

# Swirling Movements and Illusions of Growth

Amanda Fielding reports on the work of Fenella Elms, the Ceramic Review Award winner at Ceramic Art London 2011.

What do Peter Collingwood, Nicholas Rena, and Chris Keenan have in common? They all initially trained and practised in other fields before switching to careers in the crafts. Master weaver Peter Collingwood qualified as a doctor (discovering his first loom in an occupational therapy department while serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps), Nicholas Rena studied to be an architect, Chris Keenan an actor. Ceramist Fenella Elms is a new name to add to the list.

**BEFORE CLAY** Trained as an occupational therapist after secondary school, for many years Elms worked in mental health, eventually managing an occupational therapy department in a London psychiatric hospital. Curious to understand how her patients had become ill in the first place, she began training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, developing a particular interest in group psychotherapy. It was, she reflects, 'quite an undertaking', and included a period of being in analysis herself. This was with the distinguished Kleinian psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer (1922–2004), whose early theoretical interest in artistic creativity was explored in *Painting and the Inner World* (1963), written as a dialogue with the art critic Adrian Stokes (1902–1972).

Recognising how lucky she was to see Meltzer, Elms says: 'It was really after he died that I wanted to take art more seriously. I don't think he'd be at all surprised to hear that I was doing art rather than psychotherapy; he put great value on art'. By the



As a child she lived in eighteen different houses in various parts of the world





time she had qualified as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, she and her husband had moved out of London and bought a run-down, late eighteenth-century farmhouse and barn nestling in the chalky Wiltshire downlands. Now the mother of two children, during the day she worked in a counselling service in nearby Swindon, supervising counsellors and running a group psychotherapy practice, while 'every night and weekend for several years Charlie and I were in boiler suits, doing plasterwork and carpentry'.

So what was the evidence in Elms's early life to suggest a later career in art? The middle daughter of an itinerant army family, she remembers being 'a very curious, interested person' who often got into trouble for opening flowers before they were ready. As a child she lived in eighteen different houses in various parts of the world including Asia, where the flora and fauna had an especially strong impact upon her. 'There were extraordinary animals, snakes, and tropical plants that grew up overnight. We used to drive up to the Malaysian peninsula and walk into the water – the colours and texture of the coral were amazing. I sometimes think it was a dream.' Her ideal presents were sewing or construction kits, which she says she was not very good at but 'just loved doing'. At boarding school in England there seemed little chance of her pursuing art, which was denigrated as a non-subject or hobby for the less bright. Fortunately her creative abilities were recognised by her English





teacher and she was eventually allowed to take O-level art. She also had the opportunity to learn how to throw when the wife of another teacher, discovering the school's redundant kilns and wheels, volunteered to teach pottery in the evenings.

Realising the importance of financial independence, Elms chose vocational training after school, but determined to attend a pottery class at the local art college on her one free morning a week. Occupational therapy appealed because it embraced anatomy, physiology, and psychology. Picking up a found, mossy bird's nest from a shelf in her studio, she says: 'I do love looking into things and discovering how they work, so there is a connection between those subjects and what I am doing now as a ceramist'. She peers into the 'beautifully made souvenir', enthusing over the traces of her home life woven into it: 'my daughter's pony's hair, bits of my dog's hair, feathers from our ducks'.

**WATERSHED MOMENT** In spite of Elms's obvious early creativity and enjoyment of clay, it was at least another twenty years before she took up ceramics again. Knowing how much she hankered after making pottery, on her fortieth birthday Elms's husband gave her a wheel, which triggered her into action. Her next step was to join the part-time access and foundation course in Art & Design at Swindon College, which she found fascinating and revelatory: 'I was so entrenched in psychoanalysis – the way thinking works, the subconscious approach, how things emerge from the deep, how we

affect others without spoken language – and here it was happening again and again in art.' At the end of the course she combined her psychotherapy practice with ceramics, working from home in a corner of the former cowshed, now used to store bicycles. One year on she was back at Swindon College on the two-year HNC Ceramics course, during which she won a product design competition. Much to her amazement, on the strength of this achievement the competition's sponsor offered her employment as a designer. The prospect of sitting in a design studio on an industrial estate, occasionally visiting factories in China and attending large trade fairs immediately focused her mind on her future career path. After twenty years in various mental health services, opportunities for analytic work had become reduced to private practice, and it now dawned on her that 'pottery was an opportunity for another vocation, and if I was going to make a living out of clay, I wanted to be making, not designing'. This was the watershed moment when she told her patients she would be winding down her psychotherapy practice. The stage was set for a completely new direction as a professional artist. Among the artefacts she exhibited at her graduation show in 2008, there were small, breathtakingly fragile white porcelain boxes, each containing an intricate arrangement of wafer-thin pieces of clay, carefully manipulated to look like shreds of paper. Months later she successfully showed a group of similar pieces with a commercial gallery at the *Affordable Art Fair*, describing this first-time experience as a 'steep learning curve'.







4

4 *Green Ladders*, porcelain strips built onto a stained porcelain sheet, 2011, H50cm  
5 *Closed Flow*, framed porcelain, private commission, London house, 2010, H80cm



5

'...pottery was an opportunity for another vocation'



6 *Single Twist Mobius* (of a set of four), hotel commission, London hotel lobby, 2010, H50cm

**Exhibitions** *Summer Exhibition*, Beaux Arts, Bath, 25 June-3 September 2011; Group Exhibition, Sarah Wiseman Gallery, Oxford, 18 June-16 July 2011

**Email** fenella@fenellaelms.com


**Web** www.fenellaelms.com

**Amanda Fielding** is an independent curator and writer. Presently she is working on a book on Gillian Lowndes



6

**IN THE STUDIO** Fast forward three years and today Elms has converted the whole of the one-time bicycle shed into a light-filled, fully functioning ceramics studio. There are two electric kilns, one of which (approximately 80cm<sup>2</sup>) was built together with Clive Shellard to accommodate large pieces horizontally. Another vital piece of equipment is the flawless sheet of plaster (about 1m<sup>2</sup>) onto which she pours out the porcelain slip. This is eventually transformed into the slender ribbons and paper-thin leaves of clay that make up the fragile structures of her mobius and twisted double helix sculptures. These, together with wall-mounted works composed of complex layers of tiny, seed-like elements that magically capture the illusion of swirling movement or growth in the natural world, have become her acclaimed signature pieces, recently on view at various art fairs including *Origin* and *Ceramic Art London*.

There is a clear sense that the insights, resilience, and persistence Elms gained in her previous professional life are now being put to very good use in her fascinating, often challenging, and high-risk explorations of clay. 'It is important to endure the disasters and difficulties; fragility is part of the tension that can make interesting art. It's a very Meltzer idea.' 

Complex layers of tiny, seed-like elements magically capture the illusion of swirling movement or growth in the natural world