

Sinuuous ceramics

Tina Vlassopoulos' conceptual sculptures have made a welcome return to the exhibition circuit in recent years. *Jane Audas* discovers more about the influences that keep her working with clay after more than 40 years



ABOVE: *Sisters*



Portrait of Claudia



Portrait of M



Portrait of Fanis



Portrait of Maureen



Portrait of Poppy

Tina Vlassopulos is having something of a second wind, career-wise. As recently as 2017 she was considering giving up ceramics, hanging up her kiln and retiring her hands from clay. But through a renewed enthusiasm (and thankfulness) for making – garnered via recent commissions and being accepted to show at *Collect Open* in 2019 – she is taking her work in new, thoughtful and exciting directions. Vlassopulos has spent, somewhat to her own surprise it seems, 43 years making ceramics and there is now, happily, no sign that she is going to stop anytime soon.

Her life-long ups and downs, love/hate relationship with clay has been interesting. From a young age she always knew she would do something creative. Third-generation British, but of Greek heritage, Vlassopulos was born to a British father (who went back to Greece aged seven, then returned to the UK for Army service and

stayed) and a Greek mother. Her home life was ‘quite Greek,’ she remembers. At school she felt a bit unhappy and dislocated, ‘they called me a foreigner,’ she recalls. Her safe haven (as it is for so many children of a creative persuasion) was the school art room. ‘I loved drawing. Loved making things.’

ENCOUNTERING CLAY

After school she chose a foundation course in East Ham – ‘at the other end of the District Line’ – to get a bit of distance from her family home in Ealing. Then she took a BA in Ceramics at Bristol Polytechnic – that little bit further away again. Oddly, until she arrived in Bristol, she hadn’t touched clay, but then in the second term of her foundation studies, students were required to choose a subject for their degree. ‘I saw ceramics on the list and thought OK, this could be interesting,’ she explains.

‘It sounded quite grounded, like it covered a lot of things. You could make soft things, hard things, functional things, sculptural things. I thought, I’ll just go for ceramics and see what it’s like.’

She was, she says, a ‘terrible’ and shy student. Her tutors included Gordon Baldwin, Mo Jupp, Walter Keeler and ‘all those amazing people.’ But the stand-out figure Vlassopulos remembers most was head of the department George Rainer. ‘He was one of the people I felt stuck with me,’ she says. ‘A wonderful man, really calm and non-judgemental. He was like a father to all of us.’

In retrospect, the Bristol course was more suited to her than she realised and stood her in good stead for a career making conceptual ceramics. ‘I’ve always been interested in the symbolic meaning of a vessel. I think that was part of the Bristol ethos,’ she explains. ‘There were very few colleges at that time (1970s) that got away from the Japanese tradition, toward the non-functional. I remember

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Gordon Baldwin saying: “if you just make a little hole in it, it’s a vessel”. It opened up a world where you didn’t have to stick with making bowls. It freed you up.’

Vlassopulos still wonders, though, why she stuck with the course. ‘Even by the end I hadn’t really got the hang of it,’ she admits. ‘I don’t know why I didn’t just give up, but I’m very tenacious and really liked the challenge and the problem solving elements.’ After graduating she got a place at 401½ Studios on the Wandsworth Road, London, ‘which was a hub of creativity and a great place to start my career,’ she explains. Her work back then was quite different, more restrained than the signature sinuous shapes we know her for today. A job teaching school children to make organic pots led her, during her lunch break, to sit down and make two handbuilt pots. ‘I remember thinking, this is much more fun than making with coloured clays and pressing it into plaster moulds. And I continued to experiment with that.’

Vlassopulos was also working more with colour at that time too. Mixing oxides into the clay before wedging it. But arthritis in her hands put paid to that and she nearly decided to give up ceramics. Then, with the arthritis (thankfully) controlled, she received two ‘serendipitous’ commissions. These led her to relocate her studio to home and to become re-invested and revitalised about making ceramics once again. ‘I couldn’t give it up,’ she says. ‘I couldn’t imagine a life without making.’

