



# It's all about the clay

Finding ceramics later in life, Judy McKenzie has developed a range of Nerikomi pieces with a free-form, abstract effect. *Ellen Bell* discovers more

With her work being shown both nationally and internationally and with a solo show imminent, Judy McKenzie's pleasure in her new-found career as a ceramicist is palpable. And at the age of 66, it is one that has been a long time coming.

Growing up in Essex, McKenzie remembers her hands were never still: 'I was always making things; I even coiled a big pot in the living room.' But when it came to deciding on a life-path, art, it seems, was not an option. 'I was at school in the 1960s when there was a lot of employment opportunities and nothing was fluffy,' she explains. 'So, when the careers advice people told me I would never make a living from art and that I had better get a proper job and just do art as a hobby – unfortunately, I listened to them.'

The search for the proper job began with a stint at secretarial college, which was 'an absolute disaster' and ended with gainful employment in the print industry,



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Group of Nerikomi forms, 2021 **ABOVE:** Norfolk Beach Sunset I and II **RIGHT:** Stoneware moon jar with gold foil kintsugi, 2015 **BELOW RIGHT:** Nerikomi Wall Plaque with silver kintsugi, 2018

which eventually led to a directorship of a small graphic design company. Then, while toying with thoughts of retirement, McKenzie met an old school friend who suggested she enrol on the 3D Design & Craft degree course at Havering College. She hesitated at first: 'It really wasn't on my agenda. But I went along and met the course leader and from that moment I was hooked.' Winding down her business, McKenzie threw herself into the course. 'I was like a two-year-old; I must have worn them all out,' she says. 'Being a mature student didn't worry me – I just did my thing. This was my turn and I had the best three years.'

#### POSSIBILITIES OF CLAY

Thanks to her 'switched-on' course tutor who would habitually invite Royal College of Art (RCA) alumni to come and teach, McKenzie was not only exposed to the possibilities of clay, metal and glass but also benefitted from the tutelage of world-class makers. Ian McIntyre, renowned for his re-engineering of the classic Brown Betty teapot, was one such tutor and it was he who suggested that McKenzie apply to the RCA. 'I pooh -poohed it, typical me. But at the end of the course I applied and didn't get in.'

Undeterred, and buoyed up after having a piece spotted by an interior designer, McKenzie promptly set up a studio at home – 'basically a big shed in my garden' – to produce work. The piece that had attracted this attention was a kiln-shattered, stoneware moon jar that McKenzie repaired using a rather idiosyncratic form of kintsugi – the Japanese art of mending broken pottery. 'It was unglazed, only bisque-fired, so I couldn't use the pure

kintsugi technique with urushi lacquer,' she explains. 'Instead I used an epoxy putty and gold leaf. Now whenever one of my bowls has a fissure I tend to make good with silver, which requires extra firing and a lot of work. You become a bit of a jeweller.'

Then, while happily working in her garden shed, McKenzie got a call from her ex-tutor advising her to re-apply to the RCA. She did and this time got in.

'Everybody laughs when I talk about the RCA,' she says. 'I basically spent two years crying and eating chocolate.' Having blossomed within the 'delightful' atmosphere of the degree course, McKenzie found herself in the deep end and on her own. 'I had been in awe of the RCA, and there I was trying to rise up and meet the challenge of it. I did a lot of soul-searching. And I was 60 and exhausted.'

Although she was out of her comfort zone McKenzie nevertheless talks of her time there as life-affirming: 'You are taught by people who are at the very top of their game, who challenge you to be the best you can be.'

#### FINDING DIRECTION

While attending one of Felicity Aylieff's masterclasses during her first year at the RCA, McKenzie encountered the Japanese art of Nerikomi. Meaning 'to knead', the technique involves creating repeated, kaleidoscopic-like patterns with coloured clay. 'Felicity just slapped this blue and white porcelain on the table. I watched it break up and feather on the edge and I was totally transfixed,' she explains. It initiated a period of intense research culminating in the discovery of Curtis Benzel's YouTube



*I concentrate on getting the pattern all the way through the clay. It is not just a surface pattern, it's the material*





ABOVE LEFT: *Spring has Sprung Wall Plaque* (detail) ABOVE RIGHT: *Bluebell Wood Wall Plaque* (detail)

videos. 'He works with the translucency of porcelain and his gradations of colour are stunning.' But it was his use of a black key line that most fascinated McKenzie: 'It's a bit like the outline you see in comic books, so you are almost colouring by numbers,' she explains.

