



'Still Life with Brushes and Green Jar', 2013, thrown and glazed porcelain, Fencai over-glaze, hand-painted, diam. 32 x 45 cm



'Painted Grey', 1998, coiled in black porcelain clay, hand-painted with grey slip, diam. 25 x 42 cm

CERAMICS OF EPIC SCALE

Felicity Aylieff is constantly pushing the boundaries of sculptural form, always investigating new materials and techniques and most importantly her own thinking about the nuances expressed in her work. Text by Corinne Julius.

FELICITY Aylieff is a petite, diffident brunette; of no relevance until you consider her pots. These are not just large, they are monumental and dramatic. Her latest project in Doha is comprised of three vessels rising to 4.6 metres in height. Made in Jingdezhen the ceramic capital of China, they are the latest in the very different ceramics she has been creating for nearly 40 years. Yet Aylieff's career is a dual one. She is a successful ceramist with works in major collections, including the V&A and Chatsworth House, but her term times are spent teaching at the Royal College of Art in London. She is she says, 'Always the number two. It's a very powerful position, I can make things happen, without other people realising.' She enjoys her teaching and considers it fundamental to her development, indeed it helped

spur her experiments in China. 'Teaching is a passion. My two jobs are more than jobs; they are parallel passions of equal importance, although now because of age and time my work is taking over.'

Felicity Aylieff, one of four sisters, was born in 1954. Her mother was very creative, a skilled seamstress with no real opportunity to pursue her talent. Her father was an industrial engineer engaged in the thermoplastics tool-making industry, with a strong interest in design; he encouraged her to attend Art School. 'I knew I could make things easily. I was always drawing, painting and making. I wanted to do sculpture, but Sculpture was full of hulking great guys and I was timid, so I ended up in Ceramics and loved it.' Her work, however, has always expressed that interest and understanding of sculpture.



'Twist and Turn', 1996, press-moulded clay, ht 70 x 75 x 70 cm



'Bittersweet', 2001, press-moulded, red brick clay, ht 54 x 56 cm



'Still Life' (detail), 2012, thrown and glazed porcelain with Fencai over-glaze enamel, hand-painted, diam. 76 x 146 cm



'Garden', 2010, thrown and glazed porcelain with Fencai over-glaze enamel, hand-painted, diam. 67 x 172 cm

It has also and especially again recently, looked at colour and pattern. Her course consisted of one third textiles and between her second and third year she took time out to establish a commercially successful fashion business using natural dyeing and spinning. Her mother did the sewing along with four other local women. This interest in colour persisted in her ceramics, which involved simple flattish sculptures using coloured clay to explore saturated colours. 'I abhorred brown pots. No one applied colour, especially strong tonal blues and yellows, with the intensity that I did.' As in so many things she has done Aylieff had to find a way to do it and make it convincing. 'I don't make a fuss about things – I just get on and do it,' a practice she continues to this day.

After graduating with a first from Bath Academy of Art in 1978, she went on to do a teaching diploma at Goldsmiths. Her first job, which she didn't expect to get, was at her own last school. Originally educated in a traditional girls' grammar, she had transferred in her final year to Bedales, a mixed liberal "no-rules" school, where students did their own thing and where 'I didn't realise I was being educated. It has underpinned my teaching, because of what I learnt about how people learn. They learn through doing, through encouragement, through talking and explaining what you do and having the time

to do it and see why you think as you do.' She set up the ceramics course, taught full-time for three years and part-time for a further year. This experience has made her a highly respected if tough teacher, with what she describes as "kind honesty".

She went back to teach in Bath, where she liked enabling people to do things, to have visions and aspirations, to see people feel that they have achieved something for themselves. 'I recognise something in myself concerning this. Looking back I always felt timid, and I didn't want others to feel that. I wanted others to feel the strength I felt when teaching. I still feel it.' Aylieff is a curious mix of the self-deprecating and the enormously assured in her work. She is very determined about her own pieces yet seemingly lacking in confidence.

