

# What is it like to be human?

By Sharon Griffin

Through making figurative ceramic sculpture, I am gaining a deeper understanding of what it is like to be human. The complex process of using clay allows a tangible, physical experience as well as an emotional and psychological one. Using clay makes the 'thought' become 'reality'; one I can see, touch and reflect upon. Akin to the Jungian theory of shadow work within psychotherapy.

I share this wonderful sensory process with others and use the work as a way of forming connections through discussion and collaboration. The Unlockdown Project with Wayne Chisnall shown at COLLECT Open in 2022 at Somerset House is just one example of how tangible materials can be used to have a conversation.

**BOUND**  
Sharon Griffin and Wayne  
Chisnall 2020  
Photography : Kensa Creative



## Clay is my friend

My relationship with clay has been a lifelong experience. I grew up in a Telford Council estate in the 1970s and 80's with domestic violence and conflict within the home. I was a troubled child and found my freedom through playing outdoors, seeking refuge within children's play parks, surrounded by woodland. My earliest favourite memory of clay was playing with the soil in my nans back garden.

Image by Tall Boy Images 2020



FAUN  
2021

## People and Place

My hometown of Telford is situated within an area of outstanding natural beauty and is home to the birthplace of Industry, a juxtaposition of man-made industry and nature. I grew up knowing about the potteries, ancient local history and mining. I knew the names of trees and where to forage for fruits and berries (mostly for making home brew). My family was poor with a background of miners and manual labourers. By the 1980s, Telford was known for its factory work and social housing (with a garden!). An overspill of the surrounding cities (Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Liverpool) made Telford a diverse and multi-cultural town, yet by the time I went to secondary school, it had the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe.

I left home at 18 and sought an alternative lifestyle.

In the late 1990's I attended the University of Wolverhampton to study Ceramics as a fine art pathway where my initial interest in psychology and of 'people and place' began.

Since then, my interest in human behaviour developed. I had a 15-year career as an art Lecturer and in 2014 I became a full time artist. My work came to fruition in 2020 just before the lockdown in the UK. My work can now be seen in peoples' homes, art galleries and museums worldwide. This, to me is a testament to the need for change and an alternative narrative.

## How can we be Happy?

In February 2020, I went on a journey with my scientist/geologist friend to Norway. This short trip was a catalyst to my current work which concerns the concept of 'Freedom and Constraints'. That year was a time of lockdown, a universal question of environment arose.

Like many of my fellow potters, I still had access to my clay and got lost in the woods surrounding Telford and Wrekin; an area rich in wildlife. I felt lucky to be able to still access nature within my daily mile routine.

My work is more and more inspired by geology and storytelling, especially folklore and local stories told within communities. Through these stories, I explore the relationship between humanity and its environment. I am interested in questioning how these stories shape us and inform our decision making about how we live; where we live and why we live there. I am fortunate that I am born into a place of safety, without extreme conflict and I have more than my basic human needs met. The recent media coverage on refugees, Black Lives Matter and Me-Too movements add to my desire to question authority. What can I do about conflict and how can I make change happen?

This may seem like a complex narrative, but I see it as a simple one. How can we be Happy?

## Clay as a sharing experience

My current work focuses on how nature and environment effects the mind and body. At the time of lockdown, nature became very relevant to everyone living in the planet. There was a shared global experience of being fixed to a particular environment, whether this was chosen or otherwise.

I feel I can reach some form of happiness by getting lost within story telling, sharing a physical experience using a face or a body, which is relatable as we all have one. I use drawings from life but my figures are purely made up.

Perhaps clay can be used as a tool for breaking down conflicts and act as a physical sharing experience, helping to promote understanding and compassion. I would like to help promote this clay as a sharing experience for all to enjoy. Perhaps our politicians need it more than ever.



OUT OF THE WOODS  
H50cm 2021

## Methods of making

I like to make multiple works, producing many pieces at a time. I sketch, produce mind maps and use 'artist journals'. My drawings and research are a direct inspiration for my 3D sculpture.

In my workshop, separate from my home, I channel experiences and weave stories gathered to inform the sculpture. In the moment of making, I allow the clay to speak, letting it decide on what it wants to become. This is a very fast process. It takes me a long while to think but the making part is extremely quick and quite frenzied at times.

A flick here, a nudge there can make all the difference to whether a work is successful or not. My mood, environment and sense of self all have an effect on the making process. I can stand in front of a sculpture and ball my eyes out... other times, I can be afraid of what the clay reveals.

Once the sculpture is complete, I approach the clay as a fine artist, applying my own glazes, slips, engobes and found oxides and clays as my pallet. The work is once fired in an electric kiln.

## Influences

Artists who include emotional content in their work are an inspiration, especially those who seem unafraid of revealing part of themselves or their experiences as human beings. Artists such as Kiki Smith, Kathe Kollwitz and Jenny Saville share with us their emotional response to human condition. Ceramic artists such as Susan Halls and Christie Brown inspire me through their use of folklore and innovative making techniques.

Absorbing the world around me has an impact on how my work develops.

Sharon lives and works in Wellington, Shropshire.

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