

PRECARIOUS BALANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC ART¹

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical foundations and artistic manifestations of precarious balance in contemporary ceramic art from an interdisciplinary perspective. Precarity, reflecting the sociopolitical and existential uncertainties of the twenty-first century, converges with the inherent fragility and transformative properties of ceramic materials to form a multilayered expressive strategy. Drawing on Judith Butler's account of ontological vulnerability and new materialist theories of material agency, analyzes the works of Zemer Peled, Arlene Shechet, Li Hongwei, Yeessookyung, Annabeth Rosen, and Ozan Bebek, as well as William Cobbing and Phoebe Cummings. Methodologically, it integrates formal, iconological, and material-centered analyses. A practice-based component is also included, analyzing the author's own work. The findings suggest that precarious balance is not merely an aesthetic choice but also an ethical-political stance that renders social vulnerabilities visible, establishes a corporeal dialogue with the viewer, and foregrounds the agency of matter, including time-based processes in unfired clay practices.

Keywords: Precarious Balance, Contemporary Ceramics, Fragility, Material Aesthetics, Phenomenology.

ÇAĞDAŞ SERAMİK SANATINDA HASSAS DENGİ

Öz: Bu makale, çağdaş seramik sanatında prekar denge kavramının kuramsal temellerini ve sanatsal görünümünü disiplinlerarası bir perspektifle ele almaktadır. Yirmi birinci yüzyılın sosyo-politik ve varoluşsal belirsizliklerini yansıtan prekarite, seramik malzemenin kırılgan ve dönüşken doğasıyla keşşerek çok katmanlı bir ifade stratejisi üretir. Judith Butler'ın ontolojik kırılganlık kavrayışı ve yeni materyalist kuramların maddesel faillik tartışmaları temelinde; Zemer Peled, Arlene Shechet, Li Hongwei, Yeessookyung, Annabeth Rosen, Ozan Bebek ile birlikte William Cobbing ve Phoebe Cummings gibi sanatçılar incelenmektedir. Çalışma, biçimsel, ikonolojik ve malzeme odaklı analizleri bütünleştirir ve yazarın kendi pratiğini içeren bir pratik temelli araştırma boyutu da sunar. Bulgular, hassas dengenin yalnızca estetik bir tercih değil; toplumsal kırılganlıkları görünür kılan, izleyiciyle bedensel bir diyalog kuran ve maddenin failliğini özellikle pişmemiş kilin zaman temelli süreçlerinde öne çıkaran etik-politik bir tutum olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hassas Denge, Çağdaş Seramik, Kırılganlık, Malzeme Estetiği, Fenomenoloji.

¹ Research and Publication Ethics have been followed in the article.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu çalışma, çağdaş seramik sanatında hassas denge kavramını kuramsal, yöntemsel ve uygulamaya dönük boyutları birlikte düşünerek kapsamlı bir çerçeveye yerleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Yirmi birinci yüzyılın güvencesizlik ve belirsizlikle tanımlanan toplumsal atmosferinde denge, klasik estetikteki simetri ve uyum fikrinin ötesine geçerek sürekli, koşula bağlı ve bozulabilir bir nitelik kazanmıştır. Bu bağlamda hassas denge yalnızca biçimsel bir düzen ilkesi değildir, toplumsal kırılma noktaları görünür kılan, izleyicinin bedensel algısını etkinleştiren ve maddenin etkinliğini vurgulayan etik ve politik bir yönelimi imler. Seramik malzemenin kendi iç çelişkisi, yani pişirim öncesinde sünek ve şekillenebilir olup pişirim sonrasında sert fakat kırılabilir bir yapıya dönüşmesi, bu yönelimin sınındığı özgül bir zemin sunar. Üretim sürecinde nem, ısı eğrileri ve soğuma hızı gibi değişkenlerin sonuçları yalnızca kısmen denetlenebilir olması, riskin estetik ve kavramsal bir stratejiye dönüşmesine olanak verir.

Araştırmamızın kuramsal dayanakları, Judith Butler'ın ontolojik kırılabilirlik ile toplumsal prekarite ayrımı ve Isabell Lorey'in prekaryalaşma tartışmalarını, yeni materyalist yaklaşımların madde ile anlam arasındaki eş üretime ilişkin önermeleriyle buluşturur. Karen Barad'ın iç etkileşim kavramı ile Jane Bennett'in canlı madde fikri, dengelerin sanatçı iradesi tarafından tek yönlü biçimde kurulmadığını, kilin büzülme oranları, gerilim hafızası, yerçekimi, su ve ısıya eş yazarlığında gerçekleştiğini düşündürür. Fenomenolojik bakış açısından, izleyici karşısındaki az daha düşecekmiş gibi duygusu bedensel bir uyarılma yaratır; mikro düzeyde kasılma, nefes tutma ve dikkat yoğunlaşması gibi tepkiler yapıtın risk mimarisiyle doğrudan ilişkilidir. Jacques Rancière'in duyumsalın paylaşımı kavramı, kaide, dikiz çizgisi ve kırık izinin değersiz artıklar değil, görünürlük ve anlam üretiminin merkezî göstergeleri olarak konumlanmasını açıklar.

