

Nicholas Arroyave-Portela  
makes work that is at once  
conceptual, political, personal  
and sensual. Teleri Lloyd-  
Jones puts the pieces together

Ceramist Nicholas Arroyave-Portela talks about two television programmes as we discuss his new series of wall-mounted pieces in his East London studio: the one about celebrity genealogies (*Who Do You Think You Are?*) and Andrew Marr's bird's-eye visions of a modern country (*Britain from Above*). TV and craft aren't always good neighbours, but these connections seem apt the moment he mentions them. His new series of works, overall title *Todo Sobre Mi Padre* (*Everything to Do with My Father*), explores his family narrative, of nationality and identity, layering land masses, flags and shards onto one another. 'Those images of earth from space, those amazing, decorative images signify something that's going on – we're looking at something that we don't understand but it's actually quite significant.' He's talking about the Marr programme, but it could easily be his own work.

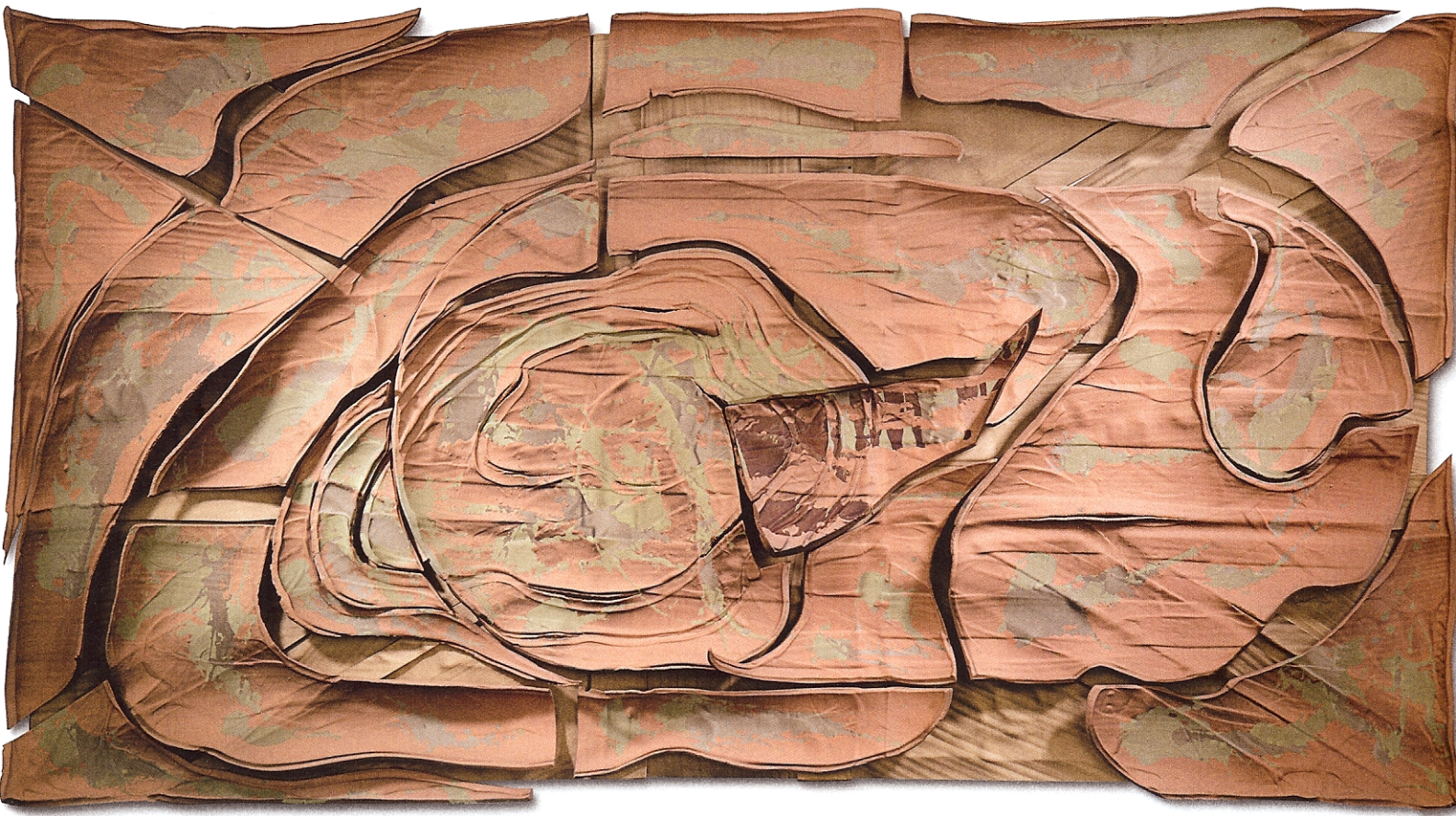
Four years in the making, this series is a far cry from the vessels he made his name with in the late 90s. He made a conscious break, not only a move from pot to panel but a desire to work with concept and narrative. 'A pot is just a pot at the end of the day, and that's what people saw,' he explains. 'They were never functioning objects. They were never not in a process of evolution, because it was always a matter of throwing better, aiming to make the perfect piece.' Now this drive towards the perfect pot is supplanted by Arroyave-Portela's personal narrative. Individual titles include *My Father's Migration Routes as an Open Wound* and *All the Things You Did to Me*: the series is introspective, almost confessional. Arroyave-Portela focuses on family history, specifically that of his father, who as a young boy left war-torn Spain in 1941 with his mother, to be reunited with his Colombian father, returning to Spain as a student at Salamanca University, and settling down in Oxford to raise his



