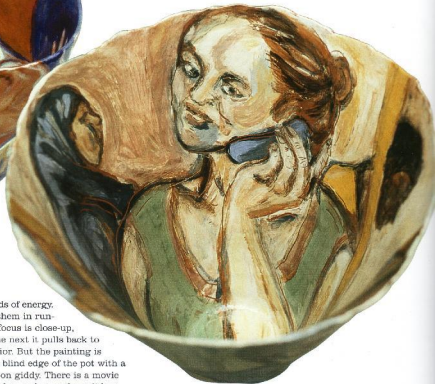


The Stuff of Life

POTTER – Jitka Palmer's voluptuous, illustrative pots capture the many faces of modern life. **EMMA MAIDEN** explains.

PHOTOGRAPHY – JASON INGRAM AND JITKA PALMER



Jitka Palmer's pots are whirlwinds of energy. Painted figures course around them in running scenes – one moment the focus is close-up, homing in on a face or hand, the next it pulls back to encompass a landscape or interior. But the painting is ever leading the eye around the blind edge of the pot with a dynamism that at times verges on giddy. There is a movie quality to this shifting focus and pace, but perhaps it has even more in common with dreams, in which the everyday is infused with a strangeness that compels and vivifies; faces loom suddenly into view and at the wavy rim find themselves bizarrely juxtaposed with a different scene on the pot's interior. Palmer's penchant for distorting both people and perspective only adds to the visionary atmosphere.

The tension between the inside and outside of the pot is exploited to the full. Palmer is a dextrous painter, and painting the interior, which to other people might seem the most daunting part of the process, is the bit she really relishes. 'I've learnt to use the curve to my advantage. It distorts, so there's more allowance for distorting the body anyway, especially on the inside. It becomes a vortex and I love that. It draws you in. Inside and outside are like two sides of a story that I can play against each other.'

Considering the surety and balance of the finished pieces, it is surprising to hear Palmer say that she never fully composes the painting beforehand. Spontaneity is for her the 'main thing', and it comes through in the quick, confident brush marks and the effortless way in which the painting flows around the pot's interior and exterior walls. Building large and by hand, there is no attempt at symmetry; rather it

is an intuitive process in which the walls grow and flare organically. A subtle bulge, or a degree of tilt, gives each piece its distinct character, and the shape then influences the painting. A painted breast coincides with a slight swell on one piece, and on another a green mountainside echoes the rim's incline. It is not unlike the way palaeolithic painters incorporated the natural undulations of cave walls into their animal images to make them all the more alive. Certainly in Palmer's work it gives a sense of the image struggling out of the clay background.

Palmer's method of applying coloured slip has much in common with classical oil painting: she works with an extensive hand-mixed palette, underpainting particular areas and then building up the forms with layers of slip. The terracotta body is soon completely covered with expressive, painterly strokes, and then, working quickly whilst the slip is still wet, she scratches through the layers, allowing the warm red clay ground to emphasise a detail, or define a line. Painting is Palmer's strength, and it has been a near obsession all her life. She remembers growing up in Prague: 'As a child I painted all the time. I was constantly in trouble at school for drawing in all the lessons but I just couldn't stop – I was in my



dream world of stories, painting people, people, people all the time. I got bad marks in school and at fifteen I woke up...!

She knew where her direction lay, but there were only two art schools at the time in Czechoslovakia and the complicated application system was unsympathetic to grammar school students. So Palmer chose a profession which would involve the human body – her second obsession – and enrolled as a medical student. As luck would have it, on the very day she was offered a place she was also given the chance to work at a pottery in a village in Moravia famous for its maiolica, an opportunity she had been hankering after for some time. Of course she fell in love with clay and, though she returned to her studies, she did so with a new set of priorities. 'At medical school I kept drawing and slowly set up a space to work in. Then when I qualified I chose to teach anatomy at the university, so I was drawing, teaching and learning the human body in detail.'

Perhaps it is Palmer's firm belief in chance that has made her life as dynamic and adventurous as the narratives that fill her pots. The twists and turns of fate in her life are welcomed, in the same way that she adapts her painting to the swaying rhythms of her clay forms. A chance meeting in Prague led

to her marrying an English architect, and then, just before their wedding, Palmer became ill with a fever that marked another turning point. 'In this high fever I had a dream about clay, touching clay. It was a lovely dream, inviting, urging, and I thought, this is my only chance – I should go for it for once. On the wedding day I said to my husband "I don't want to be a doctor, I want to study ceramics in Britain."'

Fortunately, Palmer has her feet firmly on the ground, and her unwavering focus and capacity for hard work meant that she used her two years on an HND course to the full – 'I was one of those unpopular people who worked till nine o'clock at night' – and shortly afterwards she was awarded a Crafts Council Setting Up Grant which bought her a kiln. Life was settled and Palmer established a working routine around the demands of a new family ('having a baby was another lesson in life. It complicated it in some ways but I became more organised and had to make time to work') but all the time memories of Czechoslovakia were pulling on her heart with their own demands; it was important to go back and discover just what it was she was missing. The family returned for a year's sabbatical that grew into a three-year stay, and what Palmer found took her by surprise.

