A delight in the interplay of shape, line, colour and texture has been a feature of Stephenie Bergman’s art and design work since she first came to prominence as a painter in the 1970s. From that time she has moved effortlessly between different media that include canvas and paint, wood, clay and glaze, used either separately or in combination.

A self-taught ceramicist, she began to work seriously with clay following a solo show at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery in 1986. In this exhibition she showed a mix of works on canvas and in ceramic and noted that there was a particularly positive response to the latter.

Bergman tends to work intuitively, finding inspiration in her immediate surroundings, her main bases being in the Var, France and Taroudant, Morocco. Her ceramic Rocks, for example, were initially inspired by a drive through the sensational mountainous landscape of Tata in Morocco. During the trip she stopped to collect a few boulders that caught her eye and, on her return to her studio in France, she started to make others to join them, following the logic that clay is mineral - like the original rock - and that glazes too are derived from silica. Her affinity with rocks also comes from an enjoyment of the ways in which people informally apply their form and weight to functional purpose, such as in their use to anchor sheets of material so as to keep a building protected from the elements.

Function, she acknowledges, has for many years provided almost a raison d’être for her creativity, and function was certainly an important motivation for the Objects in clay and wood. Displayed here on a set of three shelves, most of them are containers, often with sculptural lids. Another criterion in the development of this series was to achieve a sense of balance and equality by echoing a shape initially made in clay with one subsequently made in wood (mainly walnut). One of the containers - designed to hold spectacles or sunglasses - diverges from the otherwise angular forms in its more fluid shape and points to a new direction, taken up and developed in her Wiggle cups and subsequently in a series of Wiggle drawings, seen here either wall mounted or standing on shelves.

The Wire, a room divider, is a further development of her line drawings in fired clay. The dimensions and proportions of this piece were calculated specifically for the Project Space. Bergman set out to fill the square frames of the screen in a variety of ways, with the styles of the drawings changing from one level to the next. Its title, unashamedly, comes from the American TV series The Wire, a series she greatly enjoyed and which she also points out demonstrates how one thing is connected to the next, but can also be linked back to something at the beginning of a series.

Other furniture pieces include a pair of Inside-out tables, connected by their sharing of a shape. The solid surface of the smaller table echoes the empty space within the larger. Taking advantage of the technical necessity to make the ceramic elements of the tables hollow, the larger table is lidded and its inside lined with fabric to encourage use. Table with green leg is ceramic with a metal base and, like the Wiggle wall pieces, seems to be more related to drawing and painting than three-dimensional objects. Her pierced ceramic lights and Mirror, held aloft by a tower of soft-shaped and white glazed cubes, are further examples of her range of atmospheric forms.
When resident in Morocco she holds a class, one morning a week, for boys aged between 12 and 16 who live in a local orphanage. When asked by one of the boys what he should make, she recalls suggesting that he might make something that reflected his love of football... And then thought that it could be interesting to follow her own advice, resulting in her playful little Gym Figures, made at a time when she was unable to get on with other work.

Bergman frequently works to commission, finding it fulfilling to make work with a specific space in mind and in response to the particular needs of a client. A current project is a large clay drawing to be set in plaster above a fireplace in a private home in Morocco. Another example of her site specific work, a dramatic sculpture for an entrance hall in a London home, is featured in the May 2011 issue of The World of Interiors.

She also makes for her personal requirements. The work titled Wedding Shoes is based on the tool-shaped storage niches she created to maintain order in her studio. But, whereas the prototypes were sunk into the walls, here the amorphously shaped back of the plaque is also visible and contrasts sharply with the more defined face with its shrine-like framing of the precious shoes.

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Biographical notes

Stephanie Bergman (b. 1946) studied Painting at St Martin’s School of Art, London graduating in 1967. She subsequently moved to the USA for a few years, winning a Gulbenkian Foundation Award, 1975-77. She has exhibited in both fine and applied art galleries internationally and in numerous landmark exhibitions in the UK such as Stephenie Bergman and Nicholas Pope (1975), Southampton City Art Gallery/Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield; The Maker’s Eye (1983), Crafts Council, London; Craft Matters (1984), John Hansard Gallery, Southampton; Vessel (1987), Serpentine Gallery, London; The Raw and the Cooked (1992 - 95), Barbican Art Gallery, London and tour; with her most recent solo exhibition at The Artist’s House, New Arts Centre, Roche Court, Wiltshire in 2006. Public collections that hold examples of her work include the British Council, the Arts Council and the British Government Art Collection.

Marsden Woo Project Space is curated by Tessa Peters

The Marsden Woo Project Space runs alongside our programme of solo and small group exhibitions by gallery artists. The Project Space allows us to respond quickly to significant bodies of innovative work and showcases the work of talented emerging artists and designers and fresh directions in the work of more established artists. The exhibitions are organized at short notice, so please check our website regularly for news on forthcoming shows and events.