Most of her early pieces, of which she sold only a few, were hand-built (for lack of space) in her living area. In 1993 she decided to have time out. Despite fearing that she wouldn't be accepted, she became the first student to do an MPhil in Ceramics at the RCA, researching new materials and how to make huge moulds. 'I wanted to understand what sculpture meant for me.' The eminent ceramist Takeshi Yasuda, whom she married in 2003, was and remains formative in her conversations about ceramics. 'He helped me understand how I think. Why we do things, how we do things and how we interpret – ways of being, ways of looking, ways of understanding.'

She developed a new clay body of ceramic aggregate that included glass and porcelain, which needed no glazing and looked similar to terrazzo. When fired and ground it was extremely tactile, fragmented with colour, texture and depth. The hollow forms of "Elusive Body", 1999, made by pressing the clay into giant moulds, are the abstracted motifs of leaves and Indian and Islamic architectural forms. Her form grew stronger than the surface. 'In the end I treated surface as a bit of a distraction.'

The next body of work "Sense and Perception", 2002-3, dealt with a sense of sculpture. 'In order to understand the ceramic hollow, I had to create movement on the surface to show what was happening within.' They looked as though they were inhabited by an inner being trying to escape the almost membrane-like surface. They were in a state of constant movement, with no rigidity, and curiously sensuous (sensuality is important to Aylieff) – a bizarre achievement with such massive clay objects. The effect was unsettling, as if when the viewer turned away they would move with a life of their own.

These works sold well to museums and galleries, but says Aylieff, 'I found that I had said all I had to say. I wasn't sure about the size and materials. I wanted to look at sculpture in terms of the pot again, so I went back to the vessel.' Appointed Professor of Ceramics at Bath and shortlisted for the Jerwood Applied Arts Ceramic Prize in 2001 and made Senior Tutor at the RCA in 2002, it was perhaps surprising that in order to think about the vessel in an altogether looser way, she worked blindfold, using handcoiled rolls of clay. Working in a rhythm she created loose, metre high forms that she discovered had a core strength. A flat colour surface in blue or red was applied because she didn't want them encumbered by complexity. At COLLECT they sold out quickly. 'But,' she says, 'there's only a number of coloured pots you can do.'

In "Hidden and Revealed", 2005-6, she investigated surface. She created a surface like a sucked stick of edible rock candy – a dimpled layering of colour, made by applying coloured layers of slip, which she then ground down by hand. Like much of her work, it involves enormous amounts of process and complexity to attain simplicity. 'Whenever I do anything it's always in the detail. However simple they look, edges, joins, qualities of those, the



Felicity Aylieff painting black enamel outline ready for application of enamel colours – 'Fencai Gold', 2011, diam. 80 x cm



'Blue', 2013, installation for Tornado Tower, Qatar, thrown, carved and glazed porcelain, printed and hand drawing using cobalt blue, tallest 460 cm



Throwing sections for monumental pot, Jingdezhen China

appropriateness is always crucial. It gives the nature of the piece. It starts off simple, becomes complicated and is complicated to make simple.'

It was at this point in 2006 that she went to Jingdezhen where Takeshi Yasuda, was setting up workshops. Her trips were squeezed into holiday periods as she continued to teach at the RCA. It was a huge career and cultural shock, however, it did mean that she had the space, both physical and intellectual to investigate. 'It was an absolute shock; I didn't know how to use the place. I stepped back and decided that I should do things that I couldn't do in my studio in the UK.'

It was a momentous step for Aylieff. 'I felt that I could work with scale, I felt that I hadn't finished with it and hadn't really explored enough in "Sense and Perception". I wanted to work with scale and vessel, but thought how am I going to deal with surfaces? China has a history of blue and white so I thought about how I would paint. It took me back to college when I wouldn't go into the painting school because I was so uncertain. I spent one whole summer working on big sheets of paper making marks, thinking about the teaching I had way back – abstract expressionism. Then I looked at printing processes, underglaze, carving, pattern – a mix of things in China and from my education and tried to discover a language, printing and drawing on top of very simple off-the-shelf forms.' She experimented with numerous methods of application and eventually worked with the technicians to develop new shapes.

