

MEET THE MAKER

Photography Peter Atkinson Interview Catherine Coyle

Claudia Rankin Ceramicist

Now that my children are more or less grown up, I get into the studio most days. I'm usually working towards an exhibition or making ceramics for a commission. Being based so close to home can have its drawbacks; the studio is about eight steps from the back door, and I can easily get distracted by jobs in the house and garden. Dog walks are a regular part of the day and even the rainiest schlep along the river is good mulling-over time for whatever I'm working on in the studio. My mother was an antiques dealer, specialising in oriental porcelain. Helping out on her Portobello Road stall and going to auctions with her encouraged my love of decorative antiques and interiors. Luckily for me, art foundation courses in the 1980s had a minimal exam requirement; I was not a very academic pupil. Once I was on the foundation course at Wimbledon School of Art, I discovered how much making stuff and drawing was my thing. A day a week was dedicated to life drawing, and the sculpture modules set us off modelling full-size figures in clay. I went on to a degree in sculpture at Canterbury College of Art where there was a lot of hefty metal abstract sculpture being made. **Decorative was a dirty word.** We were lucky enough to have a full bronze casting set-up, though, so my degree show was mainly small, brightly patinated bronze sculptures and larger pieces in painted plaster and cement. This led me straight to an MA in sculpture at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. I loved the North-east and ended up marrying a fellow student, William Pym. We moved out to a smallholding in Northumberland and established two studios and three children. At that time, there was lots of urban regeneration going on around Newcastle and Gateshead and this brought in sculpture commissions and work on arts festivals. We began to ▶



[Above] Claudia Rankin at work in her studio. [Below] One of her animal candelabras





[Left] Putting the finishing touches to a caddy. [Below and bottom] This turnip plate and bee caddy are typical examples of Rankin's sought-after work



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accumulate animals – a dog, a cat, guinea pigs, a pony and a fair few hens. Once the children were at school, we moved into a nearby village and I had time to get on with making fabric collages. These were spotted by someone who recommended me to a gallery in London. I began to exhibit with Wilson Stephens & Jones, who stuck with me when I switched back to making objects. Travel is a great inspiration for my work, and having children who are studying and working abroad has given us a good excuse for visits to wherever they are. We were in Rome recently, where our son was on a placement. We'd seen the big sights on previous trips, so this time we followed his lead to beautiful little churches and museums off the beaten track. One find was a vast museum of Italian folk art on the outskirts of the city, which has been a rich source of inspiration for my work this year. I can lose hours at a time on sites like Pinterest, finding objects, fabrics and colour combinations that spark off ideas for my work. I also have a bit of an Instagram addiction. I've found so

many talented makers, painters, decorators, gardeners and cooks to follow on there, as well as a supportive community of artists. Several opportunities have come my way through Instagram, too, such as sculpture commissions and being included in a pop-up art fair in Los Angeles. I'm putting together my exhibition, *Beastly*, at the Scottish Gallery just now. It's two years since I had a solo show there, so I'm conscious of developments in my work. It will be a subtle shift, I think, to creatures with a bit of an edge. I'm thinking of the Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* or those heraldic beasts from antiquity whose posturing is touched with absurdity. ■

Beastly, Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, 2 to 26 October

