

View Gallery - Interview With Fenella Elms

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

A: I moved around a lot as a child and went to eight different schools, abroad and in the UK; I suppose that contributed to some amount of tolerance, adaptability and resilience. Being in so many different places seems to have heightened my curiosity and general sense of wonder – I wish I made more time to travel now.

Q: Who and what are your main influences and inspiration?

A: Cathy Fleckstein's work (a German ceramicist little known in the UK) made my heart stop when I first saw it; as did the work of Rafa Perez who is a Spanish ceramics genius. There are many others whose work creates a mixture of joy and fascination; I think it is about an ability to play with the earthiness of the clay and create something more through it – a kind of poetry in the work, possible even in a humble mug. Gareth Mason talks about his work beautifully and expresses this transformative quality which I am trying to describe.

I don't take inspiration as literally as I think some do: I don't sit down to make something that has a fixed link. For example, even if I were given a brief, I would let it settle in my mind, consciously reminding myself of it and letting it influence my experiences for a few weeks and then when I go to make, I put the preparation away and try to act as a conduit for those experiences to emerge: I am alive to the possibilities but try not to interfere. I am always interested in the resulting work but not surprised – it has a fresh familiarity; a new look at something very known.

Q: Your technique is incredibly intricate can you tell us a little more about the process of creating your work?

A: I find that more processing and repetition in the making helps create a rhythm which allows the expression I described. I've heard potters who throw describe a similar approach – the making becomes instinctive and subconscious. I make the component parts, I make a sheet to attach them to and then try to stay with the building stage for lengthy periods without interruption. It seems important that the work becomes one piece of work by being stuck with clay to clay.

Q: On average how long does it take you to complete a piece of work?

A: How ever many times I get asked this, I still don't know how to answer it. What do I measure? The thinking, the preparation, the building, the presentation and necessary liaison entailed? And what about the failures and experiments that are a necessary prerequisite to all the work? The work is more a part of a way of life.

Q: Your previous work in mental health has helped form much of the influence of your work with clay and porcelain. Can you tell us more about how the two correlate?

A: I undertook a psychoanalytical training and noticed that artists use the same language when describing the process. There is a similar mindfulness; attending to the underneath and enabling what is hidden to emerge; forming new patterns in the apparent. I worked in particular with psychotherapeutic groups in which the interaction of several awakened the individual: I notice that I cannot make something with just one part.

Q: What is your idea of a perfect day in the studio?

A: A whole day in the studio – its not possible!

Q: As an artist what message or feelings would you say you aim to communicate to the viewer?

A: The best thing about doing shows (where I am on a stand with my work) is to hear the responses – I am fascinated to hear how the apprehension of the work is as varied as the people and delight that it is possible to for them to abstract from their own imagination.

Q: What are you working on at the moment?

A: I have recently had a run of trying ideas in clay that look rubbish when they come out of the kiln but, from experience, I hope that one of them one day will turn out to be a necessary step in a path to something I think works – that's ceramics. I always feel there is something more to say through the work, but not sure what it is.

Q: When you are not working in the studio, what do you do to fill your time and find new inspiration?

A: I'm safe, healthy and have a loving family: opportunities abound.