# THE JOURNEY MAN







own family. The ceramist's pieces trace this journey via maps, words and flags, and reflect back on his own identity, examining broad connections between national identity, their cartographical outlines, their flags and all the power-struggles and exploitations that ensue. There's an intricate play with scale, as political and personal merge, and surfaces seem both planetary and microscopic. The series goes on show at Contemporary Applied Arts, its opening date the day Colombia marks the 200th anniversary of its independence from Spain.

Over recent years Arroyave-Portela has also become interested in ecology, specifically the work of James Lovelock, the former engineer and self-taught environmentalist who developed the Gaia theory in the 60s and 70s, dismissed at first

but subsequently gaining a large following (the ceramist is particularly drawn to Lovelock's maverick existence outside established institutions). The Gaia theory argues that the planet operates as a single self-regulating organism, its multiple systems and structures interconnecting to create a life-sustaining atmosphere. Links here perhaps with Arroyave-Portela's delight in scale, personal shading into political, and the shift of tectonic

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plates making way for the shifting facets of his own identity. His own connection to land – the physical clay, the conceptual terrain of 'home' – is intimately bound into these larger ecological concerns. (Indeed, the day I visit is consumed by post-election confusion, Icelandic ash clouds and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.)

Despite the new direction, Arroyave-Portela's practices undoubtedly remain rooted in traditional skills. Every section in the new work began life thrown on the wheel. The subsequent vessel is cut, opened up and laid out. 'Opening out the pots was like opening myself out,' he explains – the process less a continuation than a perversion, perhaps even a vandalism of his prior practice. He also continues to spray coloured slips onto surfaces at an angle,

Clockwise from above:  
*Flag 1: My Father's Migration Routes as an Open Wound*, framed fired ceramic, 1.66 x 1.02 m; *Flag 2 Home, Hogar*, framed fired ceramic, 1.64 x 1.02 m; *Time, Space, Continuum*, framed fired ceramic, 1.63 m x 80 cm; all from *Todo Sobre Mi Padre* series; *Slashed Piece*, white St Thomas stoneware, 50 cm high, 2001. All by Nicholas Arroyave-Portela





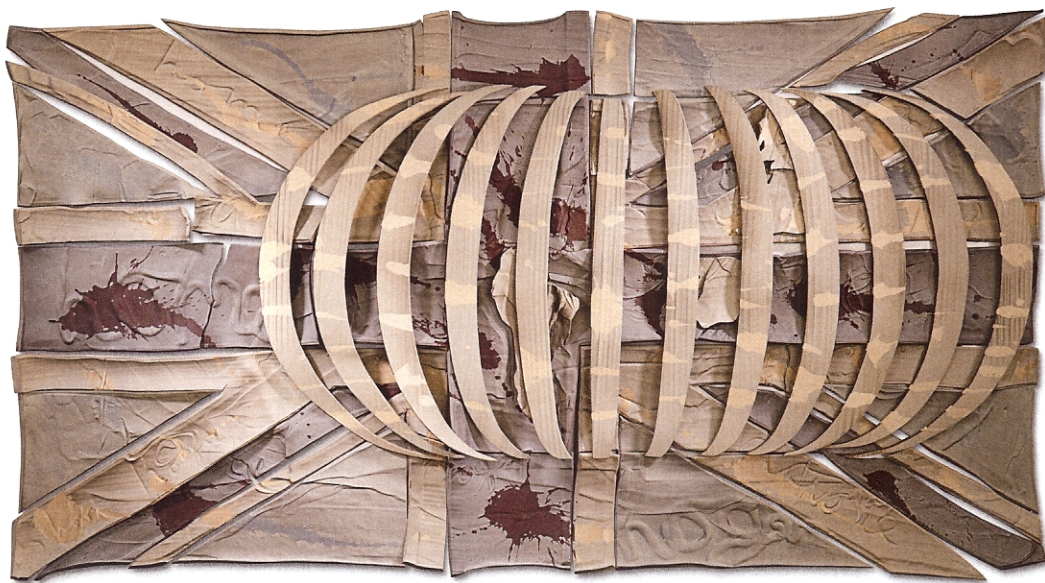
SLASHED PHOTO: COLIN CAMPBELL | ALL TODO SOBRE MI PADRE PHOTOS: SOPHIE BROADBRIDGE