Although Chinese technicians are extremely well skilled, they are not artists, but Aylieff loves their energy. The region is known for its ability to work on a monumental scale, originally making the once ubiquitous towering sculptures of Chairman Mao. Working in Jingdezhen has required enormous diplomacy and negotiating skills. Aylieff came up with her own shapes which she designs and draws on a computer. A technician then works with her to see how they can construct the sections in the factory. The pieces are so huge that it takes two or three men to work the clay on the massive wheel, producing sections with walls up to 10 cm thick. The master thrower has the force of the other two workmen to help his hands squeeze the clay. The pots shrink some 20%, so considerable skill is required to ensure that the pieces will fit one to another. They are dried, stacked one on top of another, luted together with slip and then trimmed in a process rather similar to woodturning. They are fired between 1350–1400 degrees with a clear glaze which makes the pots look very white. Aylieff decorates them with enamels before a second firing at 800 degrees.

Her first series of monumental pots "Butterfly Season", 2006, was decorated with swarms of enamel print butterflies, rising up from dense clusters at the base to flutter up the pot, based on the real life butterflies she watched attach themselves to the pots as they dried. Her "Out of China" exhibition of 2007 included these and other of her new works, such as "Flower Pictures", a series of pots decorated with stylised flowers in underglaze and hand drawing, as well as "Mapping Memories", large blue and white vessels painted by Aylieff with expressive free-form brush marks.

In 2008 she studied Fencai or Famille Rose, traditional Chinese soft enamel techniques. Her drawings of items depicted on Qing Dynasty wares from domestic scenes, "Pots on Pots" 2009 and botanical images "Flower Vase" were converted into printing stamps, which she used to decorate her own pots rather like ceramic collages. In her current work, "Still Life", she employs Fencai, not to reference China, but to create modern still lifes, with colourful contemporary references, such as umbrellas or



'Still Life with Coffee Pot', 2013, thrown and glazed porcelain with Fencai over-glaze enamel, diam. 21.5 x 54 cm

coffee pots, blown up and stylised. The majority of her Chinese pieces are a celebration of her love of drawing. Her commission for Tornado Tower in Qatar in blue and white, references Arabia's role in the silk route and the transference of blue and white to Europe, while the parts which are carved allude to stylised Islamic ware and bits of tile. It came about after a member of the Qatari royal family had seen Aylieff's work in Chatsworth, where the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire are big collectors. Her latest commission is an open brief for upto eight middle-sized vases for a cruise ship.

Aylieff is proud to acknowledge her love of beauty. It is one of her major concerns. 'I like the joyousness it can give you. When people look at my work I want them to engage, to feel a sense of liberation, aspiration and excitement, to get that feeling inside you when you are really moved by something.'

Aylieff's work has seemingly changed dramatically over the years. Early pieces seemed stark and abstract in contrast to her current emphasis on drawing and detail, yet there are repeating threads of enquiry. She is constantly pushing the boundaries of sculptural form, always investigating materials and techniques and most importantly her own thinking. She is 'driven by a curiosity. I want to know more, not just technically. I want to understand why or how, or what I can do with it – to understand myself.' She often revisits dilemmas. 'The dissatisfaction with where I have got to isn't resolved. It's not right yet.' To the outsider it is – but long may that dissatisfaction spur Felicity Aylieff to create new work.

Corinne Julius

Felicity Aylieff is represented by Adrian Sassoon, London



'Still Life', 2012, thrown and glazed porcelain with Fencai over-glaze enamel, hand-painted, diam. 76 x 146 cm



'Garden', 2010, glazed porcelain, Fencai over-glaze enamel, tallest 172 x 67 cm