Yöntemsel olarak çalışma, nitel ve görsel analizi bir arada işletir. Biçimsel okuma denge ipuçlarını, kütle aktarımını, sürtünme temaslarını, taşıyıcı ile zemin ilişkilerini ve ölçek ile eğim parametrelerini risk mimarilerinin bileşenleri olarak çözümler. İkonolojik çözümleme kırılma ve onarım, melezlik ve ekolojik göstergeleri kültürel kodlar biçiminde ele alır. Malzeme merkezli okuma ise pişmemiş ve pişmiş kilin durumlarını, yerçekimi, nem ve ısıyı ortak etkenler olarak değerlendirir ve bu etkenlerin estetik sonuçlarını tartışır. Amaçlı örneklem, hassas dengeye doğrudan angaje olma, tekniğin çeşitliliği, coğrafi yayılım ve sergi ile yayınlara dayalı doğrulanabilirlik gibi ölçütlere göre belirlenmiştir. Bu kapsamda Zemer Peled, Arlene Shechet, Li Hongwei, Yeeseokkyung, Annabeth Rosen, Türkiye bağlamından bir örnek olarak Ozan Bebek, ayrıca William Cobbing ve Phoebe Cummings'in yapıtları incelenmektedir. Çalışma aynı zamanda yazara ait bir pratik temelli bileşeni de içerir; atölye deneyimi, kuramsal çerçevenin karar alma süreçlerine ve maddesel çıktılara nasıl içkinleştiğini sınamak üzere konumlandırılmıştır.

Karşılaştırmalı çözümleme, hassas dengenin üç yineleyici strateji üzerinden işlediğini göstermektedir. Birinci strateji, yapısal gerilim ve yerçekimiyle oynama yoluyla anlık dengesizlik duygusu üretir. Arlene Shechet'in ağır seramik kütleleri yetersiz görünen taşıyıcılar üzerine yerleştirmesi bu gerilime mizahi ve aynı zamanda tedirgin edici bir boyut kazandırır. Li Hongwei'de ise porselen ile paslanmaz çeliğin karşıtlığı, melez kimliğin müzakere edilen bir denge olarak görünürleşmesine aracılık eder. İkinci strateji, kırılma ve yeniden birleştirme estetiğidir. Yeeseokkyung'un altın yaldızlı epoksi ile bir araya getirdiği parça düzenleri kusur ve travmayı alternatif bir dengeye dönüştürür; Zemer Peled'in keskin parça kümeleri güzellik ile tehlike arasındaki eşiği dramatize eder; Annabeth Rosen'in bağlanmış ve yığılmış kütleleri ise bir arada tutma davranışını somutlaştırır. Üçüncü strateji, performatif zamansallık ve ekolojik süreçleri doğrudan yapıtın dokusuna katar. William Cobbing'in bedene yapışan kil ile zamanlanmış çöküşü belgeleyen çalışmaları ve Phoebe Cummings'in suyla erozyonu programlayan pişmemiş kil çeşmeleri, geçiciliği kompozisyonun asli bir unsuru haline getirir ve yeniden kullanım etiğini görünür kılar.

Pratik temelli vaka incelemesi, yapıştırıcı kullanılmayan yerleştirme tercihleri, düşük poli modül geometrileri ve yüksek ağırlık merkeziyle riskin üretim sürecinde nasıl kurulduğunu, bu riskin izleyiciye bedensel bir gerilim olarak nasıl aktarıldığını göstermektedir. Süreç, Tim Ingold'un tarif ettiği biçimde malzeme ile müzakereye dayalı bir karşı yazışma olarak işler; her modül, yüzey sürtünmesi, ağırlık ve mikro eğimlere bağlı olarak yeni karar anları yaratır.

Elde edilen bulgular, hassas dengenin statik bir kompozisyon özelliği değil, madde ile zamanın ortak yazarlığında kurulan süreçsel bir sükunet olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu sükunet, izleyicinin bedensel ve duygulanımsal tepkilerini devreye sokar ve onarım, melezlik ile ekolojik bakım çerçeveleri içinde anlam bakımından yoğunlaşır. Kuramsal katkı, Butler'ın kırılabilirlik ontolojisi ile seramik malzemenin ontolojik özelliklerini buluşturarak dengeyi insan merkezli bir kurulum değil, insan ve insan olmayan aktörler arasında koşullu bir uzlaşım olarak konumlandırmaktır. Yöntemsel katkı ise biçimsel ipuçları, ikonolojik çerçeveler ve maddesel davranışların açık biçimde eşleştirilmesiyle farklı pratikler arasında karşılaştırılabilir bir okuma protokolü önermesidir. Coğrafi örneklem sınırlılığı ve izleyici deneyimine ilişkin ampirik çalışmaların yokluğu geleceğe dönük iki yönlü bir genişleme ihtiyacına işaret eder. Birincisi, Küresel Güney bağlamları ve yerli onarım ekolojilerinin dâhil edilmesi gereklidir. İkincisi, göz izleme ve fizyolojik ölçümler gibi araçlarla izleyici tepkilerini sınavan deneysel protokoller geliştirilmelidir. Bütün bu yönler bir arada düşünüldüğünde, çağdaş seramikte hassas denge, kusurlu, geçici ve kırılabilir olana dikkat yönelten bir etik estetik taahhüt olarak belirir ve kalıcılık ile mükemmellik ideallerinin yeniden değerlendirilmesini davet eder.