Despite this, it was Aylieff that compelled this 'timid' student to focus on Nerikomi in her second year. 'I thought I would re-visit my large pots with dribble glazes, but Felicity said no, no, no and spotted a piece of Nerikomi I had worked on while watching one of Benzel's videos. She asked what it was and said: "That's quite extraordinary, did you enjoy it?" Yes, I said, and she responded, "Well, that is what you are going to be doing."'

Still endeavouring to master the technique, McKenzie restricted herself to making two-dimensional plaques with a limited, gradated palette of black, white, grey, Naples Yellow and red. 'I wanted to concentrate on getting the pattern all the way through the clay. It is not just a surface pattern, it's the material.' And while celebrating the precise, regular patterns that practitioners like Dorothy Feibleman achieve, McKenzie was after (and continues to be) a more free-form, abstract effect: 'You get these lovely distortions. And because you roll it out between two cloths so that it doesn't stick to the rolling pin, there is this marvellous reveal when you unwrap it.'

#### SEEKING PERFECTION

Following the MA and eager to break out into three dimensions but not knowing how, McKenzie enrolled on a course at West Dean College where she learnt Tebineri. 'The technique involves bringing a bowl up from a flat

piece,' she explains. 'I loved it. I make all my bowls using this process now, although when I got a bit bolder I made a mould for the larger ones.'

With the perfection of her finished pieces belying the time, effort and skill involved to make them (it can take up to two weeks to prepare a colour palette of clays), McKenzie talks of the frustration of 'asking porcelain to do something it doesn't want to do'. There is the challenge of managing the drying process and the inevitable splits, as well as the slow fastidiousness of her post-firing polishing regime where, in order to achieve an impeccable satin finish, she will use the whole range of diamond pads and, more recently, finish with exhibition wax. 'I love to look at a beautifully glazed piece but for me it is all about the clay,' she says. 'What a waste it would be if I glazed over it.' McKenzie is equally sanguine about not throwing: 'I have always hand built. I can throw but nothing that I would be proud of. I certainly wouldn't pass the wire-down-the-middle test,' she says, laughing.

With plans to try a grogged porcelain (a more robust material) so that she can make large-scale pieces and intrigued to see the effect of the speckle on her colours, McKenzie continues to nudge herself out of her comfort zone. 'I suffered from impostor syndrome when I was at the RCA, in awe of all those giddy heights I thought I would never achieve. Well, I am walking towards them now and I have to pinch myself. I am in a place I never thought I would be. It's just delightful.' ☑

For more details visit [judymckenzie.com](http://judymckenzie.com)

Images: courtesy of the artist; Paul Hammond; Matthew Booth; Esther Segarra

#### MCKENZIE'S CAREER

- **1976–2002:** graphic designer
- **2002–2014:** Director of Planet 47 Design & Print
- **2011–2015:** BA in 3D Design & Craft (1st class), Havering College, Essex
- **2016–2018:** MA in Ceramics & Glass, Royal College of Art, London
- **2015:** set up studio practice in Brentwood, Essex; awarded Highly Commended 'One to watch' by *Craft & Design Magazine* at *New Designers*, London; exhibited at *Arts Thread, Handmade in Chelsea*, London
- **2015–2016:** showed at Celia Colman Gallery
- **2016:** exhibited in *Emerging Makers* at Bils & Rye, Harrogate
- **2018:** work selected for the *Royal Overseas League Trophy Award*
- **2019:** exhibited at *London Art Fair* with Thrown Gallery
- **2019, 2020 & 2021:** exhibited at Byre Gallery, Cornwall; exhibited at The Burlington Arcade with *Future Icons*
- **2021:** featured in *Colour in Clay*, Watts Gallery, Surrey; represented at *Culture Object*, New York
- **2022:** solo show at Craft Co, Southwold



ABOVE: *Nerikomi Wall Plaque: Lightning Strike*, 2018, in a presentation box  
BELOW: First Nerikomi bowl, 2018

