the concept of tacit knowledge drawn from Husserl, influenced the works of Michael Polanyi and his exploration of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is learned through experience, just how memories and art are formed through experience (hauntology). Polanyi describes tacit knowledge to be tailored to an individual's personal learning experiences (Polanyi, 1958). For people to have complex and abstract thoughts we need tacit knowledge as it's a crucial part for humans to understand sensory input, perceptual analysis and abstract ideas.

My own journey with ceramics began in childhood, shaping playdough and plasticine into simple forms. Progressing to natural clay, I explored hand-building techniques such as coiling, moulding, and slab work, often incorporating leaves, glitter, and painted marks to create texture and narrative. These childhood builds reflect my identity and experiences of that time. Today, my practice continues to draw on these foundations, using tactile qualities to express personal and environmental connections.

Phenomenology, particularly Husserl's concept of the "lifeworld," has strengthened my understanding of the style and approach I take with my own builds. The handling and moulding of clay evokes childhood memories and sensory experiences yet using more refined techniques and contemporary influences to bring my pieces to the present while maintaining ghosts of my past. Each mark, surface texture, shape and form reflects my identity.

Both traditional and more modern techniques such as throwing create my own story. Digging local clay, blending this with ash to create a unique product along with using a variety of methods to create different pieces I can reflect on how my life experiences have brought me to this point in time. Experiments with form, glaze and texture allow me to create pieces that feel personal, reflecting my love of the natural world, life forms and sustainability.

Grayson Perry is a prime example of haunting his artwork with notions of the past. Specifically, Perry's recent art works in response to the Wallace Collection, Alan Measles and Claire Meet Shirley Smith and the Honourable Millicent Wallace. Alan Measles, Perrys childhood teddy, has featured throughout Perrys career. Here he is shown on the centre of the vase below (figure 1), dressed in male attire, alluding that he is portraying the narrative of men and how they represent authority within society. Along with him is Claire, set slightly behind representing Perrys female alter ego, she is another motif that runs through his works, symbolizing the female narrative of inequalities, gender and identity within society. These characters portray elements of

Perry's life that aren't inherently real (Andipa, 2023) This demonstrates how imagination and fantasy can seep and influence realities.

Perry's commitment to practicing traditional ceramic hand building technique enables him to maintain a physical and sensory connection with his medium. Using hand building methods allows for a ceramist to create larger bodies of work and for Perry, this is significant, providing him with a canvass to add intricate detail and complexity in his decorative methods. His use of traditional techniques and form adds contrast to his contemporary surface matter. Laying colours upon textures, upon imagery, helps formulate a visual representation of the complexity Perrys own psyche. Perrys lived experiences, along with the political and social ideologies that stem from them haunt Perrys ceramics. The narrative he creates, with themes of gender inequality and sexuality which are prevalent in western cultures of contemporary art (Andipa, 2023). Perry's work not only challenges the viewer but also creates a layered sensory experience, producing an experience that connects historical craft traditions with contemporary narratives. (MYARTBROKER, 2025)

Perry's commitment to practicing traditional ceramic hand building technique enables him to maintain a physical and sensory connection with his medium. Hand building methods allow a ceramist to create larger bodies of work, for Perry, this is significant and provides him with a canvass to add intricate detail and complexity with his decorative methods. Traditional techniques add contrast to his contemporary surface matter. Layering colours, textures and imagery, helps formulate a visual representation of the complexity of Perrys own psyche. The use of form, vibrant colours with controversial imagery that follows a narrative challenges people to analyse the depth of the message being portrayed (MYARTBROKER, 2025).

In this piece (figure 1), orange and black combine in cloud like forms creating an image of a burning fire, combined with the imagery of well-dressed men women in a wealthy architectural area, seemingly nonchalant about the fire. Perry uses this juxtaposition to critique the ignorance of the rich in modern society, that if their world is upheld, the rich are uninterested on who burns within the fire their class created. Perry created this narrative with his and many other's experiences of modern-day society.