1. Introduction

From antiquity to the present, balance has been regarded as a cornerstone of composition and a guarantor of visual harmony and symbolic stability (Arnheim, 2004, pp. 10–17). Classical Western canons often equated balance with symmetry, proportion, and the so-called golden ratio, thereby associating equilibrium with permanence and order (Elam, 2001, p. 12). The twentieth-century avantgarde movements unsettled this consensus by redefining balance as a matter of process, contingency, and viewer interaction; Marcel Duchamp's readymades and Alexander Calder's mobiles are emblematic in this respect, since they foreground eventfulness and relationality rather than fixed harmony (Krauss, 1981, pp. 69-103). In the twenty-first century, shaped by increased awareness of uncertainty and fragility, balance is increasingly understood as a provisional state that may falter, shift, or expire. It denotes conditions that are contingent and perishable rather than stable, a view consistent with broader diagnoses of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007, pp. 1-7). Within this climate, precarious balance has become central to artistic practices that work with vulnerable and transformative matter such as clay. The term, linked etymologically to *precarius* and thus to uncertainty and temporariness, names a poise open to disruption and saturated with social, political, and ecological vulnerability (Standing, 2011, pp. 1–10; Butler, 2009, pp. 22–25; Lorey, 2015, pp. 1–15).

Ceramics provides a distinctive ground for examining precarious balance because the medium encodes risk within its physical and technical operations. Clay is pliant and moist before firing, and becomes rigid but brittle afterward; this material paradox builds indeterminacy into making itself (Peterson & Peterson, 2003, pp. 129–131). Variables such as humidity, firing curves, kiln atmosphere, and cooling rates render outcomes only partially controllable for the artist, who must negotiate an evolving field of constraints and possibilities (Peterson & Peterson, 2003, pp. 159). Building upon pathways opened by postwar studio sculpture, and in particular upon the revaluation of ceramic materiality by figures such as Peter Voulkos, many contemporary artists have converted risk from an unwanted flaw into a deliberate aesthetic and conceptual resource. The medium thus hosts a set of practices in which balance is not simply achieved but enacted, tested, and sometimes suspended at the edge of failure.

This article investigates the theoretical foundations and artistic manifestations of precarious balance in contemporary ceramic art. It asks how artists operationalize precarious balance through choices of form, systems of support, and processual decisions. It considers how these operations mediate cultural, ecological, and affective meanings. It further examines what kinds of embodied and phenomenological experiences such works elicit in viewers, whose proprioceptive responses often register the work's near-failure as muscular tension, held breath, and micro-adjustments of stance. Addressing these questions, the study situates precarious balance not as a merely formal gambit but as a critical stance that invites a reconsideration of traditional values associated with permanence, symmetry, and perfection.

The methodology integrates three complementary modes of inquiry. First, a formal reading attends to balance cues, weight transfer, frictional contacts, relations between armature and ground, and the implications of scale. Second, an iconological interpretation investigates motifs of repair, hybridity, and ecological signification, drawing on art-historical models of image and symbol formation (Wölfflin, 1950, pp. 18–23; Panofsky, 1972, pp. 3–17). Third, a material-centred analysis, grounded in new materialism and phenomenology, examines the states of clay in unfired and fired conditions, viscoplastic behavior, and parameters such as gravity, water, and heat, together with their aesthetic effects (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–146, 151; Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 12, 232–234). The corpus was purposively sampled for direct engagement with precarious balance, technical diversity that includes unfired clay, shard assemblage, kiln deformation, steel and ceramic

counterweights, and adhesive-free stacking, contextual breadth across East Asia, Europe, the United States, and Türkiye, and the presence of documented exhibitions or publications that enable verifiable analysis. The artists considered are Zemer Peled, Arlene Shechet, Li Hongwei, Yeessookyung, Annabeth Rosen, Ozan Bebek, William Cobbing and Phoebe Cummings. The study also incorporates a practice-based component in which the author's studio practice functions as a situated case to test how the theoretical framework informs decision making and material outcomes.

Finally, to organize the comparative inquiry, the article identifies three recurrent strands through which precarious balance is enacted. The first concerns structural tension and the calculated play of gravity, through which artists stage immediate bodily sensations of imbalance. The second centers on fragmentation and repair, where breakage and suturing revalue damage as a generative condition. The third addresses performative temporality and ecological processes, especially in works that incorporate unfired clay or programmed dissolution, thereby making duration itself a compositional parameter.

2. Theoretical Framework on Precarity, Matter, and Aesthetic Experience

An adequate account of precarious balance in ceramic art requires an interdisciplinary framework integrates political philosophy, material culture, and embodied aesthetics. Following Judith Butler, precariousness names a shared and ontological vulnerability that pertains to all living beings and highlights our constitutive exposure and interdependence, while precarity refers to the uneven distribution of socioeconomic insecurity, and precarization designates the normalization and governance of such insecurity (Butler, 2009, pp. 2–3, 25; Lorey, 2015, pp. 11–13). In ceramics these layers converge in concrete ways. The physical risk profile of the medium, which includes cracking, collapse, and thermal shock, literalizes ontological vulnerability. Unstable forms and contingent installations echo lived precarity. Exhibition protocols that admit failure, visible repair, or programmed decay render precarization legible as a cultural condition.

Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity further reframes balance as provisional rather than permanent (Bauman, 2007, pp. 1–4). The states of clay, from slurry and plastic to leather-hard, bone-dry, and fired, stage liquidity and solidification as sequential phases rather than as opposites. Many artists working with precarious balance instrumentalize these transitions and substitute processual poise for static equilibrium, thereby aligning form with temporal becoming.

