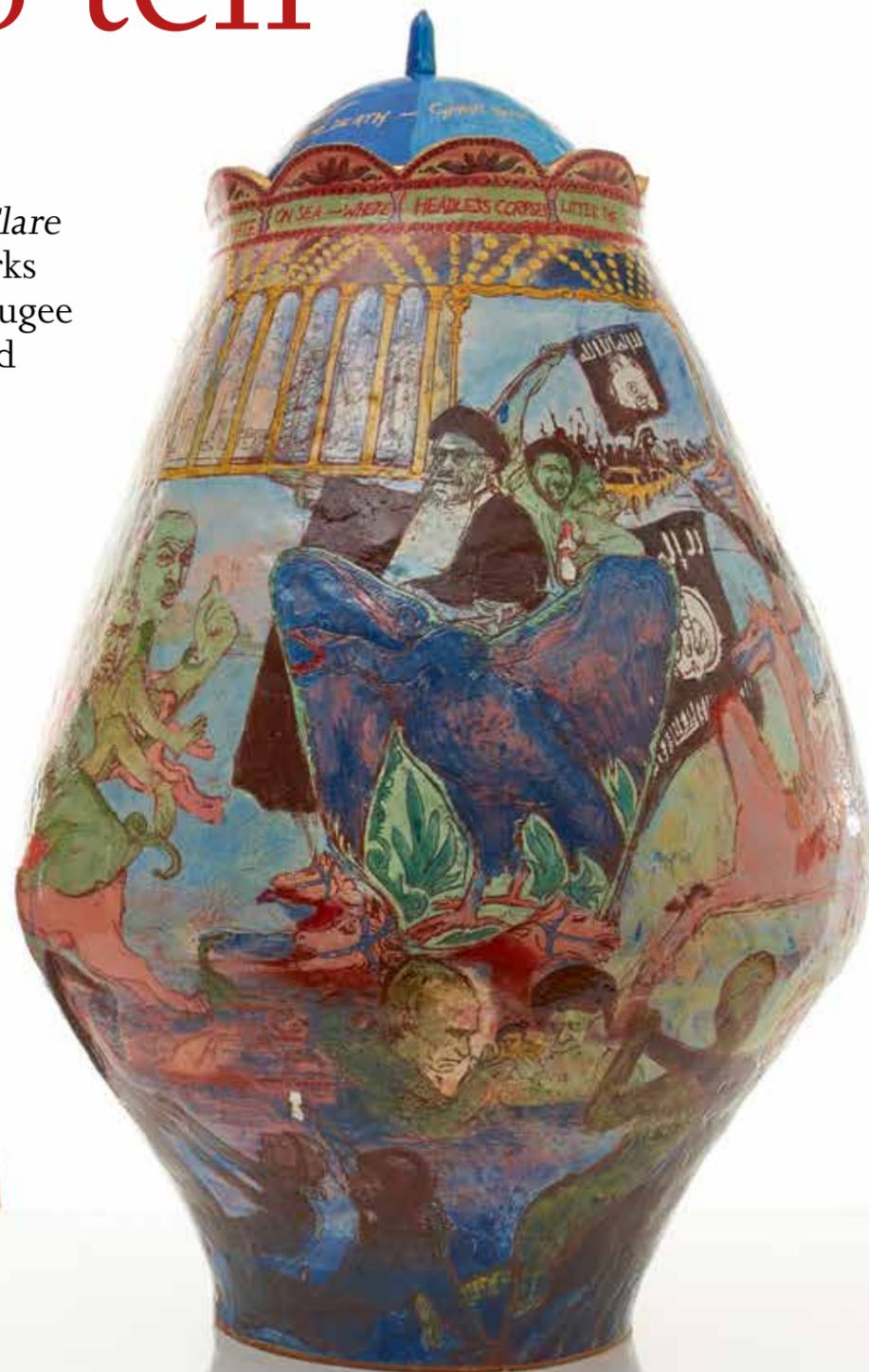


Pots with a story to tell

Using her ceramics as a canvas, *Claudia Clare* has created a series of three symbolic works that document one man's journey as a refugee in Britain. Here she shares the background to creating these large painted pieces



ABOVE: Claudia Clare with her pot *Postcard from the Caliphate*, 2015-17, 90cm high, which will be on display at the Zuleika Gallery in London during November

*From George Orwell's *Inside the Whale*, 1940. This is my interpretation of what Hossein was saying, which seemed best expressed in English using Orwell's analogy

My large-scale, figuratively painted pots are the meeting of images and form, combined with the sense of movement produced when the viewer walks around them. Concave and convex forms can produce dizzying perspectives resulting in a dramatic sense of space. This is further enhanced by the infinite space afforded by the pot's circumference, where the horizon effectively spirals round without end unless the painter decides otherwise. When painting a pot, the physical limits – or frame – are the rim and base only. A viewer's emotional response might be prompted by shape, form, images or colour, but they will also respond to the space created by perspective. Coupled with its historical and narrative associations, a pot has the potential to be an unusually dramatic canvas.

