

Phoebe Cummings, *Flowers, Birds and Fantasies*

Text by Victoria Woodcock

In an orange-walled room at the artist Glenn Brown's Georgian London townhouse, an intricate floral arrangement is positioned above a fireplace. The dense and elaborate profusion of blooms and leaves is laced with vines and strings of beads. It's ornately pieced together yet strikes a tone of faded grandeur. There's a Miss Havisham feel to the display. A handful of delicate petals and stems gather, fallen, on the mantelpiece below.

The piece is by Phoebe Cummings, created in her primary material: raw unfired clay. The sculpture was first shown at Camden Arts Centre. Transferring it to its new home required "repairs": Cummings explains: "*When I sell a piece like that, I guarantee it for 10 years. Temporality is intrinsic to her artwork. Her installations, like the flowers they depict, are not meant to last. In fact: "sometimes it's much more purposeful; they are designed to disintegrate."*

For the Risør Chamber Music Festival in 2023, for example, Cummings created a series of raw clay interventions that clung to the Norwegian coastline – tracing the lines of rock pools and nestling among mossy outcrops. Within two weeks they had all weathered away. She compares her ephemeral sculpture to music. "*Eventually it goes into the air,*" she says. "*But whereas no one's upset that the performance ends at seven o'clock, there is still a perception that sculpture has to last, it has to be solid. Actually, all materials are on some time scale."*

Cummings began working with ceramics at Brighton University. "*I thought I might do jewellery,*" she recalls of her time on the Three Dimensional Crafts course. "*But I just kept coming back to clay. I loved the immediacy of it. Whatever I could think of, the material was able to do."* It was while at the Royal College, studying ceramics and glass, that she began to explore the sculptural potential of clay in its unfired state, inspired by prehistoric sculptures, preserved in caves in southwest France, as well as contemporary land art. "*I was making larger things that I would photograph,*" she says. "*They were never really self-contained objects."*

As a fledgling artist, there was a freedom to working in this way. She didn't need a kiln and her creations weren't restricted by size or formal structure. Cummings says of her process: "*I can use wire, which I couldn't fire, to support things; I can just squash things together and not have to worry about air bubbles making it blow up in the kiln."* Yet her pieces possess a delicate finesse: rose-like corollas, peals of bell-shaped blossoms, assemblages of folds and fronds are all wrought with an awe-inspiring level of skill and dexterity.

"*With a lot of the work, even if it's fired, there's a sense of everything being made by hand,*" she says. That "*you can see the fingerprints*" only makes the inevitable demise of the artwork more poignant: "*I'm playing on that tension."*

The starting point for Cummings' new body of work being shown at Lyndsey Ingram was an 18th-century album of illustrations by French painter and designer Jean-Baptiste Pillement. "*They're all fantasy plants, but they're very botanically believable,*" she says of the detailed images. "*Some have shells or ribbons, some are almost like parasols or woven baskets."* Inspired by Pillement's rococo flourishes, Cummings constructs her own whimsical vision, first as drawing – sometimes in pencil, other times using clay on paper, "a bit like watercolour" – then as 3D studies. Both will be shown alongside a raw clay installation built within the gallery space, bringing together the form of decorative tassels with verdant vegetation.

Treading the line between the botanical and the fantastical is familiar ground. The "*back and forth between plant and ornament*" was something that Cummings first started to examine during her residency at London's V&A museum in 2010. "*I was really interested in the designs on historic ceramics,*" she explains. "*I was almost taking patterns back into a three-dimensional environment."*

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Lyndsey Ingram
20 Bourdon Street
London W1K 3PL

T. +44 (0)20 7629 8849
E. info@lyndseyingram.com
W. lyndseyingram.com

Her installation at the British Ceramics Biennale in Stoke-on-Trent in 2013 was based on the design for a 19th-century transfer-printed plate, produced by Spode as well as several other Staffordshire manufacturers. Presented in the former Spode factory floor, *After the Death of the Bear* was a lifesize raw-clay reimagining of the landscape in the original sporting scene. An extension of smaller works presented in glass cases, the sculpture was surrounded with sheets of plastic tarpaulin, existing within its own humid ecosystem – a set-up that both preserved the precarious malleability of material and created a hauntingly eerie atmosphere.

"I became much more interested in how the material enacts its own performance," says Cummings, who enjoys the creative improvisation required by producing her work directly on site. *"The plan can only ever be quite loose because there's a lot of pushback from the material. It's a very different process to making things in the studio and editing them; you have to accept that it's never going to be exactly how you want. You have to live with the mistakes because you know it's a one-shot thing."*

How to record such ephemeral work is a question she continually asks herself. *"It's not so much about keeping the object but about archiving it in different ways,"* she says. As well as using photography and film, she is currently experimenting with written and drawn documentation. It's a process that ties in with her work at the University of Westminster, where she teaches ceramics, but is also working on a three-year project being carried out by the institution's Ceramics Research Centre in conjunction the V&A, looking at how museums can collect artworks that don't exist as singular, solid objects. At Lyndsey Ingram, Cummings' raw-clay installation will be in-situ for three weeks. *"Then it will just be recycled,"* she says matter of factly. The brevity of its existence is very much part of its beauty.

Phoebe Cummings is open to the public at Lyndsey Ingram, 16 Bourdon Street, London W1K 3PH Monday to Friday between the 2 – 19 June 2026 from 10am until 6pm.

For any further information please contact info@lyndseyingram.com or call +44 (0) 207 629 8849.