



ARTISAN PROFILE

Ceramicists often talk about the excitement of opening the kiln to discover what they've made – the magic of the unexpected. Sophie Cook isn't one of them. Her serene, immaculately glazed porcelain pots are all about purity and perfection. "I don't want surprises coming out of the kiln. I need to be 100 per cent in control," she admits. It's a philosophy that has won her a loyal following of collectors, and a place in museums and galleries around the world, since she graduated from Camberwell College of Arts in 1997.

Sophie was studying textiles when she wandered into the ceramics department one day and realised she wanted to work in three dimensions rather than two. Her initial porcelain designs were based on practical structures, such as olive oil bottles, until her tutor, ceramic artist Richard Slee, told her they didn't have to be functional. So by the time she showed her collection at her degree show (at which she sold every piece – enough to fund her kiln and buy a wheel that she's still using) and then at the New Designers exhibition, the forms had been refined into something much more elegant and streamlined. Designers Guild ordered from her immediately, Nicole Farhi quickly followed, and fellow potter Jane Muir got in touch to offer her studio space for a month: "Incredibly kind, as she didn't even know me."

It was about a year before Sophie realised she was doing well enough to sustain a business. Clear-sighted and pragmatic, she lived in her father's south London flat to save rent, working at first from a disused jam factory – "in effect, a tunnel in the sky connecting two buildings, so cold that the clay used to freeze" – and then from a converted warehouse on the Thames at Rotherhithe. She started getting good press, including a tiny mention in *The Observer* by Terence Conran, who picked her as 'one to watch' ("Someone who read that has kept buying from me ever since"), and when the

Rotherhithe building was sold to developers five years later, she moved into a studio at Cockpit Arts in Deptford.

Sophie had been earning a living from her ceramics for about ten years by the time she had the first of her three sons in 2007. At this point she created a studio at her home in East Dulwich, converted from a former coachhouse built onto one side of the house like a garage: perfect for local open studios, as customers could walk in from the street to view her graceful, slender-necked bottles. The distinctive style that makes her work so collectible hasn't changed much over the intervening years, although the necks have become even slimmer, and the bodies developed to include pod and teardrop shapes. But the colours have matured. Her initial palette of blues – ultramarine, cobalt, turquoise – has broadened to include greys, yellows, oranges and pinks ("I'm still trying to get a really bright pink") and is now influenced by the landscape of coastal Suffolk, where her family has been based for the past four years. In her new studio, an outbuilding used by its former owner to house his Aston Martin (she seems to have been lucky with garages), she has been experimenting with glazes and a range of earth tones from umber to deep navy, which she unveiled last year for a solo show at Maud & Mabel in Hampstead.

Sophie can be in the studio seven days a week if she has gallery orders to fulfil as well as website sales. Glazes can play up, preventing her from achieving that perfect, solid colour: "They'll come out mottled and painterly – not what I'm after." And she recently went through a couple of months when less than half of her pieces survived firing: "You have to test ten or 12 porcelains to solve a problem like that – and trying to sort out one thing just makes something else worse." She resolved it, and can breathe again, but there's always something to worry about: wheel, kiln, glaze. But that's the thing about the quest for perfection. As Sophie says, "You never have a chance to get bored."

“Colours come slowly – I’m still trying to get a really bright pink”

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