

One to watch

Look out for Russian ceramic artist Irina Razumovskaya, who's abstract sculptures inspired by her homeland have been earning her international attention



I make ceramics, paint and create large-scale outdoor sculptures. I use the same approach for all three: an intuitive, messy process of experimenting with geometric forms and surfaces that belies the neat geometry of the final pieces. Ceramics have now become my main focus – I spend up to 14 hours per day in the studio at the Royal College of Art, London.

My childhood fascination with ceramic objects of the past led me to my present-day passion. In Russia, I studied in a classical system, following a curriculum that dates back to before the Russian Revolution – I studied five languages (including Latin and Ancient Greek), antique history and literature. This formed my interest in archaeology and material cultures of past times that shapes my ceramics today. I then attended Saint Petersburg's State Academy of Art and Design for a six-year Ceramic and Glass joint BA and MA. The programme is similar to the course the RCA ran 100 years ago: based on copying classic originals and learning traditional skills. Three days a week students are involved in academic drawing, painting and sculpture, two days in ceramics and composition and one day is dedicated to philosophy,

history and other humanist subjects. It gave me great skills – I can draw like an old master, make an exact copy of a 16th century majolica plate, throw on the wheel and more – but I rarely produced work I could call my own. After graduating, I decided to do a second MA at the Royal College of Art to learn a more contemporary approach to ceramics. This has given me even more valuable knowledge and experience than I anticipated.

I was astonished to learn how much you could say with the language of clay alone. In Russia, ceramics are very literal and illustrative. When I first started making, I adored the work of the Russian ceramic artist Vladimir Tsivin. When I came to London, I saw a Shozo Michikawa exhibition at Galerie Besson that changed my life. The staff saw how spellbound I was, and, amazingly, organised for me – a 16 year-old Russian girl – to meet with Annie Turner. She lucidly explained her work to me and recommended that I go to the RCA. Later, Edmund de Waal's work showed me it was possible to express ideas through quiet objects, made without combining all possible skills, knowledge and colours into one work (which I had previously thought was key to making ceramics).

I started drawing on Russian symbolism while in the UK, missing the landscapes of home. Recently I've been working on several series, such as *Birch* (pictured right), *Barkskin*, and *Still*. My *Birch* series recalls the birch tree, which symbolises femininity and protection in Russian folklore and, more broadly, is now a symbol of Russian identity. For me, the bark is also visually connected to the ageing of architectural surfaces; ageing is a recurring theme in my work. The shapes are partly inspired by soviet structures – once boldly futuristic, built with an uncompromising visual grammar, they have now become softer and more lyrical through neglect. You can read the whole history of a building by looking at its layers of peeling paint.

I've learned to find beauty everywhere. My main inspirations are very un-romantic: I see beauty in abandoned buildings on my way to the RCA, in how food is displayed in a supermarket – even in a drawer filled with plastic bags. I always try to bring that out in my work. I use dilapidation, forms of simple household objects, machines or architectural details for my inspiration. In Russia, I worked in an amazing studio in a half-abandoned red brick factory with high ceilings and dozens of feral cats.

My latest work is inspired by my wistfulness for post-soviet Russia, the subtlety of dilapidation and the ageing of architecture. Rigid buildings softened by the touch of time, where every peeling layer speaks of history, fascinate me. I avoid constructing explicit narratives in my work, preferring to use expressive shapes and the characteristics of materials to create objects the viewer will relate to on an



unconscious level. I believe there are a number of symbols dwelling in the human subcortex that can pull a viewer's emotional strings – simple shapes with timelessly pleasing proportions, forms of everyday objects, architectural details and more. I'm keen on the history of art

and of everyday life. I've always studied ancient rituals, beliefs, daily routines; I like to imagine the lives of past peoples. Often I will read about some object from a bygone era with no place in today's world, imagine what it could be today, then stylize and re-think it to create something new and different.

I don't feel attached to specific techniques. I use the processes relevant to specific visions, which includes hand building and throwing with a variety of clays. I've recently started to fire multiple times to create the surfaces of my *Barkskin* series, and I mostly high fire. I'm not a fan of glazing, but I enjoy applying glazes and clays to my *Birch* series, as it feels close to sculpting. Coming from Saint Petersburg, a city that is full of light but is very grey and frosty, I have a taste for light-bearing, subtle patterns with rare flashes of colour.

While working on my degree show, I'm also planning for life afterwards. After a fruitful collaboration with the Milanese gallery Officine Saffi, they now represent me. I love their taste, and can't express how happy I am about it – this is probably the most significant step in my career so far. I've also been invited to participate in a symposium and a solo show at Kecskemét Ceramics Centre in Hungary this summer. I think I'll work on small-scale compositions with a textural focus, using the techniques I've been researching during my MA.

See more of Irina's work at irina-r.ru



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