

Human concerns



Katie Spragg has achieved a lot in the three years since graduating from the Royal College of Art. *Eva Masterman* chats to the artist to discover more about her influences, making process and the community projects she is involved with

She describes herself as an artist with a 'dual practice', but this feels like a wild understatement of Katie Spragg's accomplishments. Not only is her artistic career flourishing, she is also a tutor at the Royal College of Art (RCA) on the Ceramics and Glass MA, co-runs a studio and collective in Bermondsey, South London, with the social-practice group, Collective Matter, and is currently artist in residence at the Garden Museum in Lambeth, having received Arts Council funding for a programme of public workshops and an art commission.

Her work is in the V&A, been part of the *British Ceramic Biennial AWARD* exhibition and she is currently working on a piece for the Hauser & Wirth Make Gallery in Somerset. Not a bad roster of achievements considering she graduated from her Masters at the RCA just three years ago.

When she is not teaching or on site at one of her many other projects, you will find Spragg in the repurposed school that houses her London studio, where she also co-manages a ceramic workshop and residency. Housed within the studios of Turner Prize-winning architects, Assemble, it is a very cross disciplinary environment, with music studios, carpenters, printmakers and various other creative professionals in the adjoining spaces.

IN THE STUDIO

Her intricate arrangements of porcelain flora are created with a basic set of tools: a piece of dowel, a scalpel with her hand as a cutting mat and a couple of brushes. Tricks of the trade include Tupperware with a plaster batt at the base, which she will use to keep her blades of grass damp



PREVIOUS PAGES: *Climber*, 2018; *Daydream*, 2016 (through the peephole) **ABOVE:** *Blackwell Turfs*, 2018; *Wall Nook Hamstone*, detail, 2017; *St Edmunds Fernery*, 2019; *Hedgerow*, 2017 (in the V&A collection)

‘The beauty of the work is merely a way of drawing the audience in to think about wider issues of gentrification, the environment and overlooked communities’

until the time comes to assemble them for their single firing to 1250°C. Although colour has recently started to tinge the edges of her work through the addition of the subtle blending of different clay bodies and oxides to create ‘earthiness’, Spragg’s aesthetic tends towards unglazed whiteness. ‘Part of the decision to not use colour is that I want to evoke a feeling in people,’ she explains. ‘The lack of colour allows room for the viewer to lay their own colours and memories onto them. It keeps the work neutral.’

IMAGINATION BRAIN

Storytelling is at the centre of her process; a recent rifle through her parents’ attic unearthed boxes of scrap books full of illustrated and elaborate tales created when she was a child. Of her choice of working with clay, Spragg says: ‘You can form it into something quickly, it’s responsive. Wood and metal start with a form that you then have to cut and carve and glue back together, which I’ve never felt comfortable with. Clay responds in a more immediate way.’

Her ideas will more often than not be a reaction or response to a site or location, something she first explored during her Art Foundation Course at Camberwell College of Arts, making clay souvenirs of goat carcasses (from Caribbean cooking) and council blocks – common sights to those who know the area. Her choice of subject matter may be more palatable now, but the process of collecting and translating the feel of a place remains the same.

When developing a piece, she will spend time recording her chosen site, drawing and taking photographs, before

developing them into a ‘black ink’ drawing, which have loose references to traditional botanical illustrations. These evocative sketches allow Spragg to visualise her ‘imagination brain’ and plan what she needs to make, often in collaboration with her partner, furniture maker Geoffrey Hagger. ‘Working with Geoffrey enables me to use skills I don’t have,’ she explains. ‘Like working with straight lines and finding solutions to issues such as how to hang an 80kg ceramic and glass sculpture from a high factory ceiling.’

The results of this collaboration are Spragg’s beautiful cabinet works referencing Victorian viewfinders and greenhouses. She is excited by being able to control how the work is approached and experienced; it has to be discovered by peering in through a viewfinder or textured glass. Starting incongruously as a cardboard maquette or drawing, Hagger finds a way of problem-solving around Spragg’s vision and ambition, transforming cardboard into carefully crafted carpentry to house her porcelain.

OVERLOOKED COMMUNITIES

On the surface, Spragg’s work presents itself as beautifully made decorative objects, but there is also a depth of thought and process that expands beyond this and speaks of more socio-political concerns. ‘Humans have always curated nature, whether that’s through private gardening or the larger global movement of plants around the world throughout history. I’m interested in how plants operate on their own terms and how that can be used as a metaphor for other things,’ she explains.

