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Creative Collector

Zeynep Boyan on making space for creativity and her ascendant ceramics career.

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“It started with crafts,” Montreal-based artist and designer Zeynep Boyan says of her creative experimentation, describing generations of family members who share her innovative spirit. “Everyone does things with their hands. If something is broken, or if they see something somewhere and they want to try making it at home, no one hesitates to give it a shot.”

Perhaps that’s what has fuelled Boyan’s all-in attitude to her exploration of ceramics and an artistic career that can only be described as ascendant. The curves and bends of her pieces and the movement she captures in clay are engrossing. She focuses on texture, form, and line, and using millennia-old coiling techniques. There’s a quiet confidence in the way she approaches her work that is reflected in her creations, and the world is taking note. In the almost three years since the self-taught creative began to explore clay, she has exhibited at design weeks and festivals in Milan, Dubai, the Netherlands, New York, London, and, closer to home, in Toronto at IDS and Montreal at Souk Mtl.

When she was growing up in Adana in southern Turkey, her parents encouraged her to express herself. “My parents are not artists, but I think they carry that within their soul,” she says. “It’s just they didn’t have the opportunity, maybe.” At 17, she got the chance to spend a year in Belgium, where she studied film and photography. It led Boyan to then study film at university back in Turkey, where she began working at a high-profile advertising agency while still in school. She continued working in advertising after graduation but found her interest waning. “While we were staying up late working for a significant presentation, everyone was like, ‘I have a family,’ and ‘I have kids,’ and ‘I *have* to be here earning this money, but you can go and see what’s out there for you.’ I was hearing these comments a lot,” she says. Long hours and disillusionment with the industry’s misogyny and capitalistic mindset took their toll. “There was this disconnection between the work that I was doing and what I wanted to do.”

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Photos: *Side Table No. 1* (this page) in terra cotta and off-white stoneware stacked; *Double Unit* (opposite page) with aluminum door and stoneware handles; *Pedestal II* (following page).

So Boyan quit her job and moved from Istanbul to Montreal in January 2021. Determined to reignite her creative passion, she looked for a way to work with her hands, settling on clay. "I was like, okay, I can do something with this because it has this plasticity that will allow me to go a little bit wild." With big aspirations, she began her study of the medium and embarked on a career in it. "In terms of building things with my hands and having ideas on what to create, I was, I would say, comfortable. But technicality-wise, I had no idea." Even so, Boyan dove head first into sculpting.

The social isolation that came with moving to a new country during the pandemic ended up being something of a blessing. "It really gave me that empty space to clear my mind and just create." She began researching and reading about clay and joined virtual groups and communities. "People online are really generous with their knowledge," she says, noting how strangers would take the time to help her solve issues. "That was really important in the beginning because it helped me move forward."

Three years in, Boyan speaks about clay as if it's a close friend. Of late, she has taken to terra cotta. "I've been working with this for maybe around a year—I think we've

built a really good relationship in the sense that I know where to stop testing limits, and it gives me the freedom and the playground to try my ideas."

In some ways, Boyan's limited prior knowledge in sculpting clay has worked to her benefit. "My source of inspiration is not coming from certain people or someone that I put to a higher level that I admire," she explains. "It's more about finding human connection, like the connection one has with nature, with the city that they're living in, the relationships that they're building with objects and people. So I'm coming from a more, I would say, personal perspective."

In one of her recent sculptures, *Offspring*, an abstract piece with a rounded base and a curved head bowed in on itself, she explores the pressure women face to marry and have children, and she defies the tendency to objectify the female body.

"When I was working on that piece, I was actually really thinking about these things and how we are, as women, always expected to take care of another being and nurture and reproduce," she says. "We can also reproduce things through our intelligence and our arts, and we can give that as an offspring. It doesn't have to be a person in that sense."

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Space, both physical and mental, is important to Boyan, and she fills her home with things she feels connected to, drawing on the “collector instinct” she inherited from her father. She applies this appreciation for quality, tactility, and functionality to her furniture pieces that can be best appreciated through use. “I’m not a collector that keeps things in a glass box. I don’t think that’s how we should spend our lives,” Boyan explains. “Even when I’m creating collectible pieces, I approach them with the intention for people to use them in their daily life, because they’re going to notice different quirks and details every time they’re touching them and using them.” In *Units*, three boxes stacked on a plinth have doors that slide out, a nod to the wooden pencil cases of Boyan’s youth, and the amorphous knobs are inspired by the stones she gathers during her travels.

As Boyan looks to what’s next, she plans to continue to experiment with functionality in her art. “I’m really interested in that common space where art and design meet,” she says. At her newly announced residency with custom lighting manufacturer Luminaire Authentik, she will do just that with lighting fixtures set to debut in the spring. “To be honest, I’m really proud. And working with a brand and creating a collection together, I think we can come up with interesting designs that will also challenge the medium.”

It’s been a whirlwind few years—Boyan jokes she’s been a bad employer to herself—but it’s paid off, jump-starting an artistic exploration that has made her excited to work in her studio every day. “If we go back to the history of how everything led me to come to this point, I guess I really held that creative part of me inside of me. I think the most important thing with everyone is that are we really giving ourselves the space to create.”

