

Elaine Peto

Tim Saunders



Bull, detail, stoneware, L 64 cm x h 43 cm, 2019

Clay animals by award winning British sculptor Elaine Peto can be found in galleries and collections in the UK and France and despite the ongoing pandemic her sales are holding up. "I have to keep supplying my galleries with work so I never get bored," she says.

Elaine's larger pieces can measure up to two feet tall or long but she also makes small sculptures 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 and will hopefully still be able to do this once Brexit takes place.

"Skulls are a really good example of how to build the head of a particular creature from the placement of the eyes and ears to the shape of the jaw. I have made one or two skulls in porcelain and they are such beautiful shapes."

In 1986, she set up a studio in Hampshire and continued the study of agricultural animals. Each animal is individually made by the process of slab building in clay, i.e. rolling out a sheet of clay and forming the body, then gradually adding slab by slab to form the whole animal. The details are then remodelled until the animal is complete. It is biscuit fired, glazed and re-fired to stoneware.

"There are certain creatures that lend themselves particularly well to being the subjects for hand building: horses, bulls, hares and certain dog breeds." Her work is divided into three areas: dogs, farm animals and wild animals. "I have 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 is no set time it can take to produce a piece, either. Sometimes, I work very quickly and can make a smaller piece a day; or it can take me a week. Then work has to dry out before it is fired twice."

After her daily dose of nature she will make her way to the studio, 10 minutes from home. After putting the coffee pot on Elaine listens to BBC Radio 4 and starts sculpting. "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



Fox, stoneware, w 25 cm x h 46 cm, 2020

shape of the animal's back out from 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 tin 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 at 1,000 degrees Celsius. After firing it is coloured with glazes, oxides and underglazes and fired again to 1,250 or 1,260 degrees 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."

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!"

Many local residents have bought her 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 my work 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." She also does yoga, which helps her back.

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

Basset Hound, stoneware, L 38 cm x h 20 cm, 2018





Brazilian Tapir and Baby, h 23 cm x w 15,5 cm and h 7,5 cm x L 12,5 cm, 2018

think they won't work. 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 some of Elaine's work such as her Minotaur and Centaur pieces and she would like to return to these subjects. She has exhibited at Contemporary Crafts at Bovey Tracey, Art in Clay, Hatfield and Art in Clay, Farnham. Elaine opens her studio to the public in May and December. Her work can be found in numerous private collections throughout Europe and has even appeared on television: *Collection Lot* on Channel 4, *Country Ways* and *Midsomer Murders* both on ITV.

Encouragingly the pandemic has had little impact. "I have carried on fairly normally at work during the pandemic, as I work

on my own in my studio," she says. "It has been a blessing to have somewhere I can safely work giving some sense of normality to the week. My studio is large and airy so anyone wishing to visit has been able to by appointment. The galleries I have been supplying have sold really well over the summer; I think people have wanted to cheer themselves up with art works."

However, all exhibitions that Elaine had booked have been cancelled but she has used the time to do research and spend more time with nature.

She wishes to build more African animals and to incorporate other materials such as metals with ceramics that she finds on her walks through the Hampshire countryside with her nine year old Springer spaniel, Meg.

Elaine Peto

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Biography

Award winning Elaine Peto has been making pottery since the age of 12 when she 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 at Exeter College of Art & Design, from where she graduated in 1985. There she studied 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 their clay facilities and found that I took to the medium. I continued with it and purchased a small, ancient kiln to get started."

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In 2017 Elaine won the prestigious SWA (Society of Women Artists) sculpture prize.