New materialist accounts provide a vocabulary for understanding such poise as co-produced by bodies, tools, environments, and matter. Karen Barad's agential realism contends that matter and meaning emerge through intra-actions rather than from pre-given entities (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141). Within this perspective, balance in a ceramic work is not simply imposed by an authorial will. It is enacted by the interplay of shrinkage coefficients, viscosity, stress memory, kiln atmosphere, gravity, and moisture exchange. Jane Bennett's account of vibrant matter extends this claim by granting materials the capacity to affect and to be affected (Bennett, 2010, pp. 3–6). A shard cluster that only just holds together or a porcelain skin that sags under glaze load exemplifies agency that is materially mediated rather than figuratively projected. Tim Ingold's concept of correspondence describes making as an ongoing negotiation with material tendencies, including wedging lines, lamination seams, and warpage, so that risk, correction, and repair become structural to form (Ingold, 2010, pp. 91–92).

Phenomenology clarifies why such works mobilize bodily responses. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception is an embodied attunement rather than a disembodied reception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234). In front

of precariously poised ceramics, viewers often experience tightened musculature, held breath, and micro-adjustments of posture as proprioceptive correlates of the work's near-failure. This embodied vigilance shades into affective response. Hal Foster has argued that a precarious turn in recent art renders unstable structures legible as figures of unstable lives (Foster, 2015, pp. 119–121). Jacques Rancière's account of the distribution of the sensible helps explain how these works recode what counts as visible and thinkable, so that the pedestal operates as a stress test and repair sutures appear as lines of value rather than as defects (Rancière, 2004, pp. 12–13). In some practices, programmed dissolution through water erosion or kiln-induced slump calibrates the very timing of the work, turning duration into a compositional resource and aligning the aesthetic with eco-ethical imaginaries of care, maintenance, and finite material cycles.

3. Artistic Strategies of Precarious Balance: A Comparative Analysis

This study employs a comparative and thematic analysis approach, with visual analysis serving as a foundational element. By examining the works of selected artists, grouped under thematic headings, the research highlights the diverse strategies used to construct precarious balance, thereby strengthening the argument's coherence. The visual analysis deciphers the physical, aesthetic, and conceptual attributes of the artworks, using images as evidence to substantiate theoretical claims and reveal the multidimensional impact of precarious balance on the viewer.

3.1 Structural Tension and Gravity Play

This strategy focuses on creating a direct physical sense of imbalance and tension by playing with the laws of physics such as gravity, friction, and the center of mass. The works of Arlene Shechet and Li Hongwei represent different facets of this approach.

Arlene Shechet adds a humorous and emotional dimension to precarity by miraculously balancing heavy ceramic masses on pedestals that seem inadequate to support them. In works like *Heart Throb* (2023), the clumsy and anthropomorphic postures of the forms evoke both a smile and a sense of anxiety in the viewer, inviting us to empathize with our own existential imbalances.

Examined formally, Shechet's compositional strategy exploits minimal contact points between substantial glazed ceramic volumes and slender powder-coated steel armatures. This creates pronounced visual tension through disproportionate weight distribution. The ceramic component in *Heart Throb* appears to cantilever precariously, its center of mass offset from the narrow support base, generating what we might call a perceptual overturning moment. Viewers often register this imbalance through involuntary postural adjustments and muscular micro-tensions, responses that align with phenomenological accounts of embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234). The reflective steel surface contrasts sharply with the matte or glossy glazes, introducing material heterogeneity that amplifies these instability cues. Scale matters here as well: at 59.7 cm tall, these works occupy a liminal zone between object and body, inviting anthropomorphic projection.

Read iconologically, the anthropomorphic postures of Shechet's forms function as metaphors for the embodied experience of maintaining balance in conditions of uncertainty. The leaning, tilting, struggling-against-gravity quality of these pieces carries affective weight. "*Heart Throb*" suggests both desire and vulnerability, linking physical precarity to emotional states. Shechet's subversion of the pedestal tradition—a convention reaching back to classical sculpture—operates within what Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible," where the support structure is no longer neutral infrastructure but an active participant in meaning-making (Rancière,

2004, pp. 12–13). The viewer becomes complicit in the work's drama, positioned not as passive observer but as witness to potential catastrophe.

From a material-centered perspective, the differential thermal expansion coefficients of ceramic and steel present genuine technical challenges. Bonding dissimilar materials that respond differently to temperature fluctuations literalizes the work's conceptual concern with precarious attachment. Shechet's experimental glazing practices embrace material unpredictability as a compositional resource. She often fires at unorthodox temperatures to induce blistering, crawling, or color shifts. The clay retains memory of the artist's touch, visible in surface irregularities and gestural marks. This aligns with accounts of material agency where form emerges through negotiation rather than imposition (Ingold, 2010, pp. 91–92). Bennett's notion of vibrant matter helps explain why these sculptures feel animate: the steel armature strains visibly, the ceramic mass appears to sag or push, and the interface between the two materials registers as a site of ongoing physical stress (Bennett, 2010, pp. 3–6).



