

# THE BLACK & WHITE WORLD OF KATHARINE MORLING

*With her solo show at Long & Ryle about to open, the ceramist explains how she creates her fragile worlds to Teleri Lloyd-Jones. Portrait by Trent McMinn*



*Stack of Butterfly  
Drawers, porcelain,  
stain, c.80 cm high, 2011*





This page, clockwise from right: *Scissor Tower*, porcelain, stain, 40 cm high, 2010; *Large Tree*, crank clay, porcelain slip, stain, 2 m high, 2011; *Tool Bag with Oil Can*, porcelain, stain, 60 cm high, 2011  
Opposite page, above: *Butterfly Garden*, porcelain, black stain, wire, c. 50 x 50 cm  
Opposite page, below: *Palm Trees*, stoneware, 60 cm high, 2007



'I would wake up in the morning thinking I was a fraud. I felt totally fraudulent and thought someone was going to realise.' This is where Katharine Morling was a few short years ago. From the outside everything was going smoothly. The ceramist had commissions, but she felt a growing disconnection from her work. 'I was just making shapes and totally covering them in glaze – good technically and overall, fine. But when I looked at it, it didn't look like me,' she explains.

Fast-forward to 2013 and the ceramist has gone through somewhat of a transformation. Where there had been gloopy glaze, now there is none. Where there was mould-making, now there is only hand-building. Where there was colour, now there is just black and white. 'When I look at my work now, it looks more like me,' she says with a satisfied smile.

With her distinct aesthetic – unglazed porcelain objects given detail by simple inky black lines on their surface – Morling creates fragile worlds let loose from her imagination. Part of a long ceramic tradition of mimesis, her 'three-dimensional draw-

ings' have won followers across the art world – she's one of the only ceramists (apart from Lucie Rie or Bernard Leach) whose work you'll find at the London Art Fair. She's exhibited in prestigious spaces, from the Crafts Council's *COLLECT* at the Saatchi Gallery to the Royal Academy Summer Show, has collaborated on a dance piece at the Royal Opera House and won first prize at the World Crafts Council Second European Triennial of Ceramics and Glass.

This year marks the ceramist's tenth year in her studio at Cockpit Arts and – on the eve of her solo show at London's Long & Ryle – we talk about her circuitous journey to this point.

Morling, who is severely dyslexic, felt at her most comfortable in art class away from the traditional schoolroom (she still finds the smell of oil paints and clay relaxing). After completing a foundation year at Maidstone, the young artist decided to travel and in her own words went a 'little wild'. She worked in a tulip bulb factory in Holland, in a bar on an Indian beach, as a factory inspector in China, a teacher in the Czech Repub-



lic and a nanny in Switzerland. All by the time she was 25. Crossing continents and professions, Morling had no intention of stopping but in 1997 found herself in a small town in Cornwall. She began running art classes and was accepted onto an art therapy course, but then started working with clay: 'I just thought, "I can't do that course because I need to do ceramics."'

Following an A-level and then a degree at University College Falmouth, Morling moved to London in 2003. Life was hard to begin with. 'It was bloody horrible!' she exclaims. She had left a close community and come to an anonymous city sprawl. She sent out her images and work, and precipitated no response. Nothing. 'I was rejected so much and sliding into debt,' she says, when she got her break to exhibit at *One Year On* at *New Designers* and as a result began to garner contacts and commissions. But she became less and less fulfilled by the work she was making. Not only was there an intense lack of confidence on her part but, as she explains, she was limited by her own preconceived notions of what she should be

producing, her own notions of what ceramics must be. 'Something should definitely be glazed,' the 41 year-old explains, 'it should be made in moulds or thrown on the wheel.' There was a particular sculpture she was working on, a group of zebras going up a set of stairs. She searched high and low for a small horse that she could make a mould from, not for a minute thinking that she could sculpt it with her own hands. It's a story Morling tells with incredulity, surprised that her past self could have been so blinkered.

Following a chat with ceramist and RCA tutor Felicity Aylieff – and in a bid to regain that sense of creative satisfaction – she began at the RCA in 2007. The impact was quite extraordinary. Encouraged by her tutors to leave her thousands of beloved glaze tests behind, she dismantled the biases she had built up. Going back to basics she spent time in the drawing schools: 'What I wanted to do was express myself. I felt awkward but not only that, I felt amazed at life, excited, frightened – all those kinds of emotions and I wanted to put that into my work,' she says.

Mixed up with this artistic change was a more personal one. One day at the college, she was called into her tutor's office. Filled with nerves, she went along sure that she was going to be asked to leave. Instead, she was awarded the Charlotte Fraser Award. Again, Morling tells the story with a sympathetic but exasperated tone aimed at her former self.

She graduated with a series of quotidian objects like chairs and tables, but her practice has grown over the years into more fully realised installations (a glimpse at Morling's favourite artists – Paul Noble, Paula Rego, Sergei Isupov and Klara Kristalova – emphasises her attraction to internal worlds for the viewer to unravel).

