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THE URGE TO CREATE



Turkish-born Ipek Kotan worked in corporate jobs before she gave it all up for the life of a ceramicist, driven by the need to work with her hands. Here she talks about the inspirations behind her sculptural vessels.

Words by ANNA BRADY

“I love observing nature,” says ceramicist Ipek Kotan, “From an enlarged image of plankton or snowflakes, to the patterns and textures of sea creatures, feathers of birds or rocks to images of desserts, glaciers and forests taken from the air.” Born and raised in Istanbul, Ipek has lived abroad for the past two decades and is now settled in Amsterdam where she hones her craft. She speaks lyrically about her work and, driven by a “visceral need to create with my hands using natural materials”, there’s a timeless simplicity to her vessels.

“Like most children in kindergarten, I loved playing with polymer clay,” she says, “I remember how much I loved the pretty colours it came in, how easily I could form the material in my hands to make cute little animals. Then school got in the way I pretty much forgot about it.” Although at 14, Ipek took a ceramic art workshop during summer school, she “wasn’t at all one of those kids that loved something early on and kept at it throughout their childhood and adolescence.”

That rediscovery came much later and led to a career change that was, she says, “one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever had to make.” After graduating from college, for seven years she worked in a number of entrepreneurial and corporate jobs. But, “even though I liked all of them in the beginning, after a while none of them felt like a perfect fit.”

Ipek’s last job was as marketing manager in a real estate development company in Istanbul, specialising in the restoration of historical buildings into luxury condos and apartments. “I was living in a great neighbourhood, working in a lovely office, earned more than enough money, had good relationships with my boss and colleagues,” she says. But although everything seemed perfect on paper, “there was this sneaky feeling like I wasn’t living the life I was meant to live.”

Five months into that job, Ipek became so depressed that she had to quit and, on instinct, signed up for summer classes at Rhode Island School of Design (USA) in metalsmithing and ceramics. “That summer, I felt like I found my true calling, I absolutely loved working with clay,” she recalls, “Lucky for me, at the end of the summer session, I was invited by the university to stay on as a full-time student and study there.” On her 30th birthday, she received the paperwork stating she was officially a Rhode Island student. “Talk about meant to be,” she exclaims.

Ipek’s works are minimal sculptural vessels in fine Limoges porcelain, their smooth plain exteriors giving way to the heat of crackle glazed interiors, in molten amber, bronze, gold and jade tones. She shows through galleries such as London-based Adrian Sassoon, known for his stable of talented, experimental contemporary ceramicists, alongside the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, Matin in Los Angeles and Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia. But, favouring a personal relationship with her collectors, she is increasingly selling independently through her Amsterdam studio and at fairs, as well. Next up is *Révélations*, a



Ipek Kotan. Vessel. 2015. Limoges porcelain and jade crackle glaze. 19 x 10.5 cm.

contemporary craft fair now in its third edition and held at Paris’ Grand Palais from 3 to 8 May, where she will show her trademark Limoges porcelain vessels with their shimmering metallic glazes.

“I’m also working on finishing a series of large sculptural vessels which still need a few more layers of glaze and firings,” adds Ipek, “Apart from this, I’m working on a commission project designing porcelain objects to be used as gifts. This is a very exciting project because it gives me the chance to work with porcelain in a completely different way than I normally do.” All the while, like any designer she must reconcile function and practicality with artistry. “The artworks are always one of a kind,” she says “hand-made on the wheel without moulds or models and it’s all about feelings and aesthetics.”

As for other artists, Ipek’s inspirations are widespread, but all those she looks up to are devoted masters of their material and process. “They’re kindred spirits who inspire me with their strength and vision. When I look at their works, I feel I’m not alone in my focus and almost obsession-like fascination with a certain way of working.” These inspirations are widespread, not defined by discipline. Many are abstract painters and the influence of all is palpable in Ipek’s work; Agnes Martin, Donald Judd and Zero Group artists Lucio Fontana and Enrico Castellani in the cool minimalism, mixed with the Brut rawness of Pierre Soulages and Alberto Burri. Then there’s the light work of James Turrell, and her vessels seem to emanate light from the metallic glazes within. Ipek’s respect for nature echos her admiration for land artist Andy Goldsworthy.

So far, so romantic. But as with anyone who foregoes a solid job for the life of an artist, Ipek faces “constant financial unpredictability.” Yet more painful is that moment when cracks appear on a piece after the final firing. “It’s heartbreaking,” says Ipek, “especially on large works which literally take months to make.” The cruellest of moments, as any ceramicist knows, but a risk that makes the delicate survivors all the more special. ■

ipekkotan.com. Révélations is on from 3 to 8 May. revelations-grandpalais.com

Below:
Ipek Kotan.
Photography by
Derya Turgut

