



Potters on Pots: Kitty Shepherd

Thinking outside the pot, ceramic artist *Kitty Shepherd* shares her love of popular culture and the nostalgic everyday items that form the inspiration behind the decoration she uses on her unique pieces



My name is Kitty and I have been a professional potter for the past 36 years. I first learnt about clay at Chichester College in 1978 at the age of 18. Having never touched clay before then, adding pottery to my student timetable was an afterthought and done only because I needed a full-time course of A-levels to satisfy the college requirements. Very soon, working in the pottery class became everything to me as I liked the fact I had found something so difficult to master. I knew I would never get bored of working with clay.

Fortunately, I found myself in a centre of creativity. We had a reputation in this room and others knew or sensed that extraordinary things were happening in there; a space that breathed a tangible energy into the college corridors every time the door opened. In part, this was because we all felt we had an exceptional teacher in Sue Machado. She took us on impressive field trips to Staffordshire and Cornwall, where we met the great potters of that time. Her teaching was all-encompassing and everything I learnt in those two years I still use to this day, because of course, the techniques of pottery don't change. Her classes involved hours of discussion, research and debate, and during these sessions she infected each of us with a desire to truly understand the nature of our materials and to become as skilled as we could possibly be in order to realise our absolute potential.

After leaving college I had various improvised studios. Then in 1991, I was appointed as the resident potter in an industrial museum in West Sussex that had two electric

kilns and a temperamental Victorian downdraft wood-fired kiln. I was expected to work in front of the public all day, producing a large array of domestic ware and firing the electric kilns every other day to keep the shelves full. This stint as a performing potter suited my character, until 10 years later in 2001, I made my last production-line piece and in complete contrast left that very public arena and placed myself in relative isolation in a new studio to make my own work at my own pace. No more rows of pots held aloft on planks for the crowd. Although it was fun while it lasted, I knew I needed to get serious.

The objects I find of greatest influence that draw me in are what I see as the big leaps in human inventions, which range from the amazing to the everyday. Concord, the Dyson Cyclone vacuum cleaner and the television in the guise of the TV test card, have all earned a place in our cultural make-up and are subjects I have collected, archived and worked into my pieces over the years. Alternatively, my subjects are products of mass consumption, such as Jelly Babies and Zoom lollies, confectionary that draws on a sense of nostalgia. Ray guns, which have proved to be some of my most popular pieces, straddle both of these worlds and provide a bridge from a remembered past to an imagined future.

One of my most recent obsessions is the lipstick, which I have come to regard as a tool of empowerment. My particular point of interest is the curious but long-established naming convention that results in sometimes highly suggestive, sleazy or flamboyant appellations, which in turn spark individual urban stories when their owners are questioned about their purchase or use. In 2017, inspired by these often amusing but sometimes poignant tales, I created a framed wall installation of 35 individual slipware, glazed lipstick tablets. This was followed in 2018/19 by another collection of 49 tablets, this time individually boxed; a device to contain the drama within. The collection continues to evolve in my pursuit to create a permanent record of old and new lipstick names and the myths and tragedies that they evoke.

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Zoom Lolly Vase*, 2013, H42cm

RIGHT ABOVE: *Domestic Bliss*, 2008, H40cm, (in Plymouth City Art Gallery public collection)

RIGHT BELOW: *Mr Whippy*, 2020, H50cm



RIGHT: Lipstick Tablet, 2018

BELOW: Painting By Numbers Lipstick Jar, 2018



The lipsticks that attract me fall into categories: contemporary, vintage and discontinued. The name that I choose for each piece is real, as are the colours and brands. Combining a colour with what often seems an unlikely name creates a unique character. Alternatively, adding a location where it assumes an activity, such as 'Cinema Pink' (Estee Lauder, discontinued) is a case of colour in action, or perhaps construed as getting some action! I wonder what Revlon was thinking when they named 'Fatal Apple', which is red, as red as Snow White's rosebud lips. Three years on and I am still deeply engrossed by my lipstick chronicle.



For years, I have been filling boxes with paper scraps consisting of my rough drawings and photographs that captivate me. It is these folios that eventually end up as the starting point for a new pot or collection. Normally, in my ordered folders things stay among their own kind. Bicycles are with road markings and toy guns are, at a push, with water pistols and ray guns, but separated. Storing pictures and information for my artwork is very important and this super organised system works, but only as a depository I can then play with. When I actually need to do something with them, I need a bit of chaos.

The images are like the ingredients for a recipe that need to mix and start talking to each other. So, I move pieces from one pile into another and it starts a new, potentially exciting, mixed pile that I work with. However, if a mix doesn't work for me then everything gets separated back into their own folders for another time. This is how Zoom lollies came to merge with the peace symbol. This mixed box is still active and on my workbench because I like how the results can be unpredictable and often fortuitous. Sometimes this element of unanticipated magic happens on a single pot, which then stands alone as a story in itself.

In the end, my inspiration comes from what is residing in the dark recesses of my boxes and then processed by my mind during a long and protracted course of development. Finally, when the pot or piece is finished, I let it go, the creative and inspirational process that occurred at that juncture is complete; the puzzle is worked out and if it is not, I go on to make another and then another, until the fantasy that brought the piece to life is concluded and spent. 

For more details visit studioslipware.com. Kitty Shepherd is represented by Messums, her next exhibition will be held at Messums London, 6 March–4 April 2021; messumslondon.com