HUMAN STORY

My work *Travelling West*, 2013 (pictured overleaf), tries to illustrate as faithfully as possible one person's account of their journey overland to seek asylum in Britain. Four years after we met, Hossein had decided to tell me his story. Hossein is Kurdish, a refugee from Iran. His was no formulaic story – it was full of all the inconvenient details that make a narrative human.

'Received wisdom is that a pot is a simple, humble thing, the antithesis of a grand narrative, but this is far from true'

For several months we pored over Google Maps, tracing the route he took on horseback over the Iranian border, searching for pictures that resembled the bus he travelled on through Turkey, or the unseaworthy craft that brought him from Izmir to somewhere on the Greek mainland, from which he made his way to Athens. It was a journey punctuated with anxious phone calls to his mother and desperate calls to his trafficker. He spent only a month in the infamous 'Jungle' camp in Calais. It was smaller then, before the Arab Spring became the Syrian Civil War that resulted in the mass movements of people through Europe.

The form of *Travelling West* dramatises the precipitous heights and drops of the mountainous

parts of Hossein's journey. One side of the lower part of the pot depicts a suffocating, prison-like room where the trafficker kept him for an unknown time period. Near the rim, is the bright full moon that lit up a snow-covered field on the mountains they had to climb to avoid the endless Turkish check-points. There was an audible and compelling joy in Hossein's voice as he described that moonlit landscape to me; extraordinary, given the privations and fear he had experienced en route.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

London became Hossein's home from 2007 onwards. He walked many miles in the early days just to get to know the city. Having fled a theocratic dictatorship, he railed against the Islamist preachers he encountered at Speakers Corner, spreading the very doctrine that had killed members of his family and necessitated his escape. Spitting fury about the numbers of women and girls in hijab and long clothing – 'Choice?! What choice! My mum and sisters have no choice!' – he would issue dire warnings, accusing his new homeland of 'playing with fire without knowing that fire is hot.'

Nightwalker, 2014 (pictured overleaf) is an allegorical interpretation of Hossein's view of London. It features a looking glass-world that is theatrical, confusing and satirical. Religious buildings have become a fairground. Anjem Choudary, a street preacher, is featured as a transvestite stripper, 'parading her pieties' by the merry-go-round, while President Putin, in a paper crown, is the passenger in one of the luxury cars Hossein chauffeured as soon as he could work legally.

BAROQUE INFLUENCE

Ten years later, the Middle East is in even greater tumult. The Kurds, Hossein's people, are on the front line. Coverage of this unfolding catastrophe forms part of our daily diet of television news, mainly from Kurdish satellite channels. My pot *Expulsion*, 2016, is an allegory showing a furious Prophet expelling the Caliphate and its protectors with a thunderbolt, while the Heavenly Host ushers in musicians and dancers to reclaim their ancestral lands. It is optimistic, operatic, and Baroque in intention and style. Baroque painting is associated with 17th-century Europe, religious wars, reform and the Enlightenment. Our own time is also proving to be a battlefield of religious



FROM LEFT: *Nightwalker*, 2014, 89cm high; *Travelling West*, 2013, 86cm high



and political forces – not all of them sympathetic to Enlightenment values. If there was ever a time to reclaim the Baroque, that time has surely come.

The three painted pots show three very different approaches. *Travelling West* and *Nightwalker* are both tightly detailed, carefully designed and descriptive, but they vary in mood: one is a factual illustration, while the other an allegorical satire. *Expulsion* is different again, being more loose, painterly and operatic, both in terms of the space described on the pot surface as well as the nature of the story being told.

PAINTED POTS

Received wisdom is that a pot is a simple, humble thing, the antithesis of a grand narrative, but this is far from true, as revealed by a quick look at history. The ancient Athenians used pots to record heroic battles, appease the gods, and record the development of civil and political society. Renaissance maiolica makers flattered their ruling families and painted allegorical morality tales and scenes from ancient mythology, while in France images of saints were sculpted in faïence in defiance of the atheistic revolutionary dictators of The Terror.

Figurative painting is central to the Baroque approach. This is where a potential clash of cultures occurs when combined with studio pottery. Abstraction is the expected norm. Figurative painting is much less so, although a mannered, representational approach is acceptable. This is

at least partly derived from the simple fact that few potters are also trained painters, but this is also an aesthetic norm of 20th century European modernism. Figurative painting became so marginal for several decades that, in spite of its current gradual return, we now seem to have forgotten how to look at it. The expectation is that the image will tell us, in simple terms, what the narrative is and, by extension, what to think. However, as with abstract imagery, so with figurative: the viewer will always bring their own interpretations with them. The meaning, if there is one, is therefore never fixed. ^{CR}

Claudia Clare's painted pots will be on display with Grayson Perry's prints at Zuleika Gallery, London, 7 Nov–1 Dec; zuleikagallery.com