Image 1. Arlene Shechet, *Heart Throb*, 2023. Glazed ceramic and powder-coated steel, 59.7 × 30.5 × 25.4 cm, Pace Gallery, New York. URL1

In Li Hongwei's *Allegory of Balance No. 23* (2017), structural tension becomes a metaphor for cultural in-betweenness. The light, historically loaded porcelain elements counterpoised with industrial stainless steel figure hybrid identity as a negotiated balance (Hall, 1996, pp. 1–17). Formal analysis clarifies how counterweights and reflectivity disturb equilibrium; iconology links the porcelain/steel dyad to cross-cultural modernities; materially, differential thermal expansion and joinery literalize risk.



Image 2. Li Hongwei, *Allegory of Balance #23*, 2017. Fired porcelain and stainless steel, 59 × 35 × 59 in (150 × 89 × 150 cm), Li Hongwei Studio. URL2

3.2 Fracture and Reassembly: Repair as Aesthetics

This strategy centers on the acts of breaking, dispersal, and reassembly, interpreting precarity as an aesthetic of repair and resilience. Yeessookyung, Zemer Peled, and Annabeth Rosen are the most powerful representatives of this approach.

Yeessookyung's Translated Vase series (2002–) joins discarded porcelain fragments with epoxy and 24-karat gold leaf to produce organic structures whose gilded seams affirm fracture rather than conceal it (Yeessookyung Studio, n.d.). In Translated Vase_2017 TVBGJW 1 – Nine Dragons in Wonderland, the monumental scale of 492 × 200 × 190 cm and the incorporation of stainless steel and aluminum transform shards into an architectural presence that unsettles conventional vessel typologies (Yeessookyung Studio, n.d.). Read through an ethics of repair, the visible sutures recode damage as value and interdependence, a stance consistent with Butler's account of shared vulnerability and co-dependency in social life (Butler, 2009, pp. 22–25). The biomorphic form departs from geometric perfection traditionally associated with Korean ceramic mastery, celebrating fragments otherwise destined for discard. Each component retains individual character while contributing to a polycentric composition.



Image 3. Yeessookyung, *Translated Vase_2017 TVBGJW 1 – Nine Dragons in Wonderland*, 2017. Ceramic shards, stainless steel, aluminum, epoxy, 24K gold leaf, 492 × 200 × 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist. URL3

The title "Nine Dragons in Wonderland" operates on multiple cultural registers, evoking East Asian mythic narratives alongside Western literary imagination. Following Panofsky's iconological method (Panofsky, 1972, pp. 3–17), the gilded sutures function as both material necessity and symbolic assertion, converting breakage into lines of connection.

From a material perspective, the work models Barad's concept of intra-action, where configuration emerges from specific practices of collecting, sorting, and joining (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141). The process requires negotiation with each shard's weight distribution, surface texture, and fracture geometry. Gold leaf functions as active matter enabling new structural possibilities (Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6).

This orientation expresses Butler's account of ontological vulnerability and mutual dependency (Butler, 2009, pp. 22–25). Viewers experience embodied perception, tracing seams while sensing the piece as simultaneously robust and fragile (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234). The work's scale demands circumnavigation, revealing fresh configurations at each angle and staging what Rancière calls a redistribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004, pp. 12–13).

The series operates across layered temporalities: historical time of original vessels, instant of breakage, durational reassembly, and ongoing exhibition encounter. This aligns with Bauman's liquid modernity, where stability represents provisional achievement (Bauman, 2007, pp. 1–4). *Nine Dragons in Wonderland* maintains structural integrity amid constitutive fragmentation, exemplifying the processual poise this study foregrounds.



Image 4. Zemer Peled, *I Am Walking in a Forest of Shards*, 2012. Site-specific installation. Ceramic shards, clay, metal.
Installed at the Henry Moore Gallery, Royal College of Art, London, UK. Left: URL4, Right: URL5

Zemer Peled stages the fine line between beauty and danger with sculptures composed of thousands of sharp porcelain shards; *I Am Walking in a Forest of Shards* (2012) is at once visually compelling and physically unsettling. Seen up close, the work is built from individually cut pieces placed with meticulous care. Clusters thicken around structural cores and taper toward the edges, recalling crystallization or coral growth. At the Henry Moore Gallery, floor-mounted armatures carried vertical columns whose gently undulating profiles suggest a latent movement. The visitor's path becomes a negotiated encounter with risk: nearness heightens bodily awareness of the edges. As Arnheim notes, directional thrusts produce dynamic equilibrium through counterbalancing pressures (Arnheim, 2004, pp. 10–17).

The title invokes the forest as an archetype of shelter yet recasts it as hostile and fractured. This doubleness aligns with Burke's account of the sublime, where beauty and danger coexist in productive tension (Burke, 1990, pp. 53–54). After the 2012 presentation, critics pointed to echoes of environmental devastation—uninhabitable terrains or coral bleaching. Porcelain, historically coded as refined and precious in European and East Asian contexts, undergoes a symbolic reversal when rendered as shards. Douglas's notion of "matter out of place" clarifies the dissonance: what should signify culture and order becomes a threat to bodily integrity (Douglas, 2002, p. 44). The installation thus reads as a critique of how fragility can tip into violence.

At the level of making, each shard acts as a small structural element. Its position is set by friction with neighboring pieces, gravity on the cluster, and adhesion to clay or metal cores. Peled layers black and white porcelain, bisque-fires laminated slabs, then deliberately breaks them to yield controlled fracture lines; when reassembled, the shards retain residual tension. This practice accords with Barad's agential realism: the final form is co-produced by material capacities—porcelain's hardness and brittleness, fracture mechanics that set edge geometry, and the physics of stacking that limits height and angle (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141). Bennett's account of vibrant matter helps explain the affective charge: aggregated shards seem to bristle and lean, generating a field the viewer negotiates corporeally (Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6). Phenomenologically, one does not simply look at the work; the space is felt as charged with latent threat.

