

The background of the page is a complex abstract ceramic artwork. It features a central vertical band of white and grey marbled patterns, flanked by various sections of color and texture. On the left, there are black and white marbled areas with some yellow and pink accents. On the right, there are sections of yellow, pink, and red with star-like patterns, and a large black section at the top right. The overall composition is layered and textured, typical of ceramic art.

First LOVE

Creator of this year's Overseas Award, ceramicist Judy McKenzie speaks to Mark Brierley about her lifelong love of the medium and the circuitous route she has taken to get to where she is today

Among the many awards handed out at this year's Annual Music Competition, one that caught the eyes of the assembled audience more than every other was a beautiful plaque, forged in deep blacks, whites, reds and silvers, which was handed by HRH Princess Alexandra to the winner of this year's Overseas Award, violist Alexander McFarlane.

Designed by Royal College of Art (RCA) student Judy McKenzie, the plaque is a part of her graduate exhibition, making use of lesser-known Japanese techniques kintsugi and nerikomi, combined to create an arresting piece unlike anything ever selected for the Overseas Award before, since this marriage of music and visual arts came together in 1985.

It is also something of a departure for Judy, who has spent much of her time since leaving school in the 1970s creating very different work, only latterly as a professional ceramic artist, having worked in a variety of industries quite apart from her dream of becoming as ceramicist as a schoolgirl.

"Something just clicked with me with ceramics at school," explains Judy. "I just loved it. I took it up and never put it down. I took my O level in ceramics, you had to make a box with a lid. It went off to a place near the British Museum and they kept it, saying they wanted it for an exhibition. So that set me apart a bit, I thought to myself for the first time, perhaps I do make nice stuff.

"But when I left school it was all fairly pragmatic, I was advised to give up my art as a full-time occupation and go and get a proper job, and then just dabble in art as a hobby. I listened to them unfortunately, and so off I went and had varying jobs. A lovely job at the Inner Temple in the Treasurer's Office, and then I joined the printing industry, in a very busy production office."

However, the artistic spark never dimmed and it was the advent of the Apple Mac that allowed Judy to find a creative outlet while working in printing. "We were so busy in the office I had to step in pretty quickly,



so I became an Apple Mac designer, virtually overnight, on a screen about *this* big," she says making a tiny square between her thumbs and forefingers.

"I stayed in the industry for a good few years. Eventually I bought a Mac of my own and left the industry, to work from home as a freelancer. I had my own customers, did my own designs, it was great, I did that for about ten years, and then I just thought I need to get back to ceramics."

The itch was still there and creating works in her spare time wasn't enough to scratch it. "I had always dabbled but I hadn't actually taken it very seriously, because I thought everything that I was making was insignificant, didn't mean anything, and I didn't want to make trivial artifacts that only my mother pretended to like! So I gave up dabbling, but I thought I've got to go back to it, and take it seriously."

Back to school

And go back to it she did; first with a City and Guilds ceramics course, followed by a chance encounter with an old school friend that saw her decide to take things to the next level. "I met a friend who I hadn't seen for 40 years and she told me she was doing a

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degree in fine art at the local FE College. She persuaded me to come along and meet the course leader for the 3D design degree. I went along to the college and that was it, I was hooked.

It was just like going into a sweet factory, all the fabulous equipment for ceramics, glass, and jewellery, unlike anything I'd seen before. So I joined, did that for three years, thoroughly enjoyed it, but didn't feel like I'd finished, I wanted to carry on."

After college and her BA, there was really only one destination worth heading for, the Royal College of Art. "I applied to the RCA and didn't get in first time. So instead, I had a year in my garden studio/shed, making. By this time, I had a few customers, so I was making for them. I went back for my second interview after a year and I was accepted."

Safely admitted, Judy knew this was an opportunity she didn't want to waste. Her years away from ceramics and formal education have given her a different perspective on her time at the RCA. "It was such a privilege to be there among such a brilliant cohort of makers. As a mature student, I pushed myself, mentally and physically, I wanted to succeed, and I didn't want to take it for granted," she explains. ●





“In the BA, all the young kids were doing that and I was trying to tell them to come every day and make the most of it. I was getting up at 5am to do my sketchbooks so I would be ready for whatever they wanted to teach us that day. With the MA, they’re so much younger than me, they work like crazy, and I think I work hard! But I think because you’re older, you find different ways to do things, to pace yourself. There’s a different method.”

Looking east

That method revealed itself in two lesser-known Japanese ceramic techniques, nerikomi and kintsugi, which were a world away from the type of pieces Judy had been creating up to that point. “When I first arrived at the

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RCA, I was making big stoneware pots with big splashes of glaze all over them, because I love round form and volume. It’s lovely to be able to put your arms around a pot and really become engrossed with its making.

“In the first year, Felicity Aylieff, who teaches the making and decorating course, put a band of coloured clays together and, very carefully and artfully, threw it on the table, creating this fabulous pattern. I just thought, that’s very nice, so I researched techniques for using coloured clays on YouTube. Literally all it is is colour and clay, and very strong thumbs! Lots of kneading going on, colouring the clays, mixing them together, getting the gradation of colour from white to black in lots of increments.”

That, in a nutshell, is the art of nerikomi, fusing coloured clays together to create pattern, which runs throughout the porcelain from which a form is made. The pattern is not superficial, but becomes the DNA of the material.

But, with new techniques come new challenges. Working with porcelain in such a way meant that pieces would often crack when fired in the kiln.

“When the fissures started happening on the plaques, I was absolutely devastated. Because it’s porcelain and I’m pushing the process it to its very limit, way beyond where it wants to be, they started cracking,

but the kintsugi is such a beautiful solution.” Another Japanese technique, which Judy had first hit upon when making a stoneware pot for her BA show a few years earlier, kintsugi is a way of repairing any cracks and making them into a beautiful feature of the ceramic. The Overseas Award features a beautiful silver vein running from the heart of the plaque out to its edge, gradually widening. This crack appeared during the firing process, but kintsugi treats the fissure as part of the history of the piece, rather than something to try and disguise. So Judy used silver clay to fill the crack and create the standout feature of the plaque.

“It’s come full circle. I was repairing work with kintsugi for my BA and I’ve ended doing kintsugi again now, which could mean that I just crack everything!”

The future

With the circle squared and her time at the RCA at an end, where does Judy see herself going from here? “I have a home studio, where I have quite a few commitments already. I’ve bought a kiln, so I will be sorting my life out from there, which will be fabulous. Yes, I will carry on, I will revisit the possibilities of using a mixture of clays as well I think, stoneware and porcelain. There’s so much to explore, it’s infinite!”

