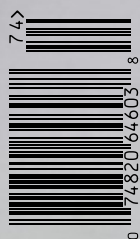


# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

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# #108



USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# Felicity Aylieff

## Someone of Her Time

Written by **Paul Bailey**

THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART IN LONDON PRODUCES A DISPROPORTIONAL NUMBER OF THE WORLD'S LEADING CERAMIC MAKERS AND FOR THE PAST 17 YEARS FELICITY AYLIEFF HAS BEEN A MAJOR FORCE BEHIND THAT SUCCESS. PAUL BAILEY WENT TO MEET HER.

**S**ituated close to the river Thames the Royal College of Art (RCA) has a second campus, and it is here, in the Woo Building, that you will find the Ceramics & Glass Department. First impressions are of a light and spacious futuristic building with the most up-to-date facilities available to the students. It feels not unlike a state-of-the-art factory making sports cars.

Driving the course is its philosophy: a belief in the transformative power of material thinking, research, and enriching our world through imaginative and meaningful ways. It embraces the diversity of contemporary practice in this hyper-material age, and importantly, the idea that thinking and making are inseparable and inform one another.

Critical thinking, self-reflection, independent thinking and professional development are encouraged through staff- and student-led discussions, seminars, presentations and debate. All this is concentrated within a two-year course, and students leave with a high proportion earning a good living through their work.

Whilst there are a number of courses of comparable success, the RCA remains a major force.



**Black, Gold and Red**, 2018, 200 cm.  
Image credit: RedHouse design studio.

The first year of the course is loosely divided into three projects, with the first centred around the collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, introducing the value of historical object research as a way of informing and generating ideas for new work. The second looks at design for manufacturing in the home. The international cohort of students have an opportunity to explore ideas for tableware that considers a range of food cultures. The final project is driven with an eye on professional practice, where students respond to the notion of a hypothetical commission, transforming a site, place, space or programme of their choosing. This is all good experience for a life after College, and is often quoted by many students as their most influential.

The expectation with all these projects is that students do not play safe and stick with what they know, but rather see it as an opportunity for risk-taking, making practical investigations that extend their material understanding and skill base.

reputation of the course and the profile of the staff who teach it, all practising artists. Her legacy will be that her work, in collaboration with other staff, has produced many ceramic and glass artists of international fame. While there are a number of courses of comparable success, the RCA remains a major force, with the likes of Zemmer Peeled, Ander Ruhwald, Mike Eden, Phoebe Cummings, Clare Twomey, Nao Matsunaga and Aneta Regal among its many graduates.

One of the most extraordinary things about Aylieff is that during her time working full time at the College she has managed to continuously pursue her own practice, producing work which is collected by international galleries and private collections. More recently, Aylieff has also run a studio in China with her husband Takeshi Yasuda and Chinese partner Xiong Baixu.

Aylieff's introduction to China was through Yasuda, who was asked to set up and run a residency workshop in Jingdezhen. She first went out in the summer of 2005 and realized

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In the second year, students negotiate an individual programme of study working closely with their personal tutor, exploring ideas, context and working methods to develop their practice.

Commenting on the course, Aylieff said, "What we look for in students applying to the course is the desire to be challenged. They need to be excited by the possibilities of ceramics as an expressive material through which to communicate a range of ideas and possibilities. These might reflect the Fine Art end of the discipline through to design, abstract or conceptual ideas and to those who are more concrete, around material investigation or for practical use."

During her 17 years at the RCA, Aylieff has taught more than 500 students who were attracted by the strength and professional

what an exciting opportunity it presented to develop new work that would take her in new directions as well as being a fresh challenge. Aylieff returned to Jingdezhen in 2006 and has never looked back.

She quickly recognized that the skills that existed locally were unique and the many small workshops could help realize her ambition to increase the scale of her work. So a decision was made not to make anything that she could do in her studio in the UK, but instead explore the wealth of traditional Chinese techniques that she saw in the local Jingdezhen factories, and create a contemporary translation – not unlike the RCA First Year undergraduate project. The huge pots with their intricate surface patterns or bold, energetic painting are now an international trademark of her work.





