

PRESS RELEASE

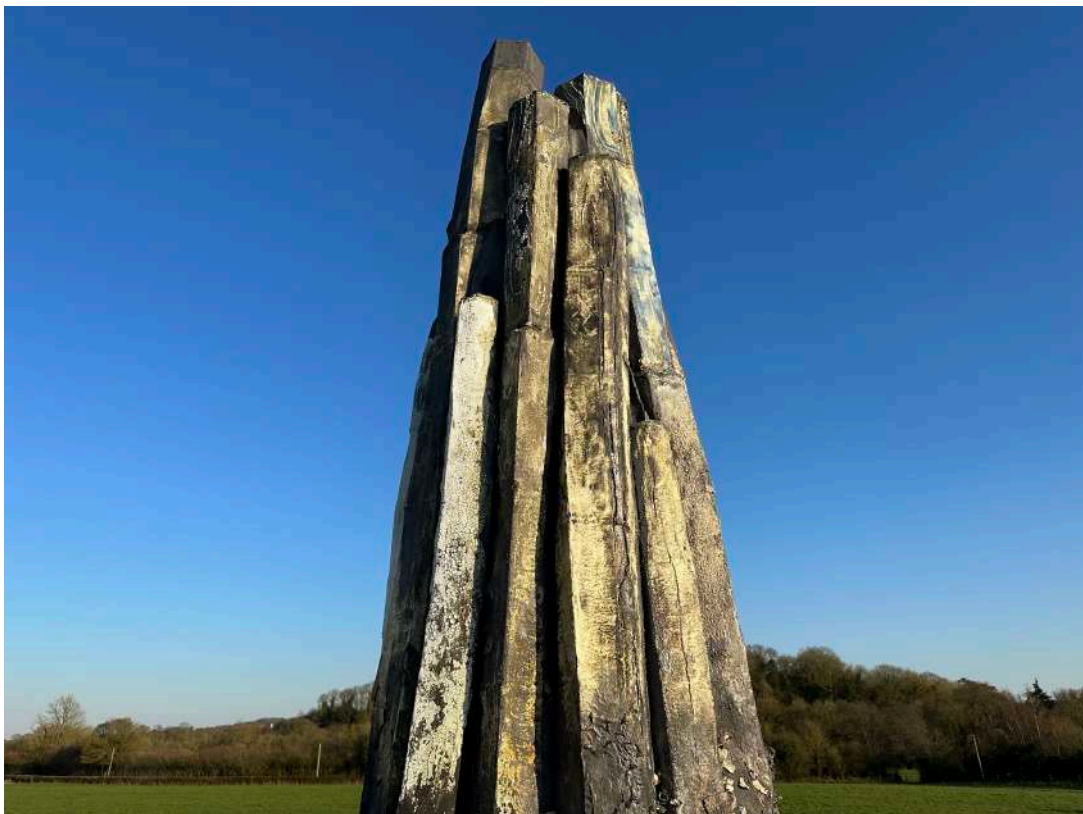
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Thiébaut Chagué: Wood Firing in Action

4 March – 30 April 2023

Messums Wiltshire



Thiébaut Chagué, *Ascension* after wood-firing. Photographer Mark Pickthall

Our spring season at Messums dedicated to ceramic has been marked by one of its key highlights – the revealing of a new, monumental wood-fired sculpture by French master ceramicist and expert in wood-firing, Thiébaud Chagué. The entire project, from start to finish has been created on site in what has been a celebration of the significance of the journey of making. It is this journey that has become the exhibition, reflecting the ethos of Messums, whereby paramount importance is placed on the aesthetic of making and the opportunity of enabling access to creativity.

Thiébaut Chagué has been artist-in-residence at Messums Wiltshire since January where visitors have been able to witness and engage with every stage of the making of process. Chagué's studio in the thirteenth century tithe barn has offered a rare glimpse into the entire ceramic process: mixing, extruding, forming, scoring, building, glazing, drying, and firing of the clay. The barn and its visitors have borne witness to the growth of this new work by the artist.



Thiébaud Chagué, *Ascension*, clay sculpture pre-firing. Photographer Mark Pickthall

Thiébaud Chagué's ceramic sculptures examine intersections between the natural and the man-made. His organic forms are reminiscent of natural fauna, flowering plants and gourd-like bulbs, elemental surfaces ripple and glisten as if just uprooted. The works seem almost growing, living creatures, works of the earth, from the earth.

The new work, *Ascension*, is a four-metre megalith, a shrine to clay and flame, that symbolises a fiery rebirth. The piece is formed from a gathering of extruded hexagonal clay lengths, each made using a refurbished mechanical extruder Chagué brought back from a scrap heap (itself made from World War II battlefield scrap near Alsace). Separately, the extruded pieces are stalagmite-like, growing upwards from the ground, together the sculpture is reminiscent of a geological rock formation, a roaming fragment of the Giant's Causeway.

The sculpture was vitrified in flame and transferred into permanence in a five-metre wood-fired kiln that was built on site. The firing took place from the evening of Friday 31 March until Sunday 2 April in a two-day celebration of clay and fire where the kiln was fed and fanned continuously while watched by a public audience. This firing was against the odds with howling wind and pouring rain on Friday 31 March risking the possibility that the firing might not be able to go ahead.



Kiln Firing, Messums Wiltshire, 1 April 2023. Photographer Mark Pickthall

Responding to the unpredictability of the elements is familiar territory for the artist. Wood-firing is an age-old technique that dates back thousands of years to when humans first interacted with clay and fire. With the many firing options contemporary ceramicists now have, the commitment to wood-firing is one that embraces the volatile and unpredictable nature of ceramic making. The clay Chagué uses can be unpredictable at high-temperatures of wood-firing, but he embraces this element of chance as part of the energy of the work's creation. The process cannot be completely controlled, the forms are fluid and changeable, splits may occur, glazes may crack and bubble – by nature the resulting work is spontaneous and always unique.

The narrative of Thiébaud Chagué's project at Messums Wiltshire is part of the history of ceramic making itself. Every slab of clay that has formed the work and every brick that was part of the building of the kiln is part of this story. His wood-fired stoneware techniques continue the legacy of the great Chinese potters of the past, pushing clay to extremes through the firing process.

Chagué is part of the great historical lineage of ceramic makers having worked under the British ceramicist Michael Cardew (1901-1983) who was, in turn taught by Bernard Leach (1887-1979). Cardew worked extensively in Nigeria setting up and promoting kilns in West Africa. Chagué has undertaken many trips and residencies including working with women potters in the Gwari village of Tatiko in Northern Nigeria and has utilised many techniques from sub-Saharan traditions. His preference for wood-firing relates to these Nigerian connections and his love of the nature of the process, through which he is extending this legacy of ceramic making.

In 2009 Chagué built a giant clay sculpture which he fired in the courtyards of the V&A Museum to mark the opening of its new ceramics galleries. Examples of his work can be found in public collections across Europe. He is represented in the V&A museum and has recently exhibited in the Louvre.



Thiébaud Chagué in the thirteenth-century tithe barn at Messums Wiltshire. Photographer Mark Pickthall

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For further information and press images, please contact: press@messumswiltshire.com

MESSUMS WILTSHIRE is a leading multi-purpose gallery and arts centre set inside a restored thirteenth-century tithe barn and surrounding buildings with exhibition space, sculpture garden and restaurant.

MESSUMS LONDON is a 2,000 sq ft exhibition space on Cork Street behind the Royal Academy. It hosts a rolling programme of exhibitions for our contemporary artists and is home to our photography department.