



MEET THE MAKERS

KATHARINA KLUG



ARTISAN PROFILE

Katharina Klug grew up in Austria making pots to supplement her pocket money. Her mother started a ceramics gallery when Katharina was a baby, and she and her brother were then encouraged to sell their own work in it. But she needed to discover her own love for the material, and learn the discipline of the craft, so moving to England after art school gave her a chance to take her work in a different direction – less commercial but more collectable. In Austria and Germany, pottery is utilitarian, she says – “A mug is a mug” – whereas here, the work of ceramicists such as Bernard Leach and Lucie Rie (also Austrian-born) is celebrated and enjoyed for itself.

Katharina uses Staffordshire porcelain clay for the distinctive vessels she has been making since 2011 in the garden studio of her Cambridge home. Ten minutes from the city centre (“because it’s too expensive to rent workspace there”), the self-assembled wooden chalet has an exhibition area for open studio visits, and enough space for three of her four kilns: “I make my own glazes, which is like inventing recipes, so the smallest kiln is for test tiles.” The next one up in size is getting old and no longer reaches top temperatures,

but is good for ‘bisque’ firing – the stage before glazing – and the two largest can be fired up to 1,265°C, for creating really glossy, durable surfaces.

Her fascination with clay is the paradox inherent in it, the durability contrasting with the fragility: it is soft, yet the fire makes it so hard. “All we have of ancient civilisations is the pottery they left,” Katharina says. “It’s what lasts.” That’s why museums provide such inspiration: she loves the ancient Korean ceramics in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. “To reinvent pottery is almost impossible, because every shape has been done, but you can change the details.” So her designs reflect modern landscapes, their linear

patterns inspired by electric cables viewed from train windows and grasses growing in the fields alongside the tracks. She simplifies the lines, and crosses them to create intersections, then lets her customers find their own images in the pattern: the shape of a tree sapling or the trajectory of falling rain. Her Monochrome jugs and bowls are marked with simple black strokes hand-drawn in pencil. Her more recent Moonlit Birch collection, inspired by childhood memories of a Japanese lacquer box given to her family, contrasts the monochrome exterior with inner surfaces of translucent colour created by metal oxides. Pigment varies depending on where the metal

was mined, so five minutes more or less in the kiln will affect the finished colour.

She makes in small batches, throwing up to 30 pieces in one session and firing up to 50 or 60 at once (although she’s also made single dishes as large as 50cm in diameter: “That’s as big as I can go”). The whole process takes at least a fortnight – even if everything goes right: throwing, drying, turning and shaving the piece, then first firing, decorating, glazing and second firing. And it all starts with the wheel, she says. That’s where the shape is born: the lines of the pattern are quick and immediate, but

she takes her time perfecting the shape first.

Now stocked in nine or ten galleries around the UK – from London to Scotland – Katharina’s ceramics sell from £10 for salt and pepper spoons to £400-£500 for one of her big 50cm pieces. She wants people to use her pottery as well as enjoy it visually – but, above all, she wants it to last. That’s a full-time project: “My mother’s dream was for me to go back and take on the family pottery, but that’s up to my brother now.” What she’d really like to achieve with her designs is the simplicity and timelessness of Lucie Rie’s work – a style that, as she says, never looks out of place in any environment.

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WORDS BY CAROLINE ATKINS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN BOSWELL; CATHERINE GRASSIN HART

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