Annabeth Rosen explores accumulation and entropy. In *Atlas* (2016) she binds fired ceramic fragments with steel baling wire, producing a dense, unstable mass. The title recalls the mythic bearer of the heavens and signals weight, burden, and ongoing struggle.



Image 5. Annabeth Rosen, *Atlas*, 2016. Fired ceramic and steel baling wire, 17 × 13 × 13 inches. Work courtesy the artist; Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco; and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Photo: Lee Fatherree. URL6

Formally the work comprises dozens of individually shaped tubes lobes and amorphous nodes which are stacked compressed and cinched with industrial wire. At 17 × 13 × 13 inches the scale sits between tabletop intimacy and bodily heft. Compactness conceals visual density. The wire does not only bind but also deforms the fragments leaving bite marks where metal presses into clay. These constrictions gather weight in local zones and imply interior compression. Rather than mass radiating from a central axis the piece reads as an agglomeration without hierarchy. Each shard remains legible while participating in a collective structure. Surface treatment moves among matte unglazed clay glossy glazes including manganese purple and cobalt blue and areas of salt flux that produce crusted lunar textures. These shifts partition the mass into zones yet sustain unity. The eye follows wire paths color transitions and narrow voids. Wölfflin would identify the result as atectonic composition that resists rational geometric reduction (Wölfflin, 1950, pp. 18–23).

Iconologically the title summons the Titan condemned by Zeus to sustain the celestial sphere for eternity a figure of endurance burden and coerced labor. The physical facts of weight compression and binding become metaphors for care work maintenance and the unseen labor that holds systems together. From a feminist perspective the piece resonates with discussions of affective labor and repair under precarity. The bundled wired mass suggests provisional fixes and a refusal of seamless finish and aligns with discourses on sustaining damaged worlds (Tsing, 2015, pp. 1–6; Haraway, 2016, pp. 1–3). The crude functionality of the wire unrefined industrial and tool like contrasts with ceramic sculpture's associations with craft refinement and unsettles distinctions between high and low culture while testing what merits preservation. Kristeva's concept of the abject clarifies Rosen's strategy. The abject is matter that unsettles identity and order because it occupies the threshold between subject and object self and other. Rosen works with failed pieces kiln explosions and

discarded fragments reclaiming waste as generative material (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 1–5). The abjected shard returned and bound into a new assemblage becomes a sign of resilience and refusal.

Material centered and practice based analysis shows a method that defies standard ceramic sequence. Instead of a linear arc of planning modeling firing and finishing she repeats cycles of construction intentional destruction smashing with hammers then reglazing refiring and reassembly. Wire binding introduces tensile force that counters gravity and sets a provisional equilibrium that could disappear with a single cut. This approach exemplifies what Ingold calls correspondence in making where form arises through dialogue with material tendencies. Clay shrinks unpredictably glazes crawl or craze and wire presses plastic elements into deformation (Ingold, 2010, pp. 91–92). Barad’s idea of intra action frames Atlas not as a static object but as a phenomenon constituted by ongoing relations. Gravity pulls downward wire pulls inward fragments push outward and together these forces produce the work’s present state (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141). Bennett’s account of vibrant matter names the sculpture’s uncanny vitality. It reads less as inert stuff and more as an organism in mid metamorphosis poised between growth and decay (Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6). The viewer experiences compressed energy and the possibility of explosion or collapse which turns encounter with the sculpture into a somatic event.

3.3 Performative Temporality and Ecological Processes

This strand explores precarity by folding time and natural processes directly into the structure of the work, often by using unfired clay. It foregrounds impermanence and engages with ecological themes of decay, transformation, and cyclicity.

William Cobbing’s *The Kiss* (2004) is a 3-minute-33-second process recorded as a video performance. As two bodies press their faces into a mass of wet clay and pull apart, the adhesive and collapsible nature of clay blurs bodily boundaries. This liminal contact resonates with Mary Douglas’s classic account of “matter out of place” and the dangers of boundary-breach (Douglas, 2002, p. 44). It also aligns with Georges Bataille’s *l’informe*—the “formless” that undoes categorical stability (Bataille, 1985, p. 31). In *The Kiss*, balance is not a static property but an ever-collapsible co-measurement of adhesion, friction, breath, and muscle. Read through agential realism, Barad’s account of intra-action where relata emerge through specific material-discursive practices clarifies how clay, bodies, gravity, and time mutually constitute the event (Barad, 2003, pp. 815–816). The work’s documented duration (3’33”) underscores this processual poise.



Image 6. William Cobbing, *The Kiss*, 2004. Video (still), duration 3'33". Courtesy of the artist; Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. URL7

Phoebe Cummings's *Triumph of the Immaterial* (2017) is an unfired clay fountain installed at the Victoria and Albert Museum as the winner of the BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour Craft Prize. The water cycle is timed so that the surface erodes during short periods each day, and across six months the configuration slowly changes. Balance in this work is not a fixed outcome but a relation that is repeatedly made and unmade by the meeting of visco plastic clay with gravity and water. In formal terms, the tiered composition sets an upward thrust against downward flow, and the viewer reads equilibrium through shifting relations of mass, support and surface as moisture accumulates or runs off, which fits the analysis of contrast and relational structure set out by Wölfflin (1950, pp. 18–23).

