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Glazedexpressions

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TILES
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Front Cover Image - 'A Bunch of Flowers' by Hilke Macintyre, 15 x 10 cm (2019) (Figure 13 from the following article).



Contemporary Tilemaker: Hilke Macintyre

Hilke Macintyre

Making ceramic reliefs was not a plan. I tried different routes into art & design before I discovered making pictures in clay which then developed into a steady tile production. Nowadays the ceramic reliefs which I produce in editions of 50 are a big part of my work as a professional artist alongside printmaking and painting. My work is widely exhibited in galleries throughout the UK.

Clay was introduced early in my life. My parents had discovered pottery as a hobby. My mother persevered, set up a small pottery in our house and made homeware with ash glazes. I grew up thinking that ceramics is something one can do. After school I studied architecture at the College for Art and Design in Kiel in northern Germany and worked for the next 5 years in architecture offices in Great Britain and Germany. In architecture I was more interested in the sculptural aspect: space, volume, structure and the design of surfaces as integrated art.

In 1996 I moved to Scotland to join my future husband, a Scottish artist, and focused more on art. At the Edinburgh Printmakers I got involved in linocutting, which quickly became my preferred printmaking technique as it is direct and hands on. I like the cut line and like the process of cutting to create an image. The resulting printing block in linoleum or wood is like a relief, tactile, you can feel the image with your hands.

On a holiday in Germany I rediscovered my mother's pottery and made some small pictures in clay, enjoying working three dimensionally, carving, cutting, adding clay and taking it away. Clay is a very flexible and forgiving medium to work with and the colour effects of the glazings intrigued me. I also liked the ceramic tile as an object. It is a small and sturdy piece of art that can be hung anywhere inside and outside. That they are an ancient form of decoration and are widely visible in our daily environment adds to their attraction (Figure 1).

When I started selling the reliefs and was asked to make copies, which meant at that time cutting each tile individually by hand, it was time to think more seriously about a way to make and multiply them. Being a printmaker I had the idea of treating the tiles like 3D prints and producing a design in editions. I acquired a small electric kiln, got some glazes from my mother, clay from a local pottery supplier and started experimenting with tile pressing in a plaster mould to edition them. I naively started cutting the design directly as a negative into a slab of plaster (Figure 2). That had its limits. Nevertheless I managed a few editions of 25 before I got hold of a book about tile making and progressed to the basic technique of reproducing a design by casting it into plaster.

I now carve the original design into hardened clay with a kitchen knife and various carving tools (Figure 3). This original relief is then cast in plaster (Figure 4). I tidy up the plaster mould and add more pattern. For each new copy a slab of soft clay is pressed into the plaster mould to get an almost identical relief (Figure 5). This pressed relief is finished by hand, carefully dried, fired for a first time, hand glazed (Figure 6) and fired again close to stoneware temperature. All ceramics are signed, have an edition number and a recessed hole in the back for hanging on a nail or a screw (Figures 7 and 8).



Fig. 1 - 'Village scene', 10 x 18 cm, hand built, one-off (1996).



Fig. 2 - 'Tea at Rinkmuir', 13 x 20 cm, low edition, created by pressing clay onto a carved plaster slab (1997).



Fig. 3 - Original relief cut in clay.



Fig. 4 - Plaster mould.



Fig. 5 - Pressing the tiles.



Fig. 6 - Glazing the tiles.



Fig. 7 - The finished tile 'Orchard with Black Hen', 25 x 25 cm (2021).

Working in editions is not only an advantage for selling it helps as well with the technical problems of making these kind of tiles. Because of the uneven thickness in a relief the tile might crack or warp. A replica can easily be made and the areas in the design that cause the problem can often be changed in the mould.

Being able to reproduce the tile offers the possibility to experiment with the glazing. I am very particular with the glazing. For every design I need a few glazing trials before I get the result I am happy with and will then apply to the whole edition. I use a variety of ready made glazes available from pottery supplies which I mix to obtain a certain shade of colour. Ceramic glazings have the added quality that they can vary from matt to glossy, which gives a different character to the colours and makes choosing the right glazings for a design very interesting.

