

# Suzy Atkins

## BURSTING WITH ENERGY AND VITALITY

by Lauren Kearns

I met Suzy Atkins through a friend of mine with whom I went to school, Jim Bailey. When I was at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in 2017, Jim knew I was returning to France and said, “you absolutely must visit Le Don du Fel and my friends Suzy and Nigel Atkins.”

I drove from my village, Vallauris, to Le Don du Fel, Le Fel, France, and was completely overwhelmed with the magnificence of the center and the placement on the land. It is a unique and marvelous building, constructed of corrugated metal. I walked through the doors and I immediately heard “Is that you, Lauren? Please come and have some tea.” What an amazing first greeting.

### **Passion and Enthusiasm**

Suzy and Nigel showed me the center, the pottery, gallery, garden, and kiln area. The salt kiln is quite large, and the interior is blue from years of cobalt fuming. Then we sat down for tea. With the same passion and enthusiasm for ceramics, a friendship was instantly formed.

At the age of 27, Suzy started working with clay. She had moved to London, England, from New York City as part of her job on the administrative staff for a big building company and decided to take a course in ceramics. She completed her studies at Harrow College of Art, London, England, after a year at Whitechapel College of Art (now the New School of Art), London, England. She met her husband, Nigel, while working at the same building company, where he was in charge of design. In 1977, Nigel had purchased a home in the rural Cantal region of France, and it was then and there that they established the pottery. The business grew in size and scope and in 2007, Nigel and Suzy opened their new center, which is where her studio is now located. As the largest contemporary ceramic center in Europe, Le Don du Fel now has approximately 50,000 visitors a year. Dutch journalist Mels Boom has described it as the Guggenheim of ceramics for both its striking architecture and commitment to contemporary work. Facilities include: exhibition gallery, sales gallery, pottery studio, offices, kiln rooms, and a storage area for production ware.



Outside view of the European Centre for Contemporary Ceramics at Le Don du Fel, France.



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### Work in Constant Evolution

Nigel has created a gallery that exhibits world-class French and international ceramic artists, in addition to a boutique where numerous European artists are represented. Combining their talents, they have created a contemporary ceramics center that offers the world an extraordinary variety of ceramic art.

Suzy's salt-glazed work is known for painterly effects with gold lusters. Her forms and designs are functionally oriented and large in scale, but evolve constantly. She began a line of functional ware in 1977 and has employed other potters (over 60 apprentices through the years) for its production. These pieces are direct and strong in form. Today her son, Kélian, now throws and develops much of the line with the assistance of another potter. On average, between 5000–8000 pieces of this production line are created per year.

Suzy herself is a marvel of energy and a creative force, and her work explodes with a similar vitality. The manner in which she uses the gold brings life to the pieces, as if they will start to dance. The large-scale pitchers are sculpted. She fires her greenware pots to cone 12 (2408°F, 1320°C), in a salt kiln designed by Nigel. She created a unique method of protecting her kiln shelves by applying a creamy refractory slip over them (see recipe on page 51). This saves time in loading the kiln, and prevents warping and other faults that can happen with salt firing. The second firing is for the gold luster, which is fired in an electric kiln.



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1 Oblong dish, 15 in. (38 cm) in length, stoneware, slip decoration, salt fired to cone 12, gold luster. 2 Platter, 24 in. (61 cm) in diameter, stoneware, slip decoration, salt fired to cone 12, gold luster. 3 Pitcher, 18½ in. (47 cm) in length, stoneware, slip decoration, salt fired to cone 12, gold luster. 1-3 Photos: Nigel Atkins. 4 View of the salt kiln.





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5 Le Don du Fel's exhibition gallery. 6 Platter, 23 in. (58 cm) in diameter, stoneware, slip decoration, salt fired to cone 12, gold luster. Photo: Nigel Atkins. 7 Suzy's studio and shelving for her production ware.

Ceramics at Le Don du Fel, has breathed new economic life into the surrounding rural area. The state authorities have recently decided to integrate the spectacular site into their regional program of art and craft promotion.

Her life and her career are an international blend—born in New York, trained at the heart of the British studio ceramics, and working in France—giving her a base of inspiration. With this background combined with her own exuberant energy, Suzy Atkins produces a unique vision and vibrant ceramic work.

*Suzy's work can be purchased at Le Don du Fel or on their online e-shop gallery, <https://ledondufel.com/fr>.*

**the author** *Lauren Kearns is a professional artist, teacher, and creator/owner of International Artists Residency Exchange, an artist's residency program, located in Saint-Raphaël, France. She has assisted students of all ages and abilities in ceramics and continues to be an active and avid promoter of the ceramic arts.*

### Achievements and National Publicity

In 2003, Suzy was the only French ceramic artist selected for the 2003 World Ceramic Biennial in South Korea. The achievement gave her work unprecedented national publicity. In recognition of her immeasurable contribution to the development of pottery in France, as an educator, cultural contributor, and now, national icon, the French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, named her Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite, an honor never before accorded to a potter.

In addition to her achievements as an artist, Suzy and Nigel's teamwork in creating their European Centre for Contemporary

### REFRACTORY SLIP KILN WASH

Cone 06–13 Oxidation/Reduction

|                            |             |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Grolleg Kaolin . . . . .   | 20 %        |
| Hydrated Alumina . . . . . | 80          |
|                            | <hr/> 100 % |

Add: Heavy-duty wallpaper glue . . . . . 1 %

Combine dry ingredients and mix with enough water to form a slurry. Add glue, mix well, and adjust with water to bring wash to the consistency of slip. Apply to kiln shelves. We use this wash on our Advancer® silicon carbide shelves and get 70 firings out of them before needing to reapply the wash.