

The London-based artist talks to *Imogen Greenhalgh* about her residency in Italy, her love of maiolica and why violence appeals

Drawing on life's brutality

Emma Hart



You've been spending a lot of time in Faenza recently. Talk me through that.

I won the Max Mara Art Prize for Women, and the award is six months in Italy. The last part of the residency was in Faenza, which is the ceramics capital of Italy. It was practical, a lot of making. And I did quite a bit of looking, too. There's the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, they have one of the best ceramics collections in the world. I'd already worked in ceramics for a bit, but I was interested to find out about maiolica.

Why maiolica in particular?

I've always been interested in how a document or record or a photograph can flip over into being a live object with agency. For instance, in the 16th century a wedding plate would be made in maiolica to record a wedding; if you didn't have one it was a little like you weren't actually married. The object is more than a gift, it has a role. I also really got into the pinch pot jugs. I love them, they're so violent. A record of where the mediaeval potter had their fingers. I love clay for that. It's immediate, but forever a record of a person's hands.

How did you think you'd incorporate this into your work?

Before I went to Italy, an interest of mine had been applying photographs to ceramics using decals and I thought I'd be continuing that because there's a line of maiolica called *istoriato*, where they paint images onto ceramics. But when I got there I became interested in patterned maiolica. The big surprise for me was that I abandoned narrative images and got gripped by patterns, repeats, fragments and then crucially started to design my own.

How did your relationship with ceramics begin?

I started doing ceramics in 2012 after a residency at the Wysing Arts Centre. I just learnt off videos on YouTube. I was meant to be doing a performance around speech and language and that sort of thing, but I was so bored of myself. I was hanging out in the ceramics studio with Jonathan Baldock, another artist and a good friend of mine. One day he chucked a bit of clay at me and said, 'there you go'. It was life changing, opening a door in my

head I didn't know was there.

What did you study?

My first degree was in photography. I just got beaten up by the rules.

Technical rules, do you mean?

Rules around techniques but also around viewing. Especially in documentary photography, there's quite a clear idea of what is a good photograph and what isn't... There's an established way of encountering images.

Were there any photographers you did admire?

I've been thinking about Bill Brandt a bit lately, his black-and-white nudes. I've always been into these kind of high-contrast images. But the photographer who really got me through was John Hilliard, a conceptual photographer. I went to the Slade to be taught by him.

Where else do ideas come from?

I've always read a lot of fiction, and been interested in how literature is constructed. In Italy I enjoyed reading Elsa Morante. And at the moment I'm reading Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. I've always been fascinated by how the novel deals with interior space and exterior space. The capacity of the sentence to zoom you in and out has always made me think.

What about other visual artists?

I collaborate with Jonathan Baldock, we've got a show together coming up at Grundy Art Gallery. I've learned a lot from him, especially around his use of colour. Also Enrico David and Carol Rama. What I really value in Enrico's work is that something might look quite sophisticated and well produced, but it still seethes with this raw, intense power. And I like Rama's honesty. And the violence. To be honest, when I'm working constantly I find it hard to find the time to look at things. Yesterday, I was in my garden and the neighbour's kid threw a dart over the wall. Things like that stick with me. I'm working with this collage of images in my mind but lots of them come through the brutality of life. *'Mamma Mia!'* is at Whitechapel Gallery, London, 12 July – 3 September. *'Love Life: Act 2'* with Jonathan Baldock is at Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, until 12 August. www.emmahart.info



Left: a maiolica wedding dish produced in Faenza, c.late 15th century, with a portrait of Iulia Bela. Right: *The Assumption of Weee*, Enrico David, 2014



Above: *Appassionata*, Carol Rama, 1940. Left: *Mamma Mia!*, Emma Hart, work in progress at Museo Carlo Zauli, Faenza. Below: *Out damn'd spot!*, Jonathan Baldock, 2016, from *Love Life: Act I* with Emma Hart



'I really got into the pinch pots. I love clay. It's immediate, but forever a record of a person's hands'