

Coolly Spare with Flashes of Colour

From the Gulf of Corinth to the Essex coast, Marisa Arna has a compulsion to make useful pots. Tim Farrington investigates

Marisa Arna made her first pot in 1989, a few streets from where she lived in the Greek city of her birth. Patras, a busy and congested port at the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth, is an area full of shops, bars and squares. Her mentor was Panayiota Kourtoglou, a Swiss-Greek potter who had apprenticed in Switzerland and had acquired a precise and disciplined Swiss throwing technique compared to the high-speed, carefree folk style of most wheel workers in Greece. Kourtoglou let the budding potter have use of part of her workshop in return for doing various jobs such as painting designs on her work, clearing up and so on. As a busy potter, Kourtoglou had little time to spend offering instruction and guidance, so Arna learnt through observation and practice. There were few ceramics courses in Greece at that time and studying abroad was out of the question, so apart from this short apprenticeship she is self-taught.

For her first workshop, Arna bought a wheel and a kiln, installed them in her home, acquired fine terracotta clay from Crete that she was used to and made pots during breaks from teaching at a language school. The terracotta was the best of a limited range of clay bodies then available in Greece, not including prohibitively expensive imported stoneware and porcelain. It was good to work with and she began to see what she could do with it, experimenting with various forms and surface treatments such as incising, painting with coloured slips and glazes, and sgraffito.

LESBOS After a couple of years Arna decided to concentrate solely on ceramics and try to make a living out of it. She and her English husband moved to Lesbos, the third largest of the Greek islands, and set up her studio in a village there overlooking the Aegean Sea. Lesbos has always had a strong tradition of arts and crafts and hers was the twenty-first ceramic workshop on the island. Here she used traditional slip-glazes on terracotta, but her designs and level of craftsmanship did not follow traditional styles and sales provided a means of support. Many visitors to the island were from different parts of Europe as well as from Greece and listening to their various responses to her work, she introduced new designs and ideas.

ESSEX It was an idyllic part of the world, but life on a Greek island had its limitations. Their son was now three years old, so they thought it was time for a change of lifestyle and broader horizons, especially in the field of ceramics. For some time Arna had been following styles, trends and techniques in England from books and publications such as *Ceramic Review*, so it was a natural progression to move and become involved in the diverse and stimulating ceramic life there. They took over a neglected Victorian townhouse in a north Essex coastal village with a disused newsagent's shop attached to it, which became her studio and showroom. She began working with fine white stoneware, taught herself glaze chemistry and her husband helped to prepare dozen upon dozen of glaze tests. Sales from the studio were encouraging and local customers were supportive.

At her first trade show Marisa was lucky enough to be given an order

from the Conran Shop in the UK and overseas which occupied much of her time for two or three years. Other shows followed, her work being represented at venues from *Exposure* at *New Designers to Art in Clay*. Despite this success, Arna made time to explore new directions in her work, and it was then that she began to try out porcelain, a medium she now uses exclusively. She developed a technique of throwing dry powder oxides into the porcelain body to produce soft coloured veining in fine, translucent bowls and vases. Perhaps it was the result of living close to the sea all her life, first in Greece and now the gentle landscape of the East Anglian coast, that she began making vessels with surfaces so reminiscent of sea-worn pebbles and cloudy skies.

Since the birth of her second son (she exhibited at *Chelsea Crafts Fair* when he was three months old) Arna is, for the time being, selling her work from her studio which, with the addition of work from other makers, is run as a small art and craft gallery. Now it is a balancing act with family, making pots and running the gallery, but still taking exciting opportunities such as showing at the first *Origin* in 2006.

Since first starting to make pots, Arna's work has gone through a number of substantial changes; some were the result of circumstances, but for the most part they arose from the evolution of her work and her desire to move on and explore the potential in it, sometimes returning to a previous idea and taking it in new directions. Form and function have always been important. Arna makes pots to be used, and the way they are used affects the design; the way a cup or bowl feels in the hands or a low, wide-necked jug with a large handle that is good for pouring sauces.

Porcelain is used for all of her work, whether one-off pieces to complete sets of tableware or more conventional items such as mugs. The pots are thrown on the wheel, turned, engraved when leatherhard if there is to be a pattern, then biscuit fired at cone 04 in an electric top-loading kiln. Arna uses her own glazes to dip and paint the pieces, and fires at cone 8. There are a relatively high number of losses with porcelain compared to other clay bodies, but she likes its fineness and translucency, even the sound it makes when in use.

During its evolution over the years from low-fired terracotta to porcelain, Marisa Arna's ceramics have steadily refined themselves from early lavishly decorated pieces to her current body of work which is coolly spare in its surface treatment apart from occasional flashes of colour, and with carefully considered forms focusing now on shape and texture. ■

- 1 Espresso cups, thrown porcelain, H6.5cm
- 2 Large jugs, thrown porcelain, H19cm max
- 3 Milk jugs, thrown and altered porcelain, H9.5cm
- 4 Large vases, thrown porcelain, H29cm
- 5 Pasta bowls, thrown porcelain, Ø18cm

Technical Information See page 65
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