A material centred reading makes the agency of matter explicit. Barad's account of intra-action helps to name how clay, pump, basin, stand and bodies do not pre exist the event but take shape through it (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141, 151). Bennett's discussion of vibrant matter clarifies why the unfired surface feels lively and consequential, since matter has the capacity to affect and be affected (Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6). In practice the piece exemplifies making as negotiation with tendencies such as saturation, slump and cracking, a process that aligns with Ingold's description of correspondence between maker and material (Ingold, 2010, pp. 91–92). Viewers often respond with bodily vigilance and small adjustments of posture when a petal sags or a frond begins to shear, which a phenomenological account would recognise as perception grounded in the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234).



Image 7. Phoebe Cummings, *Triumph of the Immaterial*, 2017. Unfired clay and water, time-programmed fountain installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Victoria and Albert Museum (Woman's Hour Craft Prize). Courtesy of the artist and V&A. URL8

An iconological and eco ethical lens brings the implications together. The artist plans the end of the work in advance and recycles the clay, so permanence yields to care, maintenance and finite cycles. Lippard and Chandler's thesis on the dematerialization of art can be read through this example, since dematerialization here is not only a conceptual shift but the literal dissolution of the material (Lippard and Chandler, 1968, pp. 31–36). The V&A exhibition record and the Woman's Hour Craft Prize materials confirm the winning status of the work and the timed flow that structures its transformation over the run of the show.

4. Practice-Based Analysis: A Situated Case Study of The Ruins I-II

This section addresses a core element of the study's methodology, practice based research that treats making as a source of knowledge. Focusing on the author's work *The Ruins I II* from 2020, it offers an embodied account of how precarious balance emerges during construction by moving from concept to direct negotiation with matter. The analysis uses the same formal iconological and material centred lenses applied elsewhere and draws on Wölfflin for formal oppositions and relational structure, Panofsky for iconological interpretation, and Arnheim for balance as a problem of visual organization (Wölfflin, 1950, pp. 18–23; Panofsky, 1972, pp. 3–17; Arnheim, 2004, pp. 10–17).



Image 8. Ozan Bebek, *The Ruins I-II*, 2020. Stoneware, hand-built, 1160°C, variable dimensions, Artist's Archive.

Formally and kinetically the work appears in two configurations, a taller single column stack and a shorter dual column group. Adhesives are refused, so every contact is a site of negotiation. Low poly modules present flat planes that must lock with precision, setting rational construction against the irregularities of hand making. The single column increases risk through a high centre of gravity and a zigzagging vertical axis created by minor misalignments, which heightens the perceived overturning moment and invites proprioceptive responses such as micro adjustments and held breath. This accords with phenomenology, which understands perception as embodied attunement and the lived body as the means of having a world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234). The dual column acts as a counterweight. Its wider support polygon reads as stable and by contrast heightens the fragility of the taller partner. Together these states stage a dialogue between risk and restraint and echo Arnheim’s account of balance cues in figure ground relations and directional forces (Arnheim, 2004, pp. 10–17).

Iconologically the title *The Ruins* evokes history decay and archaeological memory, while the faceted surfaces and planar joins align more with digital low poly modelling than with classical fragments. The piece sets past and future in tension and asks what ruins of a digital epoch might look like. Within Rancière’s account of the distribution of the sensible the work not only presents an object but also makes perceptible the possibility of failure, shifting attention from stable form to conditions of appearance and disappearance in the display the pedestal and the seams that hold things together (Rancière, 2004, pp. 12–13).

From a material centred and practice based perspective the making of *The Ruins* followed what Tim Ingold calls correspondence, an ongoing negotiation with material tendencies rather than the execution of a fixed plan. Each module acted as a partner with particular weight texture and centre of mass. Building proceeded by placing a block sensing micro shifts pausing and responding to feedback from the stack. The process produced an awareness of imminent collapse and a direct sense of precarity that transfers to the spectator through visible frictional joints and slight drifts of alignment. This behaviour accords with accounts of material agency in which matter affects and is affected and in which relations are enacted rather than imposed in advance. Bennett’s

formulation of vibrant matter clarifies why the stack reads as lively rather than inert, and Barad's account of intra action names how form gravity friction attention and time together constitute the event in which balance occurs and fails (Ingold, 2010, pp. 91–92; Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6; Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141).

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that precarious balance in contemporary ceramic art is not a decorative instability or a display of virtuosity, but a multi layered and dynamic phenomenon. Read across the corpus, balance appears as a processual poise that is continually made, tested, and sometimes suspended at the edge of failure. The comparative method clarified this by coupling formal observation with iconological reading and a material centred analysis, so that choices of form, systems of support, and processual decisions could be linked to cultural meanings and embodied reception.

Three strands organise the findings. In physical and structural precarity, as seen in Shechet, Li Hongwei, and the author's own *The Ruins I–II*, gravity, friction, and the centre of mass externalise risk; poised masses and counterweights stage negotiated equilibrium and translate physical phenomena into existential metaphors. In fracture and reassembly, exemplified by Yeessookyung, Peled, and Rosen, breakage, dispersal, and suturing are legible as an ethics of repair in which scar lines and shard ecologies revalue damage as generative. In performative temporality and ecological processes, as in Cobbing and Cummings, unfired clay and programmed dissolution fold duration into form; adhesion, erosion, and flow turn balance into an event that holds and fails, recasting dematerialisation as literal material loss.

