

Fleur Schell: Motorbikes and cockatoos

Western Australian artist Fleur Schell shared stories of her extraordinary childhood and her love of art and family with Fibre Arts Take Two.

Fleur Schell's Friday Feature Artist Interview can be found at the bottom of this page.

Growing up on a farm near the small Wheat Belt town of Goomalling in Western Australia, Fleur Schell spent her time as a perpetual maker of stuff.

Fleur's creative path led her to a visual arts degree at Curtin University. After completing postgraduate studies in ceramics at the University of Tasmania, Fleur spent time in Canada and abroad, looking to refine her distinctive voice through clay, finding porcelain to be an honest, responsive material that records every impression. Fleur experiences a calm that washes over her when making.

She is grateful to live her creative life and describes the world as being transformed from black and white to Sublime colour when her children entered her world, and she began exploring figurative work in clay. Fleur shared her love of art, family and her remarkable childhood with Fibre Arts Take Two.

Motorbikes and cockatoos

Fleur's childhood was anything but conventional, "I can honestly say I had the most wonderful childhood," she says, "I grew up in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia in a small country town. My mom was an inherently creative person. There were always projects all over our house, all half-finished. She was a music teacher as well at the school. My dad was really mechanical-minded. He was always building things on the farm. So I think I was just surrounded by really creative people, where anything was possible."



Heidi and Harry

Fleur happily admits that her children Heidi and Harry have become her muses, “I think my children gave me permission to reference my own childhood,” she says, “because I didn’t realise until I had children myself how remarkable my childhood was because I was living it. I just tell my children about how I grew up with a cockatoo that flew alongside the school bus and then came to school, and then it would fly alongside me when I was on my motorbike. And they would say, ‘Tell us that story again. Tell us that story again’. When I started telling them other people’s stories and reading books, I realised what an amazing genre that is and how it could inform my practice. I just wanted to make my kids all the time in clay because it was all I could think about, I was just so in love with them and rather than be a distraction to my practice, they became the centre of my practice.”

Living with her work

Fleur has a unique way of finding the right way to complete a piece, “When I make a piece of work,” she says, “it goes straight to the dining room table. I pick it up, and I carry it in and sit it there because sometimes I’m quite stumped because I’m so close to it. I’ve spent up to six to eight weeks making a piece of work. And then there’s been so many stories attached to this piece of work that I’m lost trying to put a title on this piece of work.”

This way, she shares her art with her family and friends and enjoys extra insight, “My family and friends, anyone who drops in for a cup of tea, they all just sit there and live with this work,” says Fleur, “Over a period of time, while we’re sitting there, moving dinner plates around, my son will say, ‘Mum, I reckon it should be called this,’ or Heidi will say, Mum, I don’t even understand what you’re trying to say about this piece of work’, They’re brutal, they’re honest and often, they just say the most wonderful things about it that I had had never thought of. So I think it’s really important that rather than make a body of work and send it out there, you live with it if you can and let it inform you in ways that if you let go of it, it’s not going to be able to do that.”





Making Room for the Wildlife

One of Fleur's most impressive pieces is her three-dimensional map, *Making Room for the Wildlife*. "I built it on the floor," she says, "I was looking at it as though it was a topographic map, and I was also strongly referencing Google Maps while working. If you look at it closely, you can see all these symbols that Google Maps uses, all these little symbols throughout it that identify it as a map. And then the first instalment of those areas that represent parkland, they were actually living. I had cactuses in them and all these little plants growing out of them. Then I decided to send it to the Australian environmental lighting designer. I just didn't want someone to have to be responsible for caring for those plants. I thought, 'I've got to be a bit more realistic about this and pragmatic,' so I replaced those tiles with a green porcelain version."

Fleur received some unexpected but welcome benefits from contributing *Making Room for the Wildlife* to the Sydney exhibition, "It was really well received," she says, "It's the most fulfilling thing when you make a body of work because there's something that moves you in your life, and then there's an exhibition that fits it. So I sent it to Sydney, thinking, 'This is such a good fit because I'm going to be amongst all those who feel so strongly about the environment like me.' And that is precisely what happened. I just found my people. Being amongst these people who cared about something was so nice."

Porcelain

Fleur first started working in porcelain when she was doing her postgraduate studies in Tasmania, "My supervisors encouraged me to reference my own personal history in my studies, and they said, 'What are your passions?' And I said, 'Well, I love writing music. My mom was a musician, so music was always a constant in the house. And because of that, I learned lots of different musical instruments.' So they said, 'Well, you should tap into that.'"

When I discovered the resonant quality of porcelain, I thought, 'Well, this is perfect; I'm going to make these crazy sound instruments that reflect the quality of the material and describe internal spaces that the eye can't see.' Because sound does that, it travels in and out of things and describes spaces we can't see so beautifully. I then spent several years just making these crazy instruments. I didn't know where it would lead, but I had so much fun doing it."





About the artist

Fleur Schell studied a production pottery Diploma at Perth TAFE College, followed by a Visual Arts Degree at Curtin University and Post Graduate Honours at the University of Tasmania. Art School for Fleur was the most normal and liberating experience.

Once Fleur finished university, she spent several years travelling and working in Art Schools and artist studios to earn a living and refine her distinctive voice through clay. Later, she returned to beautiful Perth in Western Australia to raise a little family with her husband Richard, and they launched a Clay Centre and International Visiting Artist Residency.

For Fleur, everything changed when her children, Heidi and Harry, were born. Her world transformed from shades of grey to sublime colour. Informed by the conversations and perspectives shared by both of her children, she now spends her days telling their marvellous stories through clay. Sharing in their childhood has deeply influenced Fleur's art practice and helped her stay connected as a family in a world in constant flux. Heidi and Harry remind her that the most exciting stories unfold while we are busy waiting.

Fleur's art imitates her life, and she is eternally grateful for the two muses in her work, her children Heidi and Harry. Without their insight, their belief in magic and the value they place on seemingly less important or insignificant things surrounding us, Fleur would have far less interesting stories to tell.



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