

Mary Kaun-English

Tim Saunders describes her pit-firing process



WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY makers out there it is important to set yourself apart from the masses by doing something different. Mary Kaun-English, the UK, Surrey based sculptor, does just this.

Her affordable and distinctive pit-fired ceramics, inspired by Neolithic standing stones, the work of Barbara Hepworth and the organic, can be found in galleries and exhibitions throughout the UK. Although American born, Kaun-English absorbs inspiration from Britain's woodlands and the Cornish coastline. Her respect for the natural world is mirrored in her experimental low firing ceramics practice. Recent works include handbuilt clay vessels and sculptures influenced by the ancient North American Indians, her biological forefathers.

"My work is created using Ashraf Hanna Super White Raku Clay; although my work is not Raku, I use Raku clay because it is heavily grogged and this helps with the rapid temperature influx, which occurs when firing work in this manner," explains Mary, who is based at Portland Studios next to National Trust woodland in the Surrey Hills. "It is handbuilt using slabs and is burnished before initial bisque firing at 920 to 950°C. The second firing of these pieces occurs in an open fire; (more frequently happening on the Cornish seafront) exposing the porous clay to the smoke given off by the burning of organic materials used to fuel the fire. The results are organic vessels and sculptures painted by nature herself."

Kaun-English's sculptures always have an aperture, which allows light to pass through the form, creating a sense of spiritual depth. "My intention is to create work that speaks of nature's balance and power," she says, adding that it can take between three to four weeks to produce a single piece. Last year Kaun-English was commissioned to produce two large *Phase* pieces for a hotel in Beijing, measuring 52 cm in diameter.

Aside from making, Kaun-English also focuses on passing on her valuable skills, for which she has been officially recognised as the Heritage Crafts Trainer of the Year 2015. The award is an acknowledgment that she has passed on craft skills to others with enthusiasm, knowledge and experience.

"Running workshops and demonstrating is a good way of passing on skills and creating a loyal following," explains Mary. "I conduct pit-firing workshops three times a year around the South of England and conduct a live demonstration on Porthmeor Beach, St Ives, Cornwall as part of the September Arts Festival. This year was the fifth consecutive year I have done



Facing page: Mary Kaun-English pit firing.

Above: *Advocate*. 2014. Pit-fired ceramics. 26 x 23 x 9 cm.



Top left and above: *Pit firing at St Ives, Cornwall. 2014.*
 Right: *Inukshuk. 2014.*
Pit-fired ceramics. 40 x 16 x 9 cm.

so. "During the workshops I give a comprehensive talk of the process. Participants then create their own work to be pit-fired the following week. At the St Ives firing I give a talk on this ancient process and the contemporary use as an art medium – the following day hundreds of people visit the beach to watch the process."

Pit-firing fits with what Kaun-English wishes to say with her work. "My intention is to express the strength and life affirming forces of nature. Using abstract forms and vessels in the sustainable pit-firing process, I capture the visual chemical essence of fire. The energy of the elements leaves the material with depth and a narrative. My fire pits are approximately 75 cm deep and one metre in diameter if circular and one metre by 50 cm if rectangular. On the beach, the sides need to be shored up with metal tins.

"The bottom of the pit is filled with 10 cm of wood shavings; salt is added to the shavings," explains Mary. "Pinecones are put on top of the shavings and the prepared ceramic pieces are placed on top. Wood and flammable materials are added to the pit, which will be set alight. Materials are added to the pit and placed touching the ceramics to add colour. These include: salt and seaweed, which produce a yellow/orange colour; copper wire/copper scrubbies produce red, banana peel equals a peach colour, copper carbonate for red and cobalt for blue. After the pit is prepared, it will be lit. Around half an hour later metal tins are placed on top of the pit to slow down the fire and increase the heat inside." The pit burns throughout the night and is cool enough to be opened the following morning.



“Excavating the pit the next morning is often the most exciting part of the process; to discover how nature has painted the ceramics.” Kaun-English finds that no two pieces are ever the same; all work is unique. “I am never exactly sure how the firing will turn out; the fire is affected by temperature, humidity, wind, air pressure and the quality of the burning materials. Breakages are common due to the extreme temperature changes.”

She adds: “The process of pit-firing, facilitated accordingly, is a communal and spiritual experience. I have just undertaken a long-term communal project that would bring together more than 300 people in one communal firing. Aiming for completion in October 2016 (with fundraising time included, this might be ambitious) the first project would be set in Surrey, including disadvantaged people. The project is called *The Village* and each participant would construct a ‘ceramic house’ that would eventually be fired in the open air, in one large pit. The pieces would then be exhibited together in a gallery environment. The benefits of this project would be group participation, camaraderie in a spiritually uplifting experience. What is more uplifting than standing watching the fire, which is painting the sculptures, created by the hundreds of people standing there with you? An added benefit would be the ideas, techniques and information shared.”

Mary Kaun-English says that children and adults are enthralled with the pit firing process. “For children when I conduct workshops or when I visit schools as an artist in residence, the pit-firing process covers many areas of the curriculum: chemistry, history, archaeology and art. Adults love to express themselves using clay and are intrigued by working with the open air firing process.”

Tim Saunders is a journalist who enjoys writing about a variety of subjects including art, ceramics, travel and motoring. He was the business and motoring editor at the *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, UK.

Right: *Vessel*. 2014. Pit-fired ceramics.
20 x 19 x 19 cm.

Top: *Mary Kaun-English pit firing*.
Above: *Pit firing at Portland studios*.

Born and raised in Southern California, US as a young girl Mary spent extensive periods of time exploring the then undeveloped San Rafael foothills. Feeling at one with the natural world; the red soil beneath her bare feet, the clear hot air surrounding her and the sense of earthly spirituality filling her soul, Mary Kaun-English explored. After studying architecture in Los Angeles, she moved to England and earned a BA (Hons) in the Practice and Theory in Fine Art and Design, from Wimbledon College of Art (www.marykaunenglish.com).