

Capturing the natural beauty of Wiltshire

Ceramic sculptor Elaine Peto shares her inspiration with Tim Saunders.

FOR THE past seven years, award-winning ceramic animal sculptor Elaine Peto has lived in a period brick farm cottage near Lodgershall on the edge of Salisbury Plain. She finds much inspiration for her work from the local countryside.

Her day starts by walking Meg, an eight-year-old springer spaniel. Wiltshire is all about the countryside and the walking for Elaine. "There are some lovely walks in this part of the country and we often walk near the ranges on Salisbury Plain," she says. "It's lovely and open and in the summer months it really can feel like an African plain with the heat and the intensely dry landscape. In July and August there are a variety of insects and butterflies, while in the late summer Salisbury Plain is covered in beautiful wildflowers."

"I see bats, owls, limes, deer and birds of prey. I love the countryside and regularly find inspiration here. I like to collect bones, shells, feathers and other natural found objects that I can incorporate in my work or use to give me information about an animal."

Elaine, who won the prestigious Society of Women Artists (SWA) sculpture prize in 2017, adds: "Skulls are a really good example of something that can give you so much information on how to build the head of that creature from the placement of the eyes and ears, to the shape of the jaw. I have made one or two skulls in porcelain as they are such beautiful shapes."

After her daily dose of nature, she will then make her way to the studio, 10 minutes away, where she starts sculpting. "I'll put the coffee pot on and listen to BBC Radio 4, then get to work. I will either start on a new piece of work or continue working on a piece already part-made. Some days are firing and glazing days; glazing a full kiln will normally take me a day or two."



Elaine starts by rolling out a slab of clay - like you would for pastry - but on different textured materials including linen, which then give the finished sculpture a particular surface.

"If making a standing piece I then take the slab and pull the shape of the animal's back out from the inside. That piece is left to dry until it can hold its shape. The piece is put on a support made of a column of tins and wood. I build the legs, shoulders, rump, neck and head with more slabs and leave again to dry slightly. When I have the basic shape constructed I carve into the clay and add more to create the finer details. When it's finished, I leave it to dry thoroughly after which it is fired to 1,000 degrees Celsius."

"After firing, it is coloured with glazes, oxides and underglazes, and fired again to 1,250 or 1,260 Celsius (stoneware firing temperature). I use small amounts of glaze along with the oxides and underglazes, so most pieces are matt with small amounts of glaze on the nose and eyes."

'I love to try and capture the spirit of the animal'

Elaine has always had a passion for nature.

"It was not so much a decision to make animals as a natural course for me to go on. I love to try and catch the spirit of the animal in my work."

There are certain creatures that lend themselves particularly well to being the subjects for hand building: horses, bulls, bats and certain dog breeds, and so her work



is divided into three areas: dogs, farm animals and wild animals. There is no set time it can take to produce a piece, either. "Sometimes, I work very quickly and can make a smaller piece in a day, or it can take me a week. Then work has to dry out before it is fired twice."

Elaine's larger pieces can measure up to two feet tall or long but she also makes small pieces that are just a few inches in size.

Favourite clays for Elaine are stoneware and porcelain. "I have a crank clay, which has a high grog content, making it ideal for throwing, hand building, sculpture and large tiles. This is particularly good for what I do - I buy it from Spain."

Clay is fine as long as it doesn't freeze, but Elaine's studio is in a barn so there is a big roof space and plenty of glass, making it difficult to heat. "I have been known to tie a hot water bottle to my back!"

Unsurprisingly, many Wiltshire residents have bought Elaine's work. "Most notably for me, a dairy farm has a number of my farm animals in their farmhouse kitchen. They have two of my cows, a pig, a sheep and a ram. They saw my work in a local gallery and bought the pieces in drips and drabs."

Making ceramics plays havoc with the back, she admits. "My bad back started after I drove a van to Cumbria where I was exhibiting. The brake, accelerator and clutch pedals were in an awkward position for me and that's what started my problems. The way I work also tends to put strain on my back and I now have an iffy disc. I go to an osteopath in Tisbury; I've been going to them for years." Elaine also does yoga, which helps her back.

Making pottery since the age of 12, Elaine attended Saturday morning pottery classes where students were encouraged to make pots. "I soon deviated from the brief by making my first two animals: two horses about 10 inches tall."

She went on to study sculpture for her degree at Exeter College of Art & Design, studying animals via livestock markets and the abattoir, using the media of



photography and drawing to record the structure of the carcass. "On leaving art college, I couldn't afford to have work cast in a foundry, or the equipment to hand to work in plastics. So, I joined a pottery class in order to use the clay facilities and found that I took to the medium. I continued with it and purchased a small, ancient kiln to get me started."

Elaine usually has a couple of pieces on the go at any one time so that she can work on one piece while the other is drying in readiness for the next stage.

Her work ranges in price from £60 to £1,000 and she does consider commissions. "I turn them down if I don't think they will work," she says. "I never want someone to go away disappointed with a piece that has been made for them. People's pets can be tricky as I am not a portrait artist."

'Mythology has inspired much of her work'

Mythology has inspired some of Elaine's work, such as her Minotaur and Centaur pieces, and she would like to return to these subjects.

Over the last year she has exhibited at Contemporary Crafts at Bovey Tracey, Art In Clay, Hatfield, and Art In Clay, Farnham, plus open studio events in May and December.

Her work can be found in galleries across the UK and France, as well as numerous private collections throughout Europe and has even appeared

on television: *Collectors*

Lar on Channel 4,

Country Ways and

Midsomer Murders,

both on ITV. Last

year, Elaine's pieces sold

in an exhibition at White Horse

Bookshop in Marlborough.

The next 12 months will see

Elaine's new website unveiled.

her work showcased in a number

of exhibitions and, in May, she will

open her studio. "I also have to keep

supplying my galleries with stock so I

never get bored," she concludes.

• www.elainepeto.co.uk

Elaine working on a sculpture in her workshop. She has been working with clay and making pottery since she attended Saturday morning pottery classes when she was 12-years-old

