

Wendy Kershaw

A Look at Her Intriguing Work

Article by Paul Bailey

THE DAY STARTS EARLY FOR WENDY KERSHAW AND often the nights are late. But living in an old Scottish farmhouse overlooking vast expanses of idyllic countryside has its compensations. But this is far away from her early experiences in China. Today she is recognised as one of the leading ceramics maker's in the UK, and an exponent of the cross-over between illustration and fine art ceramics.

Kershaw describes her early work, when she was a student, as a celebration of domestic rituals that came out of her love of ceramics as usable objects. She started out as a thrower and at age 18 she was obsessed with throwing teapots. That obsession continued with teapots, not just themselves but what they symbolise. Their warmth, humanity, plus the tea ceremony itself. Her work celebrated everyday life.



Later it included depicting proverbs and sayings. When she went to China the first time she took a book of 1000 Chinese proverbs and enjoyed playing around with them, using the meanings of the proverbs or twisting them. For example she took the proverb 'do not climb a tree to look for fish' and depicted trees with fish hiding/swimming in them. Sometimes finding things where they would be least expected.

Many themes in her work today come from lines of poetry: Tennyson, Keats, Sapho, lines that conjure up images and ideas. She is particularly interested in depicting Tennyson's "Maud" and the line saying that Maud had "but fed on the roses and lain in the lilies of life". She depicts *Maud* holding a plate with roses on it, a gold fork in her top pocket and salt and pepper on a nearby table, or else she is sprawling on lilies with a full cake stand full of roses ready to be eaten. In some images she is happy with the roses for her next meal, but in others she looks unsure and is surrounded by high, throned roses towering around her.

And then there are the stories that she writes herself, such as *The Seven Deadly Birds*, where each sin is depicted as a bird. Also *The Pudding Girl* where a girl is so concerned that she may miss out on pudding (dessert) for want of a spoon, that she sews many pockets into her clothing, and puts a pudding spoon in each pocket. She then feels confident that if pudding should appear she will not miss out on it.

Working in two different and demanding mediums – illustration and ceramics – is a challenge and a reward. Kershaw is a master of both. She explains her progression as paring down the work, and in doing so discovered that it was the drawing on the clay that was most interesting. Not wanting



Facing page: *The Pudding Girl*.

Above: *Memory collecting the flowers mown down by time*.

Below: *Maud*.



the form to be more important than the image, but to be a canvas for the image. At first throwing pots to draw on, but as she kept paring down, leading to the work being drawn onto flat slabs that are then framed.

Kershaw describes the actual making process as follows: "My illustrations use the qualities of ceramic to make the images. You can see how the needle has etched into the clay surface, how the scuffed surface of the clay is brought out with underglaze stains. It has a unique eggshell smooth surface of the unglazed porcelain. I use diamond polishing pads by hand to bring out this surface. It is a

flat surface but a physical one. For me it would be impossible to make the images in any other way.

"The decal head images are my own collaged artwork. I take photos of my nephews, or friend's children, cut up the photographs and space out the eyes, nose and mouth and paint them to look older, with longer faces. I scratch into the photographs, paint over parts of them, around them and create a new face with acrylic, watercolour and gouache. I can tweak the features of the photos to make the faces happier, sadder, more pensive and, after scanning my artwork, I continue to play around with it on the computer." Kershaw admires different ceramic work, but she is perhaps more inspired and influenced by illustrators, especially children's book illustrators, such as Dave McKean, Arthur Rackham and Edward Gorey.

In 2006 she was the invited artist to The Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen and Shanghai, China. Jingdezhen is the ancient porcelain capital of China, while Shanghai is one of the new booming cities. She exhibited her work in Jingdezhen, both at The Pottery Workshop and in the *International Ceramics Masters* exhibition at the Jingdezhen Ceramics Museum, where her work is now in their permanent collection. After exhibiting in Shanghai, she later brought the work back to exhibit in Scotland.

Then in 2008 the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums in Fuping, China invited Kershaw to take-up a residency. It is a large tile and architectural ceramics factory, plus Chinese visitor centre and international residency centre combined. With less than a month to get used to the clay and factory firings, she had to make work that would be in the museum's permanent collection. Certainly not a stress free couple of weeks. Drawing onto the factory's big plates, she worked with one of the lead

decorators in the factory. Working 12 hours a day, often in 35 to 40°C heat.

These residencies gave her a concentrated period of time to focus on exploring new ways of working and trying different techniques and materials. It was more experimental, trying underglaze transfers, on-glaze decals, painting with on-glaze, painting on layers of slip mixed with materials, applying slip with different tools, and dried out glaze mixed with different mediums to allow her to paint in controlled areas. The experience of China resulted in her combining her needle drawn lines with decals, leaving blank areas in the drawings to include a particular decal after the high firing.

Looking back at some of the other important events in her career, Kershaw considers that being



at Ceramic Art London, Royal College of Art in 2013 and 2014, was a boost for her career. Her work was seen by new collectors, galleries and the public, plus it was the first time to be shown in London.

The Orton Cone Box Show in the US has been going since 1975 and, when she visited NCECA, (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) in North Carolina in 2001, it was one of the shows that most impressed her. All the work in the show had to fit into the box that the Orton Cones come in, 3 x 3 x 6 inches. She thought that this was a show she would like to be in, so entered it in 2008 with a porcelain book and, to her surprise, won best in show. The second time that she entered it she won a purchase award prize.

Her relationship with America started in 2001 as visiting artist to the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore. At the time she was working at the Glasgow School of Art and through a staff exchange she was able to develop new work there, while demonstrating working with paper clay. Kershaw has also been in a visiting lecturer at the University of Manitoba, Canada. More recently in 2014



Facing page: *Porcelain books: The Tea Van and The Seven Deadly Birds.*

Above: *Saving the Fish.*

Left: *The Pudding Girl.*

Below: *Kershaw in her studio.*

she was commissioned to make the Scottish Children's Book Awards trophies.

So, today Wendy Kershaw can be found living up a single-track road, in an old farm-house on the hillside of a small Scottish glen with her partner. With wonderful views, it is beautiful at all times of year and all times of day. After years of fitting her work around different jobs, including full time at the Glasgow School of Art for more than 11 years, the luxury of being able to concentrate solely on her own work is wonderful, even when there is a tight deadline and she has to get up at three in the morning to take the bung off the kiln in mid-winter.



Paul Bailey currently represents the Aylesford Pottery in Kent, England. He is also a practicing potter. Originally trained in graphic design he has worked for the BBC and University of Manchester, later establishing his own design company. He moved to Kent to work on the launch of a new theatre and, from there, to head-up a communications team for two city councils. He then moved to a national organisation responsible for local government.