Last year, she landed a large commission from Stoke City Council supported by Arts Council England to produce work inspired by (and to sit alongside) the Staffordshire Hoard, the Anglo-Saxon treasures on permanent exhibition at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery since its discovery in 2009. The result was 10 fantastical figures imagined from the symbols that decorated the



Left: *The Group*, earth stone, porcelain, stain, each figure 32 x 91 cm, 2011  
 Below: *Morling and the Hoard*, installation view, earth stone, porcelain, stain, tallest sculpture 1.05 m high, 2013  
 Far below: *Time*, porcelain, stain, 55 cm high, 2013  
 Opposite: *Byron the Boar*, from *Morling and the Hoard*, earth stone, porcelain, stain, 2013



ancient jewellery. They are extraordinary, a world away from Morling's sculptures of the everyday. There's a centaur-type figure wielding a sword, and a half-human half-boar who holds his prisoners, a deer and a swan, on chains. They are fierce figures with a suggestion of myth and deity, and it's obvious that the artist relished letting her imagination go: 'Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons thought that they were taking on the energy and characteristics of these wild creatures, giving them greater strength and power in their battles?' the ceramist explained at the time. 'So I took the tiny images from the Hoard and transformed them into mythological god figures, brought to life in a kingdom of ceramic animal gods. These deities embody the power of the decorative depictions that were originally worn on the battlefield hundreds of years ago.'

Last year was a big one for Morling's studio: she had eight assistants helping prepare for her Hoard commission and others. Two are working as we sit and talk – Zara decorating butterflies and David sculpting the head of a giraffe. Morling and

I chat about her studio practice as they diligently continue. She's never been an apprentice or studio assistant herself, so to some extent she is making up her own rules. And as the last few years have brought Morling a sense of artistic confidence, they have also brought her the confidence to run a studio: 'Some have been good [she gestures to David and his giraffe's head] but others have not. One girl was awful and she was here for weeks before I got the courage to ask her not to come back! I learn on the job.'

The Long & Ryle show this November will give visitors the chance to not only see her most recent work but also glimpses of the process with her drawings on show too. Morling feels a little strange about showing these work-in-progress pieces, and it's the first time they've been on public show.

To anyone familiar with her work, it'll be pleasing to discover that it all begins with a sketch. Each one is only a few inches in size, and realised with the definite ink line that graces the final pieces. As we flick through these pages, Morling points to a shelf in her studio: 'There's 100 filled



sketchbooks there at least,' she says. These pages act as an aide memoire for the artist, and she seems a little bemused why anyone would be interested in them – 'It's quite basic,' she explains: 'they're notes: they sum up a quick idea' – but outsiders will find pleasure in their close relation to the final form. There's also a lovely contrast; whereas the original sketch expresses an instantaneous moment, a spark of thought, her porcelain pieces are the result of time spent modelling, firing and decorating, and holding onto the looseness of the sketch is part of their charm. As well as these initial drawings Morling works on larger, atmospheric ink washes. Often with single figures, this work shares less aesthetically with her ceramics; it's more emotive, almost sinister.

Once she's decided what the piece will be, she begins to make (no maquettes are involved). One of the most interesting facets of her process is that, although she is making manifest the things of her imagination, a sense of narrative or meaning is often elusive. For example, a set of tools hanging on the wall, a piece showing at Long &

Ryle, reflects 'a busy life, the need to be doing', and as she hunts for the right word you know there isn't one. Once made, she often steps back and sees the sense within the piece as though she must trace back her intuition to shed light on her own thought process.

For the new show there is a collection of work under the title *Nature Boy*. 'It's all about teenage angst really,' Morling explains. 'He wears a rucksack and goes out wanting to pin down beauty. He wants to hold onto it but in the process he ends up killing it... Everything goes in the end.' There are cases filled with butterflies and a bundle of cameras that fit the narrative, but also more opaque objects, JCBs shovelling giant jewels for example. While she might not start with a distinct story, *Nature Boy* has a lovely resonance across Morling's practice, that sense of capturing the essence of something, pinning it down.

Over the decade Morling has been in her London studio, her practice has changed beyond recognition. The foundation of this change is undoubtedly her belief in her own ability and the

sense of satisfaction in making work that 'looks more like her'. Now she has private patrons who allow her to exercise her imagination, and a timetable of shows to work to, but her long-term goal is to establish a ceramics education centre in the capital. With a series of studios, a café and education room, Morling sees the centre as a support for graduates fresh out of college, but also as a place to run a programme of art courses for the underprivileged and young people in care. Having organised a few workshops in the past, Morling is buoyed by the process, how people can 'very quickly see their worth in the things they can make'.

And if anyone is a demonstration of this principle, it's Morling herself. One thing is for sure: she no longer wakes up each morning feeling like a fraud. *'Shifting Perspective' is at Long & Ryle Gallery, 4 John Islip Street, London SW1P, from 28 November – 20 December. Cockpit Arts Christmas Open Studios, 18–22 Creekside, London SE8, from 6–8 December. www.longandryle.com, www.cockpitarts.com, katharinemorling.co.uk*