

# Arts And Antiques

## *Claire Baker: Ceramicist & Assemblage Artist* by Abby Cronin

I've seen all manner of quirky art on my recent travels round the fairs and galleries in London. Some are mesmerising and genuinely original, others appear to set out deliberately to shock. But when I encountered Claire Baker's ceramic art, I fell for it! Great stuff, I thought. Must try to get an insider's account of Claire's journey into the art world and find out how she has been so successful just one year after completing her degree course in 3D Design Ceramics. We met and

*Claire Baker*



she told me her story. The story began when a tutor introduced her to the work and life of the American assemblage artist, Joseph Cornell (1903-1972).

Reclusive Cornell was a compulsive collector who led a profoundly solitary life. He obtained objects from flea markets, junk shops, obsolete materials which he went on to give order and meaning. He filled boxes with ephemera and souvenirs which served as a catalogue to structure his thoughts and dreams. Fixated by film celebrities and women, Cornell's energy was directed to sealing visions of glamour and personal memorabilia in boxes. His biographer Deborah Solomon has written: "There are many different reasons why people are moved to collect objects. For some, collecting is a display of affluence....For others, collecting is not a material activity so much as an emotional one and this was true of Cornell. To collect is by definition to collect the past and Cornell's collectibles officered him a route into the past...." (p. 48) Art critics at the time associated Cornell with the surrealist movement. But others saw him as a naive maverick bohemian. Finally, in 1967 aged sixty-four years old, Cornell received major recognition in the American art world. Two retrospective shows, one at the Pasadena Art Museum and one at the Guggenheim in New York City established his assemblage art as works of importance. One critic wrote that the Guggenheim show was "a historic event: the first satisfying measure of work by an artist who has become legendary in his lifetime." (Solomon, p334).

Cornell's art was a catalyst for Claire Baker. In the course of researching Joseph Cornell's life and work she was inspired and fascinated with Cornell's assemblage of collages and boxes. She set about adapting Cornell's aesthetic to her own techniques of ceramic design. As a student Claire had a free hand



*Candlestick*

in experimenting with different methods of ceramic production. Today her ceramics, paintings and boxes tell a multitude of stories. Hers is a personal visual narrative; a repertoire associated with pieces of old china and found objects. Once found, the objects soon become friends. And as friends they inspire Claire to repair and renew to give them another life. Her creative energy is embedded in each piece. She has embarked on an artistic journey, haunting junk shops, auctions and car boot sales, constantly on the lookout for items she can recycle and reassemble. As a highly skilled ceramicist, she turns vintage tableware, cutlery, candlesticks, watches, clocks, jewellery, boxes, and even feathers and dolls into quirky and unique one-off pieces. She applies transfers of insects, old maps, flowers, and faces to newly cast ceramic cups and saucers, cutlery, platters, brooches, jugs and vases. There is a sculptural, somewhat surrealist feeling about her objects. Each piece is unique. They are collages in clay.

In describing her work, Claire explains, "People think they are made of papier maché, but they're not. There's a story about my making. I think of them as drawings and 3D collages. I build layers – a collage of thought." Her artist statement explains it all:

*My work is made as a response to a lifelong passion for Victorian china and chintz. The large pieces are slab built recreations of my drawing studies. The smaller pieces are press moulded directly from my collection of vintage crockery. The distinctive 'Broken' edges are created as a result of Press moulding into a ceramic object rather than a plaster mould, it does not release the clay body as evenly; Cracks and splits appear during the making process as a direct response to engaging with Antique china. Each piece is fired a minimum of 5 times, layering each time with Slips, Oxides, Glazes (including volcanic), Decals and Lustre's. I apply my glazes with brushes and rollers therefore leaving small areas purposely unglazed. My collection of vintage ephemera spills over into the design: Spoons, Candlestick bases, buttons, buckles and other curios are not only used for moulds or creating relief pattern, but also combine with the ceramics to create new objects.*

A selection of Claire's original work is pictured here. They are bound to make you smile. Breakfast at Tiffany's is a charming pun on what you might expect to find on a tray from room service in a five star hotel. Her Bluebird Plates evoke candy box designs from early 20th century America. Refashioning old pieces of jewellery into wearable art is popular today. She inserts her ceramic pieces into recycled vintage brooches seen here. Her old teaspoons are given a new life as handles after she hammers them flat and joins them to her delightfully funky cups and saucers -see Trio For Tea. And it is likely that you will find her Cutlery in one of her boxes. There is an edgy charm about the Somewhere to Go box assemblage. Have a closer look at her brooches, vases and dishes. Who is looking at whom? This theme appears in several of Claire's pieces such as The Face of Time and in her Moonface Sugar Bowl.



Jug



A Trio For Tea

Claire's quirky ceramics are attractive, modestly priced and sell easily in galleries, fairs and exhibitions. Soon after completing her degree course, she was selected to exhibit her work in New Designers, 2009, a highly competitive annual event for new design graduates who show their work to industry employers, the media, and trend predictors. This event is held in London, at the Business Design Centre in Islington. Here she sold her first piece to the Anthropologie Gallery in Rockefeller Centre in New York City. And her cup and saucer trio (seen here) went to Carouge, Geneva where it featured in an international ceramics competition. Since then Claire has shown and sold her work in a variety of galleries. She featured at the annual Art In Clay exhibition at Hatfield House in August 2009. And at the Affordable Art Fair in Battersea in March 2010, her ceramics were so popular on the Barn Galleries stand, virtually all her pieces sold out on the preview evening. The dealer had to ring her to ask for more stock. Because Claire is so highly motivated to continue to supply her work to different outlets, she manages to keep producing, an amazing feat for a one-woman maker. You can find her work at New Designers 2010, where she has been invited back in the category New Designers, One Year On.. Claire will show her new assemblage series entitled: The Seven Deadly Sins for one week when New Designers 2010 opens 30th June. Recently The Daily Telegraph magazine featured her work at the Imagine Gallery near Sudbury, Suffolk. It sold immediately. The New Ashgate gallery in Farnham, Surrey will take commissions for Claire's work.

Here is a clever young newcomer with just the right balance between entrepreneurial marketing skills and artistic output. While still a student, she won awards for her business plan and a travelling bursary to go to China. Barely one year on from completing



Cutlery



Jewellery



her ceramics degree course, Claire Baker has launched herself successfully. She's an up and coming star travelling swiftly into the hectic and competitive market of ceramic and assemblage art. Look out for her work; you are bound to find a piece which can sit comfortably in your home.

Exhibitions of Interest:  
Joseph Cornell & Karen Kilmnik  
Spruth Magers Gallery, London  
June 9 - August 27, 2010  
7A Grafton Street, London W1S 4EJ  
www.spruthmagers.com  
New Designers 2010  
Part 1- 1-4 July 2010  
Part 2- 8-11 July 2010  
Business Design Centre  
Islington, London N1 OQH  
www.newdesigners.com  
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