CHANNELLING IDEAS

Newly emancipated in her relationship toward clay and making, Vlassopulos began to work with the material straight out of the bag, au naturel, which proved to be easier on her hands. Initially working from sketches, she then makes maquettes. ‘And then I just go for it.’

She can, she reveals, struggle to find inspiration for new work, so she channels other things that stimulate her into inspiration for her making. ‘The difficult thing is coming up with the initial concept,’ she explains. ‘If I go to see an opera, the ballet, contemporary dance or an exhibition, it frees up my brain so that I can come up with ideas.’ Even during lockdown, she was taking art classes and a course on classical music.

Vlassopulos can be found working in her small studio at home in London most days, often for long hours at a time. The handbuilding comes quite quickly and takes her a couple of hours. Then comes the burnishing, using a variety of spoons, to get a smooth surface with tonal variation. ‘I’ll do a lot of scraping and preparing the surface for burnishing. That takes a long time and it’s not the most exciting bit because you’ve already got the form, you are just refining it. It can take up to 12 hours to burnish a piece, over consecutive days. I can make two small or one large piece in a week,’ she explains. She is careful not to fill

up her studio with unsold pieces and only fires the pieces she feels are worth it.

Really hitting her creative stride these days, the work for her recent *Conversations with Friends* installation at *Collect Open* (then extended and shown at Caroline Fisher Projects in Norwich) was possibly her best, most formed work yet. Based on portraits of her friends, Vlassopulos began the series by writing down qualities of each person. ‘I contemplated the friend for hours on end and made lists of their attributes,’ she explains. From the general to the specific, she then made each ‘portrait’ with reference to those qualities, morphed into shapes.

One of her oldest friends, Sophie, whom she has known for six decades, was a vessel accompanied by six shapes – or secrets. ‘I realised I’d known Sophie for so long that I knew lots of her secrets,’ she explains. ‘One day when we were in primary school, she whispered to me, “I forgot to wear knickers this morning”, which really impressed me because I was brought up in a very regimented, responsible house.’ So, for *Conversations* she made a little pair of pants ‘with frilly bits’ and put them in one of the six shapes. Apologies to Sophie then, that one of her secrets is now revealed.

Vlassopulos is undoubtedly a maker who has had an ‘interesting’ relationship with her chosen medium of clay. Many makers have – a creative career is rarely an easy career – but not everyone is as forthcoming about that struggle. She admits that there have been highs and lows in her career, but luckily at this time things seem to be on the up. For Vlassopulos, the unalloyed love of her life, ceramics, developed slowly, over a very long time. Giving truth to the popular adage that things worth having are worth waiting for. ☺

For more details visit tinavlassopulos.com
Her work will be part of Material Conversations at jaggedart, 29 September–16 November 2020; jaggedart.com and Started it in England: Leach and Hamada, in Two Ways at Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan, until 8 November 2020; mashiko-museum.jp



Portrait of Sophie

TINA'S PATH

- 1973: Foundation, East Ham College of Technology
- 1977: BA (Hons) Ceramics, Bristol Polytechnic
- 1980: solo exhibition, British Council, Athens
- 1990: Texas Instruments Arts Award
- 1991: solo exhibition, Contemporary Ceramics, London
- 1992: Hellenic Foundation Arts Award
- 2002: Soing Award, International Festival of Postmodern Ceramics, Varazdin, Croatia
- 2006: Award of Merit, Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramic Award, Australia
- 2009: Honourable Mention, 5th World Ceramic Biennale, Korea
- 2010: 24 British Potters, Goldmark Gallery, Uppingham, Rutland
- 2014: *Vessels: The Spirit of Modern British Ceramics*, Mashiko Museum, Japan
- 2017: *Sexy Ceramics*, Keramiemuseum Pricessehof, Netherlands
- 2019: *Conversations with Friends, Collect Open*, London
- 2020: *Re-Flourish*, jaggedart, London



Sophie's Secrets