I have stayed with this rather basic process of tile making now for over 20 years and only changed about 10 years ago from a white clay that showed the glazes clearer to a buff clay that gets a burnt effect in some areas. I now prefer this earthier feel. I sometimes miss the white clay for certain designs but working with 2 different clays complicates the production process so I rather keep to one clay. Over all I like to keep the technical part as easy as possible and concentrate on the design.

I work in a simplified figurative style, influenced by folk and indigenous art and the 20th century art movements. I had already developed a certain style in painting and printmaking which I then applied to my images in clay.



Fig. 8 - Back of the tiles.



Fig. 9 - 'Breakfast', 11 x 22 cm (2001).

The ceramic designs are always based on a figurative image. I think that using figurative and abstract elements together creates the strongest visual impact and expression. I enjoy colour, form and pattern and a certain symbolism in the depicted objects.

For subjects I like small daily happenings, plants, animals and my surroundings. A lot of inspiration comes from the Scottish East Coast where I live but as well from places I visit or travel to further away. People drinking or eating and gardens seem to feature high amongst my images.

My first tiles were quite rough (Figure 9) which I still find attractive but over the years I have become more interested in the single shapes and forms and the lines they create in the overall composition. With time my cutting technique became better, resulting in smoother and cleaner forms. These days I am rather thinking about the more defined forms and how to simplify a figure or object to get a certain expression and composition. Also I got more conscious about the shapes in between the figures. These shapes interest me just as much as designing the figure itself. I use the in between spaces a lot to tell more about the object they surround.

Working three dimensionally in clay involves the eye and hands to feel the shape while designing it. Pattern I use in a positive and negative form. I scratch pattern in the original clay design, they later appear indented or I scratch pattern into the plaster form which creates a raised pattern on the resulting pressed relief. Both patterns catch the glazing differently and can be used for certain effects. I especially like dots in various sizes, they appear either as little holes or bubbles. Linear patterns I use for direction and dynamic in an image. (Figures 10 and 11).

In a relief the sculpted piece remains attached to a solid background of the same material. Distinctions are made according to how far the sculpted form raises from the background. As well there is the sunk relief, where the image is cut into the background. I have used both methods, often within one image. My only restriction is that I need to be able to release the pressed clay slab from the plaster form, that means that I cannot undercut a form, ideally any raised form should be slightly tapered. There is a strange visual effect in reliefs where a slightly raised form appears to the viewer's eye more three



Fig. 10 - 'Walking the dog', 12 x 16.5 cm (2012).



Fig. 11 - 'Hairy Cat', 13.5 x 13.5 cm (2020).

dimensional than it actually is cut. Sometimes I leave the rectangular tile shape and give the design an irregular shape. Clay and tile making are giving me various possibilities to play around with figures and perspective.

Recently I have started to experiment with using a woodcut that I press into the clay as the basis for a tile design. The result is a quite flat relief, more a painting than a sculpture. I will explore this line further (Figure 12).

Because my tiles are often bought as gifts I have included over the years quite a few suitable designs like *A Bunch of Flowers* (Figure 13 - see Front Page) or people celebrating. Wedding tiles are particularly popular. Some designs are just memories. *Angel with Dog* depicts our little West Highland Terrier who is with the angels now (Figure 14).

Most of my ceramics are postcard size or 10 x 25 cm; double panels can measure up to 25 x 25 cm. Some of my work is made up of a series of related pieces such as *5 Course Meal* which extends to 15 x 50 cm (Figure 15). I always have a variety of sizes available. For the editioning process bigger multiple part designs are quite an undertaking but I would like to expand my designs to a bigger scale as a plan for the future. Often I have too many details I would like to show in a design and too little space, resulting in small scale figures and objects. I like making these busy designs but I would also like to explore more the abstraction of shapes and figures in a bigger scale. Tile making has so many possibilities. Sometimes I dream of going full circle and being able to get involved with the reliefs in architecture again.



Fig. 12 - 'The 3 Kings on their Way', 19 x 14 cm (2023).



Fig. 14 - 'Angel with Dog', 6 x 15 cm (2022).



Fig. 15 - '5 Course Meal - Starters, Mains, Pudding, Tea and Coffee, Cheese', 15 x 50 cm (2023).