

Ken Eastman enjoys a rare moment of inactivity in the converted stable he uses as a studio, in front of his pot *Folding Blue*. Beneath the stairs is *Nova*. The tall piece on the table to the right is an untitled work in progress

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Constructed from substantial, fractured slabs of clay, Ken Eastman's pots are like Frank Gehry buildings reborn as ceramics. Their remarkable originality is achieved through a combination of frenzied artistry and painstaking application, discovers Matt Gibberd. Photography: Antony Crolla ▷

## BUILDING IN CLAY

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**KEN EASTMAN** is a speed freak. This might seem surprising for a man who works in a quaint converted stable in rural Herefordshire, but when he's not busy getting his three sons off to school or giving a scatter-gun discourse to wide-eyed students at Glasgow School of Art, this former motorcycle courier is to be found prodding, malleating and sumo-wrestling clay into fantastically original shapes.

'The first few hours of making a pot is a chaotic process,' Eastman enthuses. 'I'll be standing on a table holding up the clay with anything that comes to hand – buckets, props, sticks...' It's easy to see why he has named one of his creations *Don't Let Go*.

'I try to make things I haven't seen before,' Eastman continues, 'and working at speed is a way of seeing new shapes.' His vigorous drawings, some of which are pinned up around the studio, also represent forms of rapid experimentation. These are often the starting point – enticing squiggles, daubs and dribbles which capture a mood or spirit that might translate into three dimensions.

Eastman works with clay that is rolled out to little more than a quarter of an inch thick. 'I like to make it deliberately difficult for myself,' he says. 'I try to find the organic, fabric-like qualities in clay.' Once the basic structure has been successfully erected, Eastman spends countless hours fine-tuning. Like a tiger sizing up its lunch, he will constantly prowl around his creation to see it from every conceivable angle, often darting up the stairs for an aerial view.

Standing as high as 3ft tall, and made up of undulating, overlapping pieces with unashamedly prominent joins, Eastman's pots are architectural in feel. Some have compared them to the fragmented edifices of Frank Gehry. It is no surprise to learn that before he trained at Edinburgh College of Art and the Royal College in London, Eastman embarked on a course in landscape architecture. In fact, such is their complexity that his ceramics could almost be the product of computer-aided design.

This most passionate of potters cites music and poetry as major influences, but ultimately he sees his ceramics as an extension of the painter's art. 'There was a time when I didn't use clay at all,' he says. 'I was just painting plates and canvases.' Eastman decorates his pots with slip, adding more and more and refiring over and over until he is pleased with the result. '*Don't Let Go* has probably got 15-plus layers on it. I don't think to myself, "this one will be brown"; I go through loads of layers until the colour finds itself.'

Eastman is keen to stress that the decoration of a pot is directly related to its shape, which explains the patches of colour on many of his works, such as *Nova*. 'A patch might reflect the footprint of a piece, or a shadow that falls on it, or contradict or exaggerate the curves. It's not like putting Mickey Mouse on the side of a mug.'

By the same token, the colour can dictate the shape. Indeed, Eastman often begins to make marks with his brush as soon as the clay has been rolled out. 'Just by the way you paint it, you can make a miserable piece happy, a nervous piece secure, a slow piece fast,' he says. A 'fast' pot? Only the indefatigable Eastman could have come up with such a notion ■

*Ken Eastman's pots are available from Barrett Marsden Gallery, 17-18 Great Sutton St, London EC1 (020 7336 6396), priced from £2,000*

From top: *Folding Blue* viewed from above; *Nova* stands outside Eastman's studio. The patches of colour are typical of his recent work; *Don't Let Go*, so named because Eastman dropped it during construction and it had to be rebuilt. Behind it are rapidly executed sketches and dribbles of slip, in which he explores 'new ways of making things alive'