Nao doesn’t bother much about colour in his recent work – the actual colour of clay, some black or white glaze, and stripped wood are his material vocabulary. At the moment he says terra cotta is ‘too red’. The putty colour of white stoneware and the pallor of a barkless twig articulate form without fuss.

And what of the forms?

Some of these graceful awkward objects are just clay, some are just wood, but the core of this new body of work engages these materials with each other. Not suggesting any function but evidently hollow, apertures draw attention to themselves by being sharply rectangular, architectural you might say, well-finished, points of focus in the loose, slightly bulbous, weighty clay shapes. Perhaps the body as well as the building are in his imagination, but the content remains elusive and unspecific and this is his strength.

The juxtaposition of familiar objects, across a range of scales, is in play. Storytelling implications, beasts, towers, caves, tree-houses, a reclining woman - things alluded to but not followed through. There is danger in going straight for the figurative, he says, an oblique route is preferred. Proportions are tantalizing, a big and bulky appearance achieved on a tabletop, a work like a miniature perhaps of something much bigger, there is a whiff of the absurd.

Nao studied on the mixed media course in Brighton and worked in wood and clay, and his work speaks strongly for the possibilities of that course. After graduating he worked for a couple of years in an Architectural Ceramics workshop with traditional terracotta methods, banging out press-moulded units for restoration and new building, working on big projects.

Big things re-enacted small, furniture, and architecture, have long been part of his visual language and field of reference. Over the years I have known his work I have seen small flights of steps, seats you can almost use, a big raw clay bath, pots on tall wooden tripods of builders wood from skips. He made a great arch you could walk through of pressed tile/bricks with a pub-green glaze. A rectangular structure with small door as a point of entry in its seemingly huge wall, was a memorable piece from his RCA years. It was made of terra-cotta with rapid diagonal finger marks across its surface.

Playing with scale is a theme, articulated through surface as well as form.

There has been a gradual transition in his mode of making, though it would be fair to say that building skills are part of his everyday life, in and out of the studio. But regarding clay, his skills evolved through press-moulding in the factory, slabbing at RCA on his MA course, and coiling now; the slowest method so far . . . . .

Slowness makes its contribution. He starts coiling in the middle so all options are kept open. His return to hand-built imprecision, intuition, and unprescriptive form-making is because he wants sufficient time to put the right kind of control into several pieces. Wood then makes its impact on the clay after his soft coiling, he beats them with wooden tools when the forms are leather hard, and then come the repetitive marks of wood – the scrape of a wooden modelling tool cutting a surface like fish scale across the form, which is ‘capturing movement in a still object’, he suggests.

Nao started raising his clay forms on structures of twigs or small branches while on a residency at Cove Park in Scotland in 2010. He wanted to see how the weightiness of the clay form would seem stuck up in the air. The made encountering the found which brings its random nature. The wandering lines of a stick found in a woodpile of thinnings in a cemetery or a park has the movement of growth. The sticks need to be co-opted into the work, this is done by carving, also slow. Time almost doesn’t matter, he says. Much as he admires the rapid gestures of Japanese calligraphy and brush painting, at this stage he needs to spend slow time with work, giving it his inattention as much as his attention. ‘In order to make the branches “my own” I started to carve their surface to resemble tree bark (to create a kind of caricature of a tree) and also to echo brush and pencil marks that appear on my drawings.’ He had wild deer in mind while he was working at Cove Park as well as submarines, beasts and built containers, cohabitants of the bare West Scottish coast.

In the current body of work his loose approach is further developed, the open dialogue between wood and clay. He
half-makes the stands before deciding which clay object will go on them, whether they will be support, signifier of nature and artifice, or cage. Ambiguous collisions of formal reference arrive at a final appearance when Nao has defined their surfaces. The carved twig surface connects with the scraped clay surface although their textures are different. They are comparably restless. He works all over with a V-cut chisel on the sticks, the tool that would have been used on a block of cherry wood for Japanese printmaking. The very fine texture produced means you can’t quite focus on it, and perhaps this brings you closer to look.

Marks of both kinds, the wooden scrape on leather-hard clay and the chisel gouge through wood, imply the human hand and this is important. The marks are also directional and steer and persuade the eye, echoing the idea of drawing, doodling even, all over a form. If it could be described as drawing, it is far from decoration, perhaps animation posed against the mass or bulge of clay.

In the past few years an important encounter has been running at the back of his mind. Asked as an interpreter on an architectural research trip in 2008 for an exhibition at the V&A, Nao met the architect Teranobu Fujimori whose buildings defy contemporary expectations, are rich with material qualities, and play with scale. Subsequently Nao helped to progress Fujimori’s project in the group exhibition 1:1- Architects Build Small Spaces which opened in the museum in June 2010. Nao helped to find the timber yard for hefty planks, helped to scorch their surfaces, translate to the British workforce, and was then, to his delight, physically involved in getting the small building winched up.

Noguchi1 is another very important reference for Nao. Noguchi is known across the eastern and western hemispheres. With a broad visual practice across architecture, sculpture, design and craft, this is form-making in the widest sense. Nao spoke of his envy of the straightforwardness of working the 1930’s, as Modernism spread its influence across the world; the ability to make something new without irony or appropriation or inverted commas. Nao’s whole concern is rooted still in visual language, we need to eat with our eyes without verbal explanation and conceptual supremacy. Visual language for him has survived in German painting, in work he deeply admires such as Fujimori’s buildings and the sculpture of Thomas Houseago, and, Nao says, ‘here, it survives in work in craft.’

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1 Isamu Noguchi 1904 - 1988