Above: Packing the huge trolley kiln in China. Image credit: RedHouse design studio.

Right: Installation for the Qatar commission 2013. Image credit: RedHouse design studio.

Aylieff commented, “It was not easy working in the Chinese workshops in those early days as tools, clay and processes were all unfamiliar. Workshops were often dusty and cramped with few facilities. I had become used to European standards of Health & Safety and had to find ways to operate that did not interfere with their business and respected their working day and production schedules. Communication was, of course, a major problem, but I became adept at talking through drawings and body language. These early collaborations were interesting and fun; both parties were equally curious about what we each did and what we might learn from each other. I had to get used to not being in control of every aspect of the making and firing, which was a new way of operating for me, and I soon realized that trust and respect were paramount if the relationship was to work. I lost a lot of work in the early days, either through technical problems in the factory or through my own limited knowledge of the new skills I was encountering towards developing a new aesthetic. By gradually resorting to an interpreter, things began to work. I am aware that I am the interloper. Gradually as my confidence grew I moved factories and I have now been with the same ‘Big Ware Factory’ for 10 years. The boss is a realistic businessman, but

also open minded and enjoys the work I do.”

A recent project was to create a large vase decorated with peonies, a flower revered by a Malaysian family who commissioned the work. It was a daunting commission for Aylieff, not just for the technical problems that she might have encountered when working on this scale and to a deadline, but also to create something that fulfilled the clients brief without compromising her aesthetic.

The vase is statuesque in form and profile, with a swelling towards the top, narrowing below with a slightly flared base for stability and elegance. The height of the vase is two meters and it was suggested that it sit on a granite base of approximately 50 cms. It is made of porcelain to better reflect the light. The peony flowers are pinks to deep magenta and the leaves green; however, the butterflies and dragonflies incorporated a wider palette of golden yellows and blues to visually lift the composition and to create a lively atmosphere.



Often Aylieff will design forms in the UK and send them to China for the large pots to be made. She has forged a strong bond with a team of three assistants at the Big Ware Factory who understand her approach and sense of detail. When she arrives in China she will visit the factory to do the final trimming and firing and supervise glazing. The solitary activity of drawing up all the surface patterns by hand, or painting the giant vases using cobalt pigment, is relished after the pressure of her London life. Each pot takes up to six months or more to complete from start to finish and progress is often interrupted by her teaching at the RCA. Firings are undertaken in the factory's vast gas-fired kilns and her work is loaded, alongside the factory's own large ware, using a forklift to manoeuvre it into place.

And what next for the RCA and ceramic teaching in the UK? Government funding is diminishing in higher education and there is a new priority to develop scholarships for all students to help towards fees and living. Another development for the programme is that it has joined the School of Arts and Humanities. This perhaps reflects the growing interest amongst students to have a more fluid experience on the course, to present more cross disciplinary opportunities and provide a wider context to the work the students are involved in.

The final comment on such a rich career raises the question, if Aylieff burst onto the international ceramics scene back in 2002 with the exhibition titled *Sense and Perception* at the Manchester City Art Gallery, plus with *Out of China* in 2008, what then does her still developing work in China hold in store, and what major shows and commissions await? With the function of ceramic studios changing from small often individual premises to a more co-operative venture involving many people, then the experience of China will be fascinating to watch for years to come.

Her recent decision to reduce her role at the RCA will allow, for the first time in her life, a concentrated focus on her own international practice – exciting times ahead both for the ceramics and glass at the RCA to establish a new era, and for Aylieff to take international ceramics to the next level. ■

#### About the Author

Paul Bailey writes on modern ceramics in the UK and is editor of *Emerging Potters* magazine.



**Peony vase**, 50 cm wide at base.  
Image credit: RedHouse design studio.



**Fruit flowers.** Collect  
show 2015, 150 x 80 cms.  
Image credit: RedHouse  
design studio.

