

A  
FRAGILE  
STATE OF  
PERMANENCE

Kathryn Conway meets two ceramicists for whom the medium of porcelain is utterly transformative



For anyone who has had the pleasure of viewing the work of Fenella Elms in person, they will know it provokes quite an assault on the senses. On witnessing a series of her pieces entitled *Flows* on display at the Contemporary Applied Arts gallery in Southwark, my own reaction was visceral and rather affecting; I immediately wanted to run my hands over the undulating clay beads that, to my mind at least, looked like the ruffled feathers of a bird in close up. “Reactions to my work are very different and I’m fascinated by what people see in it,” reveals Elms. “My daughter and I were once at a museum opening where a pot I’d made was on display. Two women

were looking at it and when one expressed that she rather liked it, the other said, ‘Urgh! This is just disgusting! How could you live with it? It gives me the creepy-crawlies; it looks like insects are crawling all over it.’ So it really repulses some people. But I was thrilled that this woman had such a strong reaction to it, that it did something to her.”

Similar responses expressed to Elms include being reminded of looking down and seeing the ground alive with cockroaches or of fish scales, but people also find beauty in her work – petals, swirling water, feelings of healing and calm. Of her own take on her pieces, Elms reveals that she sees “the fields of crops

and grain that surround my studio in Wiltshire and how the wind catches the ears of wheat or barley. I also keep bees and it's amazing to see them swarm – all these little individuals cooperating as one. This is endlessly fascinating to me”.

The complexity of the work, which in the case of the *Flows* series sees individual clay beads placed on to a sheet of porcelain to create distinctive and monumental wall hangings, makes it incredibly powerful. There is a confidence to the form that is strikingly at odds with the fragility of something as delicate as porcelain, but Elms is entirely at peace with the dichotomy between the fragility and permanence of her work. “I think contradictions are really helpful in life because they remind us that there's an ambiguity there,” she says. “I think it's really dangerous to be certain about anything.” Elms is also constantly surprised by what she calls “those little miracles of making” – from her beads of clay, which are actually incredibly strong once fired, to the fact that on removing thin sheets of porcelain from the kiln, the sheet bends just enough for Elms to be able to place wooden slats under it so that she can move the fired work without it breaking.

#### STAMINA, RESILIENCE AND PERSISTENCE

There have been accidents, of course, and while Elms is philosophical about any breakages that do occur, there are times when she finds it difficult to smash up a broken piece. “I've got a trench outside my workshop where I throw in broken works,” reveals Elms. “Some things are really difficult to let go of, so I just place them in there and hope that the sheep that live out there will just tread them in for me. It is important to smash up pieces and move on, but I've got so many little gems, my favourite little bits of pieces that broke, hanging around the workshop.”

Being able to move on from the breakages is incredibly important however, and Elms believes that having come to ceramics later in life has been a blessing. “Having had a life and having some maturity helps hugely as an artist,” she acknowledges. “It's such a rollercoaster, especially in ceramics where there's a lot of accidents and things don't go to plan. You can't control the material very easily, so you encounter a lot of setbacks and this requires you to have some resilience. Stamina and persistence is crucial and I guess that usually comes with maturity.”

Elms took up ceramics seriously at the age of 40 after her husband bought her a potter's wheel for her birthday. Her previous career was in mental health and it's interesting to consider how her psychoanalytic training impacted her current artistic practice. For Elms, the answer lies at a subconscious level, in

having that confidence to just be with the art. “From a psychoanalytic perspective, you're really just listening to your patient; listening to what's happening, not just what they are saying but how they are saying it,” says Elms. “It's a really clever but difficult way of working. You have to tune into that place where you're listening in a certain way, really attending but not forcing it. And what has been an absolute revelation to me was that artists do this too.” For Elms, this came into sharper focus when she was tasked at college during her art foundation course to make something that wasn't something. “That was an interesting challenge,” reveals Elms. “because you begin to realise that you are being encouraged to try, to enquire, to be curious and to experiment.” She adds, “I find I spend hours staring at things, pulling things apart. I do so much daydreaming, which is a really good thing – it's not time wasted. Then the moment comes and you just have to go for it. And it's lovely when it takes you by surprise and you think 'wow', because you weren't actually trying to make anything at that point, it just happened.”

#### THE MODERN STORYTELLER

For artist Katharine Morling, who calls her work “one big art therapy project”, the process of creating for her, just like it is for Elms, is also about being with the material and working with the moment. “When I work, I'm trying to find a peacefulness. And it's in that moment when you are working in silence and it's just you and the piece – that's a very lovely thing. You're absorbed in what you're doing and hours can go by,” she says. Having a self-confessed “need to make” has ensured that Morling is a prolific artist and ceramicist, with a monochromatic aesthetic that is instantly recognisable and eminently collectable. Indeed, she describes her work as three-dimensional drawings conceived through the medium of clay, in which “inanimate objects have been given layers of emotion and embedded with stories, which are open to interpretation in the viewer's mind”.

Her sculptural pieces have encompassed everything from a work entitled *Poison Pen*, a typewriter with keys that appear to wobble – a comment on Morling's battle with words as a dyslexic – to *Stitched Up*, a piece that represents the artist's passion for making things – referencing the sewing basket given to her by her aunt in her childhood and the potential it represented. However, perhaps most important of all of Morling's creations is *Rest a While*, the only work that its maker herself has kept. “This piece is about home, which has always been a big issue for me,” she reveals. “It features a figure wearing a pope's mitre, sitting on a chair that can rock. The figure has a snail's

OPENING PAGE: MOBIUS ON EBONY SCULPTURE BY FENELLA ELMS  
THIS PAGE: FROM THE FLOWS SERIES BY FENELLA ELMS. BOTH IMAGES COURTESY OF FENELLA ELMS







shell on its back and it is holding a small house. I keep it in my bedroom and for me it represents a quest for home." Looking at the piece, one's initial response might be to view it as a comment on how a home offers sanctuary and security, but Morling reveals that its meaning is actually much more profound. "I think home is somewhere inside you. It's already there inside that person, not external to them. So, it's not religion, it's not what you carry on your back, it's not your house, it's not where you sit in life," she says. "I think I really know the answer now, but there was a big hole, a big non-understanding of what home was for a long time for me."

Morling's work is full of these little subtleties of meaning, so it comes as no surprise when she comments that, "Because the clay is so tactile, you can put your feelings in through your hands. It goes through your fingers and you touch every single piece. Your 'you-ness' goes into the clay and into the piece." What is slightly unexpected is that rather than feeling emotionally drained at the end of a day's work, Morling feels refreshed. "I honestly find it rejuvenating," she says. "I really enjoy making and I feel very refreshed when I've spent a day working with the clay... it's very transforming."

At the time of our interview and having recently become a mother, Morling reveals that she is about to step away from clay and her south London-based studio at Cockpit Arts for a few months. "I don't know whether this will be research or just play. But, from January, I am taking four months off to just mess around and see what happens," she says. "I'd like to go to some museums, go down to the river near my house, perhaps do some drawing outside, so that when I come back to the studio, I can start painting and working without any intention."

Morling reveals that she isn't necessarily anticipating this period developing into a body of work, although this wouldn't be the first time there has been a shift in her aesthetic. Her early work features colourful glazed pieces of fruit and clam shells, completely different from the unglazed 'drawn' works that she currently produces. Whether these four months will produce another complete change is difficult to judge, but it's certainly exciting to see what new chapter Morling might embark on. But, whatever path Morling chooses to go down, the ceramic arts is in debt to both her and Elms for demonstrating to the world that the medium can be so much more than vessels and pots.