

KITTY SHEPHERD



ZOOM LOLLY VASE WITH FAB JAR PRINT

Kitty Shepherd is a highly regarded British ceramic artist with a career as a slipware potter spanning more than 30 years. Her creative training could be best described as an unorthodox path through further education, which began in the arts, but not specifically in ceramics. Her early passions were for the stage, studying primarily voice (Soprano) and drama. She was first introduced to clay as a minor subject during this two year course and it changed so much for Kitty; the result was two productive years of singing, acting and ceramics which were the foundations of an artistic life filled with many significant turning points. In the end her affinity with ceramics dictated the direction of her future career. From these early beginnings to the current day, she continues to channel her passion for slipware into developing her own unique style.

All my pots are intensely specific in their focus on a particular subject. Over time I have established a particular system for honing and cataloguing information; to classify

and impose order on those things that affect me. It is all intentional; there is nothing random in the selection of my source material - everything is obsessively thought out. People who have visited me in my studio are probably surprised to see that as part of the beginnings of my creative process, I start with what can only be described as apparently random piles of paper, but that is because deep down I am a collector. For years, I have been filling books, boxes and folders with saved scraps of paper on subjects that interest me or tangentially touch on areas of personal interest. These may seem irrelevant at the time but it is the subject matter that is either contained within these papers or inspired by the images or words that eventually end up as the starting point for a new pot or collection of pots.

Normally, in my ordered folders the subject matter is arranged in such a way as to suggest that some kind of lateral thinking is at play. Bicycles are placed with road markings and toy guns are to be found with water pistols and ray guns. However, a sub-categorization then takes place

and objects are separated and then gathered together again according to a more precise criteria. Storing pictures and their associated information for my artwork is very important and this super organised system works, but it is only intended to act as a depository.

When the time comes and I actually need to do something with this archive, I need a bit of chaos to inject a certain amount of randomness. The images and scraps that I have gathered together for a particular topic can be interpreted as the ingredients for a recipe that need to mix and start talking to each other in order to spark a concept that can be worked on. I think it is at this point when the interest in any particular collected subject(s) becomes overpoweringly compulsive that I begin to move pieces from that pile to join another. This then begins a new, potentially explosive, mixture of ideas that I might work with. However if a mix doesn't work out then everything gets separated back into their own folders for another time. Although this may sound complicated, I find that my internal thinking runs along several tracks simultaneously, all the time. An ability which has informed some of my more interesting work over the years.

These mixed boxes of potentially inspirational content can remain 'live' or active in my studio or on my work bench for several months and even when it is exhausted a box is preserved for another time. Once I have worked with a photograph, so that I don't spoil the original image, the original physical copies are substituted for digital line drawings so that they can be replicated and re-sized according to my requirements. The cuttings are then placed back in their folders and the archive is kept complete. It is a peculiar way of working that has evolved into the digital age from my early days of childhood scrapbook making.

It is interesting to see how this early “hard wiring” of the personality is still central to the way I interpret and manage all the “stuff” that is out there. Once things are in my scrapbook, box or folder they are mine and I can lay claim to them. Many of the objects I am attracted to now have been with me all my life as physical memory and by collecting them I am sorting them out. It would be accurate to say that they are quite literally the fabric of who I am.

Ironically, in the end, the true collection of all these artefacts and data is what remains in my mind. The pieces of paper survive, but it can take years for the process to throw them up again.

It would be tempting to say that my collections seek a form of self-enclosure where history is replaced by some form of classification and the collection is a form of art involving the reframing of these historical artefacts within a world of constant manipulation. Like other forms of art, its function is the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical relationship to everyday life. For me the collection is a continuation, an intrinsic part of my life.

This archive ensures that I begin all new work with a huge amount of material and ideas. The best ideas come from literally months of thinking and planning.

I build my pot with one eye open taking in the fall of a plumb line and a profile. Once the pot is made, I only have a relatively short window of time to complete the surface painting before the damp clay dries out. I try and hold this back for as long as possible with plastic and Clingfilm covers in order to not only extend the creative window but to prevent faults and cracking. In the intense dry heat of southern Spain during the spring and summer months, maintaining an adequate level

of humidity for the work is a time consuming task in itself and ensures focus. As each pot can take as long as a month to decorate and complete prior to firing, there is ample time to reflect on what is being created. Sometimes at the end I can look at what I have done in surprise and have no idea how I did it, which is usually a good sign.

For the past 10 years my workshop has been in my house in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, south of Granada in Spain. I am surrounded by the cool of the mountains and breath-taking views. I feel I have time travelled to this place, 3,000 feet above sea level where children are still allowed to play like children and horses and donkeys live in the houses with their owners. In the winter, pigs are slaughtered in their owners’ garages and the strings of homemade sausages and chorizo can be seen hanging from the balconies and the rafters of upstairs rooms and the women have fire tinged cheeks from cooking in the open hearths of their garages.

Despite its attractions and obvious benefits to health and sanity, this timeless idyll is beginning to disappear. There is the inevitable clash of culture as modern western consumerism encroaches on this world. The farmers now have modern tractors and mobile phones, their children drive Audi’s and their wives have more cleaning products for their Neff hobs than you could stuff into one cupboard and yet they still prefer the hearth. It is a very traditional agricultural Spanish community of only 900, still poised on the edge of the 21st century and I have been fascinated by this simple way of life.

By circumstance, I work very much alone, linguistically stranded. I have a wi-fi radio tuned in to Radio 4 or 6, but with 12,000 other stations to listen to I can switch to radio city Delhi for a

thrilling change of mood if the whim takes me. Although I miss my shared studio in Sussex and the chat, building the Spanish workshop and working in it has been hard, but creatively inspiring. I am surrounded by breath-taking examples of traditional Andalucian pottery derived from early Moorish influences, which serve as a constant reminder of how this cultural diversity moves art and civilization forward.

I return to England every few months. It is always beneficial to have a break from this solitary simple life and to briefly reconnect with my roots in Sussex. The contrast never fails to spark another flash of creativity. It is this example of a blatant contradiction of time and space which is so central to the work of a potter.

I am currently working on the combination of fragile flowers and crudely drawn words that proclaim passion and rage which is so thrilling. Putting words on pots is an overt move for me. I have to come out from behind the slippery shadows of pictures, to proclaim a kind of certainty that I think will work.

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