The choice of plants that populate her work is not random, but a pointed response to site and community; the beauty of the work is merely a way of drawing the audience in to think about wider issues of gentrification, the environment and the visibility of overlooked communities.

A fern is not just a fern, but a specific fern that grew out of the drainpipe in the last co-op house in South London where she lived before it was knocked down to make way for new flats. A flower is not just a flower, but a specific flower that has grown through the cracks of a council

Images: Sylvain Delieu, John Holloway, Davina Jelley



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Clay for Dementia* at the Garden Museum; Installation view, from left: *Daydream, While Away, Animations* viewing box; Lambeth Wilds Young Carers workshop at the Garden Museum



SPRAGG'S RISE

- **2006–2007:** Foundation Studies in Art and Design, Camberwell College of Arts
- **2007–2010:** BA (Hons) 3D Materials Practice, Major in Ceramics and Plastics, University of Brighton
- **2010:** *Designs of the Future*, V&A Museum
- **2014–2016:** MA Ceramics and Glass, Royal College of Art
- **2016:** *Future Heritage*, Decorex, Syon Park, London
- **2017:** V&A Museum acquires *Hedgerow*
- **2017:** shortlisted for *British Ceramics Biennale AWARD*
- **2017:** Spotlight Space with Flow Gallery; *Collect*, Saatchi Gallery, London
- **2017:** *Young Masters Art Prize* shortlist exhibition, Cynthia Corbett Gallery, London
- **2018:** *Material Earth II*, Messums Wiltshire
- **2018:** *Katie Spragg - Glasshouses*, Garden Museum, London
- **2019:** *A Natural Selection*, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh



estate where a participant in one of her community workshops lives. They are tied to a site and the people and stories that populate and give life to that site. These are plants as metaphors for human concerns, for the overlooked community and how they operate on their own terms and within their own structures, regardless of how much external stress or neglect they may be exposed to. While her artwork and teaching practices operate separately on a practical level, Spragg tries to tie the threads and themes that run through them together as much as possible.

'Clay is an amazing tool to help people see their value, to get them to talk and try something for themselves,' she claims. 'It doesn't have the same preconception that something like drawing has, where people may believe they can't draw, so won't pick up a pencil. Looking at my teaching practices from the outside, they seem very different – teaching someone with dementia is obviously totally different to giving a tutorial to an MA student – but for me, the goal is the same. If someone sees value in what

they're doing, then hopefully that will lead to a wider understanding of the world, which should mean they gain a better understanding of the value of other people and people in other contexts to them. I want to try and draw out that value in both my art and my teaching.'

DEVELOPING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Her most recent Arts Council funded project with the Garden Museum has this value at its core. 'The thing that's exciting about this project is that I wrote the brief myself, it's not shaped by outside factors, so I can work in the way I want,' Spragg explains. 'I've been running workshops for people with dementia, a focused project with Lambeth Young Carers, going on nature walks with small intimate groups and holding clay workshops in response that share ideas and conversations. It's allowed the commission I'm working on to grow directly from the relationships I have with local people. The workshops and teaching become the entry point for how the artwork develops.'

The project focused on wild, opportunistic plants and the way they may be overlooked or 'hidden', celebrating and making visible both these plants and communities local to the museum. Stop frame animation workshops with Lambeth Young Carers considered connections between wild plants and being a young carer, and Spragg is using source material from these workshops to create her own installation of wild plants that visitors will discover as they explore the museum. 'The Garden Museum has brought the ideas that I'm working on in the studio to the workshops with dementia groups and young carers. I've been able to provide a space to gather their experiences and that's given me a better understanding of my subject, which is really exciting,' she explains. 'It also means that I can make something that represents a particular person who I know is really special and that I would never have met without the type of work I do.'

This openness and willingness to share her knowledge and time with others has positioned Spragg as one of the

leading new voices in UK ceramics, but she remains driven by the personal connections that her work provides and the stories it allows her to share. Far from just a 'dual practice' her work combines ceramic sculpture with illustration, animation, social outreach and teaching, and is an exciting example of how ceramics can be used to create not only beautiful, thought-provoking sculpture, but also a space for conversation and learning.

Spragg's work creates a common ground to explore the ways that humans and plants co-exist and how that can become a metaphor for the shared experiences we all have regardless of background or upbringing – after all, everyone has a childhood story about falling in stinging nettles. ☞

Find out more at katiespragg.com. Lambeth Wilds, Garden Museum, from 14 October, gardenmuseum.org.uk; Spragg is part of the exhibition *David Gates: In Dialogue* at Make, Hauser & Wirth Somerset, until 12 October, hauserwirth.com