Figure 1, Alan Measles and Claire meet Shirley Smith and the Honourable Millicent Wallace, Grayson Perry, 2025.

Simphiwe Mbunyuza grew up in Butterworth, South Africa his rural upbringing allowed him to explore what the land had to offer, observing the changes and contrasts in the landscape, tending to farm animals and swimming in the river. He grew up understanding the value of women within society and the creativity and skills they pass down through generations.

Mbunyuza's relationship with clay began when, as a child he used to create models of the animals he cared for, using clay from the riverbed. Today, using the same coil pot methods he produces enormous forms with layers and texture, feeling and listening to the material he says, "I can control it [at first], and then it's controlling me in a different direction" (Rabb, 2024, para. 5). Listening to the clay in the immediate experience of working with it, creates an organic and natural form.

Mbunyuza uses oxide washes to create the earthy muted colours of greens, oranges and yellows intertwined with motifs of small houses and textures created from mark making, shown in his piece called 'NALI'TAMSANQA' (figure 2). The colours reference *imbhola*, cosmetic pigments produced for centuries by Xhosa women (Rabb, 2024, para. 6). These women provide inspiration for the forms he creates using rhythmic curvature's resembling female forms, which is prevalent in the form 'YEMYEM' (figure 3).

Now living in America, Mbunyuza continues to take inspiration from deep-rooted connections to his childhood using ancient African techniques to create form and

texture on a large scale, representing what is important to him – recognising the value of women in society, which, unlike Western culture, women are sometimes portrayed as subordinate and weak. He takes a holistic view of landscapes and environments, pulling in different visual dynamics instead of the traditional view of a first-person perspective. Even when physically, Mbunyuza is no longer in Africa his ancestry and cultural heritage continue to influence his work bridging his past to the present using his relationship with ceramic to tell his story in a more contemporary style.



Figure 2, NALI'TAMSANQA, Simphiwe Mbunyuza, 2024



Figure 3, YEMYEM, Simphiwe Mbunyuza, 2023

Art is a means of communicating a story or a message both on a personal and cultural level. Ceramicists in all cultures use both decorative and functional items to tell a stories or narratives using the surface to display patterns, texture and meaningful inscriptions.

Contemporary artists like Grayson Perry and Simphiwe Mbunyuza draw on traditional techniques linking them to more modern trends with surface design. Perry uses classical forms and glazing techniques as a foundation for social critique, layering vibrant imagery and inscriptions to challenge norms of gender and class (MYARTBROKER, 2025). Mbunyuza utilizes coil-building and oxide washes rooted in African ceramic practices (Rabb, 2024, para. 4).

My own practice also reflects this link from past to present. As a child I began with hand building, a theme that continues through my designs with the introduction of the use of local clay and natural materials, linking my own heritage to a more current contemporary style, new techniques like throwing also feature in some of my pieces, all the time building on my own story and personal growth.

The theoretical framework laid out in this essay provides adequate evidence in support of Brunos statement that surface is anything but superficial (EMPAC,

2023, 1:45). That the foundation of the materiality of surface comes from experience and emotional reactions and how we process these experiences to project into surfaces of materials (BOMB, 2014). Hauntology and phenomenology enhance the credibility of Brunos thought that “surface projects time, space, atmosphere and effect” (Doktorski, 2020, para. 2). Hauntology provides a clear analysis that the projection of surface comes from notions of the past while influencing the present outcomes, always existing and always being interpreted. Phenomenology provides an insight into the physical elements that go into communicating, providing a bridge for ideas to become physical outcomes, how the material itself enhances an artist’s creativity, the material he uses is equally important than the result. This therefore enhances Brunos concept that touching the surface is the first point of communication (BOMB, 2014). While Perry uses external influenced issues like political and societal (MYARTBROKER, 2025) to influence his work Mbunyuza uses personal environmental experience to lead the direction of his work (Rabb, 2024), both are equally important in provide meaning to surfaces within art.

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