

Passionately Drawn

1 Pages from Jitka Palmer's sketchbook, 2012 2 Marc Chagall, coiled and modelled crank stoneware, painted with slips and oxides, wax, 2012, H43cm



'I am balanced between two countries, which brings both grief and joy'



Emma Crichton-Miller explores the story behind Jitka Palmer's current work.

Jitka Palmer is a potter and painter in equal measure. Her large clay vessels are animated by boldly drawn, colourful scenes, which curve around and within them, while her sculptures and portrait busts are given vivid life by the slips, oxides, waxes, and stains she uses to reinforce both their form and character. Palmer, a Czech, is equally divided as a person. Born in Prague in 1959, this year she has lived exactly half her life in the Czech Republic and half in England, and still visits her cottage in Moravia at least four times a year. Married to an English architect, Palmer's children are entirely bilingual. 'I feel a split personality', she tells me when I visit her home and studio in Bristol, a university city that in many ways mirrors the university town of Brno, now in the Czech Republic, where Palmer grew up. 'I am balanced between two countries, which brings both grief and joy.'

3 Marc Chagall, coiled red earthenware painted with slips and oxides, clear glaze, 2012, H39cm 4 Little Prince and Friends, coiled red earthenware painted with slips and oxides, clear glaze, 2012, H45cm 5,6 Jitka Palmer's sketchbook, 2012

From Eve to a smiling Bach and intense Michelangelo



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GOOD COMPANY This autumn, to celebrate the fruitfulness of this double life as potter and painter, as Czech and British, Palmer has created a solo show for the spectacular Galerie Du Don, the centre for contemporary European ceramics near Aurillac in the Auvergne, Central France. She was invited to make the show after the gallery's founder, Nigel Atkins, approached her 'out of the blue, just when I was thinking there was no way to go forward with ceramics'. He had seen a portrait bust of her mother in Palmer's studio. The remarkable beauty and liveliness of the work she has created, with the passionately drawn, whirling figures and dramatic variations in colour and mood, testify to the tremendous release of creative energy this show has stimulated. In keeping with the figurative bent of her work ('Abstract art is not quite finished for me', she says) the show has a central narrative theme. *Good Company* is inspired by the idea of a grand birthday dinner party. Inside the central cylindrical exhibition space at Le Don du Fel, fifteen ceramic portrait busts of Palmer's ideal guests will be placed on a circular bench. These are both real and imaginary figures from history, literature, and her own life, people who have influenced her, from Eve herself to a smiling Bach and intense Michelangelo, leavened by her own wise beekeeping grandfather and a wondering, wistful Little Prince. Opposite them, in a wider concentric circle, will be the pots each of these figures has inspired, on which Palmer has painted either a story or a scene or a question that she would like to pursue with



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them. In the centre of the circle she will place a large vessel named *Aqua Vitae*, filled with water, in homage to the fancy that the characters might all, on some hot summer night, come alive, magically, and converse with Jitka until dawn. In the gallery that rings this central space Palmer will hang preparatory and supplementary pastel drawings that explore the background to each figure.

As Palmer shows me the busts and pots in her studio before they leave for France, the story of her life weaves through her descriptions. Pointing out the bust of Andreas Vesalius, the sixteenth-century Flemish anatomist and doctor, for instance, with his heavily incised skin and beard, alongside his pot with its flayed figure, musculature exposed, and naked skull, his heart, brain, and eye displayed inside, she explains that in the Czech half of her life, still under the Soviet regime, she studied medicine, qualifying as an anatomist. 'My father told me that the system would always try to control me if I tried to be an artist,' she says. She took up a placement in a folk pottery in Moravia, exploring majolica in her leisure time, but it was only on coming to England in 1985 that she felt free to pursue pottery as her primary career. She acknowledges, however, that the compassion and refusal of sentimentality of the anatomist remain with her: 'My medical training gave me incredible insight into suffering and the human body, so some darkness has stayed in my work.'



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7 *J.S. Bach at Home*, coiled and modelled crack stoneware, painted with slips and oxides, wax, 2012, H37cm 8 *Beekeeper*, H43cm, and *Woodworker*, H45cm; both coiled and modelled crack stoneware, painted with slips and oxides, wax, 2012

Technical Notes See page 69
Exhibition *Good Company*, Galerie du Don, France, 14 October-30 November 2012
Stockists Bevere Gallery, Worcester; The Edge Gallery, Lancaster; West Wales Arts Centre, Pembrokeshire; Cecilia Colman Gallery, London; Contemporary Ceramics Centre, London

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PORTRAITS & STORIES It is, above all, this humanity that is the defining feature of all her work. Besides the many pots that grow in her studio (Palmer describes herself as 'a very quick coiler and pincher', before she polishes the walls thin to make them ready for her slips and glazes), the walls of her home are lined with paintings, both pastels and oils, which reflect her strong interest in people and their stories. Expressive portraits of friends, family, and people seen on the streets of Bristol hang alongside exultant evocations of her orchard in Moravia, where she grows plums, cherries, pears, apples, and walnuts. In a similar way, two of the *Good Company* are family members – her grandfather and her father. Two others are celebrations of the Moravian countryside and traditional Bohemian culture – her touching portrait of Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, ruggedly bearded, covered in birds, his pot an earthy evocation of folk dance and birdsong, and her *Orchard Spirit*, on whose pot black plums rain into Jitka's own hands.



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Humanity is the defining feature of all her work



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As she admits, through all the many influences of the art she loves (besides tortured Michelangelo, the dreamy Marc Chagall is part of this congregation), there is a psychological intensity and graphic energy to her drawing that comes from the Social Realist art she grew up with. As important a source of inspiration for Palmer, however, is music. In addition to the direct homage her pots and portraits pay to Bach, Dvořák, Jacqueline du Pré, and Édith Piaf, all her pots seem in motion, reaching upwards, dancing, their lips left smooth but untrimmed in rhythmic waves, as the stories they bear unfold.

VENUS The most startling piece, and the series' origin, is Palmer's portrait of Venus. Far from a conventional Renaissance goddess, this long-necked, dark figure is inspired by the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, perhaps the oldest artwork in the world, dated to between 29,000 and 25,000 BC. Some years ago Palmer visited the site, just south of Brno, where this hand-sized sculpture of a woman was

found. The figure itself was out on loan, but Palmer was given some of the soil from the same paleolithic seam from which she had been dug. It is this soil that she has used to create her Venus, not a replica of the statue, but an evocation of the original potter's original model. The related pot depicts the primal scene of ritual fire in which this Venus rose. 'Clay is an undervalued material, with pottery an underrated art form, and yet when you dig old graves, what is left? Old bones, old metal – and ceramics.' As an afterthought she adds, 'I like to think of my pots being found buried many millennia from now.' If they are, let us hope they carry intact the vivid stories that Palmer has painted on them, preserving her unique conversations with this *Good Company* into the future. ☑