Two transversal dimensions are decisive. First, material agency situates clay, gravity, water, and thermal history as co authors of form, consistent with accounts of intra-action and vibrant matter (Barad, 2007, pp. 139–141, 151; Bennett, 2010, pp. 1–6). Second, a phenomenological approach shows how precarious works recruit proprioception and affect in the viewer, shifting attention from detached contemplation to co-presence; muscular tension, held breath, and micro adjustments of stance are integral to reception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 232–234). At the level of cultural meaning, hybrid couplings and sutured surfaces articulate identity as negotiation (Hall, 1996, pp. 1–17), while economies of reuse and programmed decay align with wider debates on living with uncertainty and sustaining attention to damaged environments (Tsing, 2015, pp. 1–6; Haraway, 2016, pp. 1–3). The documentation of ephemerality further resonates with classic accounts of dematerialisation, here literalised as physical dissolution rather than a purely conceptual displacement (Lippard and Chandler, 1968, pp. 31–36).

The main theoretical contribution is to frame precarious balance as a posthumanist paradigm. When Butler's ontology of vulnerability meets the ontological properties of ceramic matter, balance emerges not as an order imposed by a sovereign maker but as a contingent settlement among human and non-human actors. Methodologically, the article demonstrates that a clear coupling of formal cues, iconological frames, and material behaviours yields comparable readings across diverse practices, including time-based works that challenge conventions of documentation and conservation.

Limitations remain. The sample leans toward Euro American and East Asian cases, and the argument would benefit from empirical audience studies. Future research should enlarge the corpus to include Global South practices and Indigenous repair ecologies; operationalise audience research through eye tracking, physiological measures, and qualitative protocols to test embodied responses to precarious form; and examine digital and

robophysical tools such as parametric stacking, sensor augmented firing, and responsive installations that algorithmically manage or deliberately destabilise balance.

Taken together, the evidence supports the following claim. Precarious balance is a processual poise co-authored by matter and time; it is sensed in the viewer's body and thickened by frames of repair, hybridity, and ecological care. As such, it is not only a diagnosis of the present but also a proposal for making and living otherwise.

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Image 1: Arlene Shechet, *Heart Throb*, 2023. Glazed ceramic and powder-coated steel, 59.7 × 30.5 × 25.4 cm, Pace Gallery, New York. Accessed at 10.07.2025 and taken from https://d7hftxdixxvm.cloudfront.net/?height=800&quality=80&resize_to=fit&src=https%3A%2F%2Fd32dm0rphc51dk.cloudfront.net%2FV6UBvQkOOuZpafx00aKbjg%2Fmain.jpg&width=571%201x,%20https://d7hftxdixxvm.cloudfront.net?height=1600&quality=80&resize_to=fit&src=https%3A%2F%2Fd32dm0rphc51dk.cloudfront.net%2FV6UBvQkOOuZpafx00aKbjg%2Fmain.jpg&width=1142%202x

Image 2: Li Hongwei, *Allegory of Balance No. 23*, 2017. Fired porcelain and stainless steel, 150 × 89 × 150 cm, Li Hongwei Studio. Accessed at 10.07.2025 and taken from <http://www.lihongwei.com/Public/Uploads/5cee7f3e76f2f.jpg>

Image 3: Yeesookyung, *Translated Vase_2017 TVBGJW 1 – Nine Dragons in Wonderland*, 2017. Ceramic shards, stainless steel, aluminum, epoxy, 24K gold leaf, 492 × 200 × 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Accessed at 10.07.2025 and taken from https://static.wixstatic.com/media/a318ff_58a98c6df44d44e783b5c1370a06ab5a~mv2.jpg/v1/crop/x_157,y_841,w_4230,h_5563/fit/w_918,h_1202,al_c,q_85,usm_0.66_1.00_0.01,enc_avif,quality_auto/a318ff_58a98c6df44d44e783b5c1370a06ab5a~mv2.jpg

Image 4: Zemer Peled, *I Am Walking in a Forest of Shards*, 2012. Site-specific installation. Ceramic shards, clay, metal. Henry Moore Gallery, Royal College of Art, London, UK. Accessed at 10.07.2025 and taken from <https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/54baf93e4b0ebc96dad94f7/1424050621206->

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https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/54baf93e4b0ebc96dad94f7/1424050624934-TY8DI3OOONIWYS4ODEDT/I_am_walking_in_a_forest_of_shards_3.jpg?format=750w (right)

Image 5: Annabeth Rosen, *Atlas*, 2016. Fired ceramic and steel baling wire, 17 × 13 × 13 in. Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco; and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Photo: Lee Fatherree.

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Image 6: William Cobbing, *The Kiss*, 2004. Video (still), duration 3'33". Courtesy of the artist; Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. Accessed at 15.09.2025 and taken from

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/a5/ca/7d/a5ca7d80713f76ad1961883885fa817a.jpg>

Image 7: Phoebe Cummings, *Triumph of the Immaterial*, 2017. Unfired clay and water, time-programmed fountain installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Victoria and Albert Museum (Woman's Hour Craft Prize). Courtesy of the artist and V&A.

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Image 8: Ozan Bebek, *The Ruins I-II*, 2020. Stoneware, hand-built, 1160°C, variable dimensions, Artist's Archive.