creating accentuated shading that often suggested water on his vessels, but on the new works evoke an eerie pseudo-planetary skin.

After graduating in 1994 from Bath College of Higher Education, the ceramist moved to London and worked at Kate Malone's Balls Pond Road studio for several years. He was the recipient of a Crafts Council Setting up grant in 1996, winning first prize at *Ceramic Contemporaries II* at the V&A the same year. By the turn of the millennium, he had established himself as a virtuoso, commanding impressive price tags and a solo show, *Throwing Lines*, that toured internationally. But by 2006, he was having doubts: 'It was weird. I'd worked all my life to get to this point, but I didn't feel excited by it anymore. And I made a radical decision, to stop making the pots totally. Which was quite scary. I think it was one of those things, you sink or swim. I felt I could've carried on, but something deep inside of me would have died. What's the point of doing something creative when all you're doing is churning stuff out?'

So he stopped producing the vessels expected of him, and took time off, giving himself space to think. He considered returning to formal study – maybe a Masters at the Royal College of Art? – but decided he was better off alone. 'To be an artist,' he explains, 'is to have a lifetime of discipline, being able to change and to be self-critical. And you've always got friends and other artists who will be honest with you. You still have that kind of tutorial interaction, but you set that up yourself.' The Slow Movement has popped up throughout our conversation, and it's clear that Arroyave-Portela cherishes the time and space this change in direction accorded him. Nor does he take such luxuries lightly: 'It's quite a weird and wonderful existence. Unlike most people, I don't have to get up in the morning to a 9-5 job. I have a lot of freedom in that respect, but there is a price. You try to justify that you're not doing something that's just indulgent.'

The move from vessels to wall pieces seems to have brought with it the conundrum of definition. The vessels had belonged in an applied-art tradition; but the ethos of the wall-mounted, framed and autonomous newer pieces is in friction with this. Certainly the change in context is not lost on



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him. 'I never consciously thought, "Oh great, this is fine art now," It's just the best way of presenting the work.' But he recalls finding that 'you were treated as a second class citizen in relation to fine-art practice, especially if you wanted to do a particularly ambitious project. You had to fight for it. When I had the touring show, we always had to fight not to have the crappy space. The context was those little fights – and I got tired.'

Which is not to say he's eagerly striving to found his very own fine art enclave. Indeed – like numerous makers featured between these pages – Arroyave-Portela simply considers himself in the area in between fine art and craft. 'Bringing it down to real basics, what I don't like about the fine art world is that it's very anti-art sometimes. It's over-intellectual and all about referencing; very incestuous, with no sensuality or pleasure. On the other side of the coin, [in craft] there is

not enough emphasis placed on context. And I've always found myself in the middle, I like one part of both and hate the other. Which I think is why I said "Enough." I'll do what I want to do, and when I reach a point that I'm happy with, then I'll worry about where I show it.'

Sensuality is a word that's been recurring: the physicality of throwing is evident on surfaces, coloured slips reinforcing the undulations made on the potter's wheel. And with sensuality comes an explicit framing of skill – as his wall pieces are constructed from thrown forms, the new work still bears these sensual fingerprints, however abstracted they may become. Yet *Everything to Do with My Father* reflects a violence too, with its tectonic plates and graffiti-like scrawl. And it is this new-found language that Arroyave-Portela takes pleasure in, of tribal and contested space: 'At the beginning of the whole process, I was feeling disconnected from my work – that was a destabilising moment, and quite a big part of my identity as an artist. So you go back home, and re-evaluate.' *'Todo Sobre Mi Padre'* is showing at *Contemporary Applied Arts*, 2 Percy Street, London W1T 1DD, from 23 July – 21 August 2010. For details, see *Crafts Guide*. [www.caa.org.uk](http://www.caa.org.uk) [www.nicholasarroyaveportela.com](http://www.nicholasarroyaveportela.com)