'I was missing my home, but when I went back I realised it wasn't so much the place I was missing as my childhood. I found that what I was missing wasn't there anyway. In a way it stopped all the unnecessary grieving. In the Czech Republic I badly missed Britain and wanted to come back.'

LEFT TO RIGHT: *Maternity*, 2000, H38cm | *Soba*, 2004, H36cm | *Benfire*, 2000, H38cm | *Florence*, 2002, H40cm.



which I couldn't believe.' Once she had returned to the UK, Palmer found that what had before seemed a lack could now be a positive source of creative energy.

'I realised the advantages of not being in my homeland; I can get my inspiration from there and the sense of yearning and memory. It's an ideal state, and I think many artists and composers who couldn't live at home had this feeling that fed into their work. I can always get myself into that nostalgic mood if I need to.'

A deep sense of place – of a remembered Czechoslovakia – imbues many of the pots. Dark interiors and spirited landscapes, Moravian orchards heavy with fruit, and childhood ghost stories – personal narratives made all the more vivid by time and distance. But Palmer also finds inspiration in other places and themes. Recently she has made a series of pots for the Contemporary Ceramics showcase, one of which is all about the area around the Marshall Street gallery in Soho.

'This one I had fun doing. I went to Soho and got lost, couldn't find the gallery. I went down those streets with the pimps and the sex shops and I decided to make a pot vaguely based on that, and the Chinese markets.' There is a rent boy on the outside standing in a shadowy doorway, and inside a prostitute on her mobile phone, whilst women haggle at a vegetable stall – 'it's just the feeling you get when

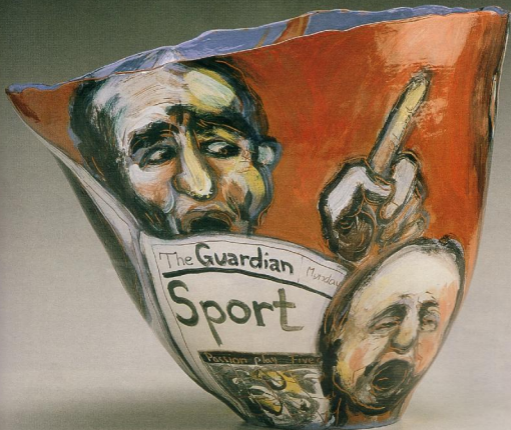
you walk through Soho.' Another, called *New York Deli*, is a mini-soap opera in itself – 'there was this guy who was chatting up my friend, it was so hilarious the way he was acting, so there he is, with the bagels.'

Sometimes the pots contain stories within stories. Morence depicts the iconic Daomo under a blue sky, and someone writing a postcard in a street cafe, but spin the pot round and there is Masaccio's *Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, all sombre-hued and full of grief. Sacred and profane, bizarre and beautiful, old and new: such contrasts are the stuff of life to Jitka Palmer, and she uses them as different colours on a palette, building opposites into a sense of wholeness and always leaving room for chance to do its thing. **CR**

Forthcoming exhibitions: *The Figure and the Face*, Orleans House Gallery, Twickenham, until April 27. Tel 020 8631 6000; *The Story and the Song*, Brewery Arts Centre, Cirencester, June 12 – July 17. Tel 01296 627181

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Shopping* (detail), 2003, H40cm | *Slavonic Dances* (detail), 2003, H38cm | *Fathers*, 2001, H37cm | *Hide and Seek* (detail), 2002, H39cm | *Sisters* (detail), 2001, H40cm.



Technical Notes

INSPIRATION

My work is figurative, narrative and expressive. I love working around a story or a theme, creating something like a sequence, developing the idea gradually as I move from surface to surface. When painting a vessel, I am trying to create a strong tension between the outside and the inside surface in order to give the whole piece another dimension.

I work in batches of five to six pieces, linked by a theme or topic. My favourite themes and continuing sources of inspiration are the world of music, people at work, the human body and places. In this complicated world I draw on personal experiences, past and present, with a view to reflect the spontaneity of ordinary human life.

CLAY BODY AND FIRING

VR Terracotta – Valentine's Red, Bath Potters Supplies.
Dry vessels are fired in an electric kiln up to 1040°C, sanded down and glazed with a clear brush-on glaze.
Glazed pieces are fired on props up to 1020°C.

MAKING AND PAINTING

Vessels are coiled and pinched from red earthenware clay, smoothed down and painted, when leatherhard. I make preparatory sketches in ink, watercolour or pencil on paper. I then always paint them afresh on the piece itself to maintain the spontaneity, dynamics and fluidity of the painting process. Painting is done by building up layers of coloured slips, stains and oxides and is finished with a thin line-drawing scratched through the layers of slip to reveal the base clay colour (sgraffito).

WHITE SLIP

Ball clay	40
China clay	30
Potash feldspar	20
Flint	10
Zirconium silicate	10%