

Elemental influences



Sotis Filippides came to London from Greece 35 years ago and built a successful career making ceramics for top high-street stores. *Ellen Bell* discovers the background to his success and his unique making process



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Stotis Filippides is an optimist. A maker of elegant ceramics ranging from small vessels to monumental wall-mounted installations, this optimism carried him through the Covid-19 lockdown earlier this year. While his showroom at London's OXO Tower was shut to visitors, Filippides continued to make in his studio behind. With the majority of commissions coming through interior designers impatient to satiate their clients' desire to embellish the homes they had been forced to spend an inordinate amount of time in, business was good for Filippides. 'I sold a lot of installations,' he says. 'I even put a sign on the door saying I'll deliver – and I had a lot of calls.'

This kind of entrepreneurial spirit pervades Filippides' approach to his practice. Raised in the centre of Athens, the son of a plastics factory owner, his father's commercial acumen made a deep impression. 'My father was very good at knowing how to make money,' he explains. Describing himself as an artistic child who hated school but spent hours alone drawing and painting, Filippides recounts how it was his father who steered him towards ceramics. 'He had a friend who had a ceramics factory making plates and cups and saucers and he thought maybe I could do that.' After his degree at Athens' School of Ceramics his father intervened again and sent his son to London to learn English.

CLASSES & COMMISSIONS

London was a revelation. 'I loved London so much. I felt at home when I came here,' explains Filippides. Enrolled on an English Language course at Hammersmith College,

he began attending ceramics classes there, learnt raku and then taught it. 'I had a really good time. I was free, I was away from home. I'd met my first partner and I was living in a beautiful place,' he adds. Emboldened by the chutzpah of the young, Filippides walked into The Conran Shop one day and asked to speak to the head buyer. 'She liked my work and I ended up supplying 80 per cent of their ceramics,' he divulges.

Commissions from Liberty and Harrods followed. 'I had a really profitable business, I was making money and also learnt a lot from talking to people,' he reveals. Renting a market stall first at Covent Garden and then in Ealing, Filippides cut his professional teeth by conversing with customers. 'I learnt what they liked, what they could afford and how to convince them that my work is good.'

Filippides' decision to then return to education and study for another ceramics degree is a bemusing one, one that he puts down to Britain's 'snob-value.' The University of Westminster refused him on the grounds that they didn't take 'already established' students. The Harrow School of Art was more forthcoming and offered him a scholarship. He stayed a year. 'They wanted me to stop every connection with Liberty, Conran and Harrods,' he explains. 'I had a big problem with that.'

Filippides' memories of Harrow are vague. His eight years at Hammersmith are more distinct, particularly as it was there that he was first introduced to the Stoke-on-Trent crank clay that he has used for the last 35 years. 'It was amazing for me,' he says. Remembering the clay

Images: courtesy of the artist



in Greece in the 1980s Filippides is scathing: 'Red or grey, it was terrible. It wasn't flexible and I couldn't control it. We didn't have the best materials in Greece, they were fairly bad quality, so when I came to London I was amazed at what was available.'

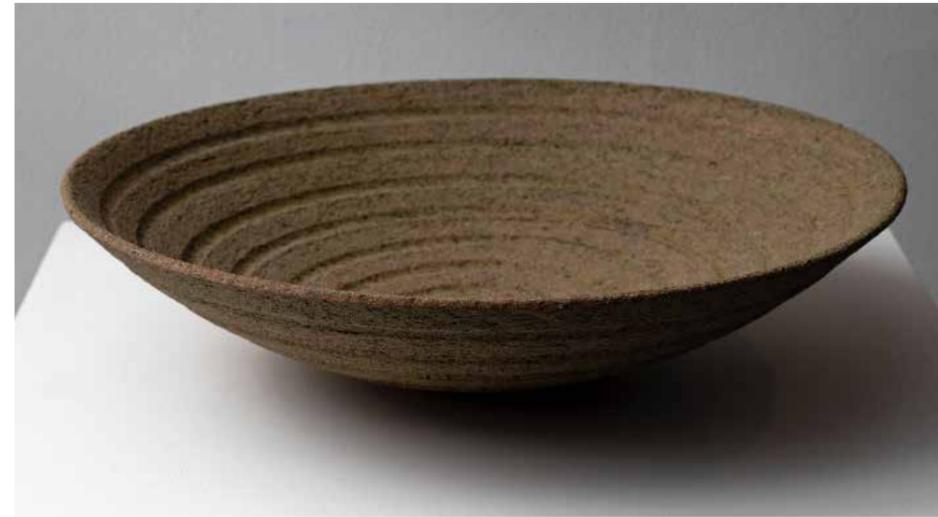
CLAY & GLAZES

Filippides relishes the familiarity of the crank. 'I know how to manipulate it,' he explains. 'I have a rough idea when I glaze something how it is going to turn out. I know my clay and its reactions and the temperatures. I do things because I enjoy them and I enjoy this clay.' He mentions his delight when, coming across a magazine article about Grayson Perry recently, in one of the studio images he saw exactly the same clay that he uses.

His approach to glazes is less conformist. 'I create my own glazes with different chemicals and oxides but I use them in a totally unorthodox way. Colleges would tell you not to do that because it would fail, but my glazes work,' he says. It amuses him that, because of the transparent luminosity of his glazes, many potters assume he uses a gas kiln when in fact his kiln is electric. 'With my blues, greens and shiny whites, they ask how I can do it.'

But it is in his application of gold and platinum that Filippides is at his boldest. 'I used to hate gold. The way they used it in Greece and Turkey was really tacky.' However, he was prompted to use them while preparing for his first exhibition in the United Arab Emirates. 'I was going to go to Dubai with sandy colours and black and





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everybody said that that would be a disaster because they like gold,' he explains. It was an astute move, culminating last year in a commission to create a series of lamps and a large wall piece for a bedroom in the Qasr Al Watan, the Presidential palace in Abu Dhabi.

Filippides buys his gold from Italy. 'It's 24-carat gold in liquid form. I apply it on the shiny surface of the ceramic and then fire it to 720°C,' he reveals. 'In the firing all the chemicals in the liquid gold burn out and you end up with a crust of gold on the surface. My gold is not a bright gold. The shinier the glaze, the shinier the gold. I don't like that, so I apply oxide underneath to destroy the glaze.'

The gold surfaces meld from matt to lustre – a kind of 'wavy-gold' that he describes as 'fox-mirrored gold.' At over £100 a gram, liquid gold is an expensive commodity and one that can only be supported by the promise of clients. Errors in the firing can still happen but Philippides is sanguine: 'I used to have mistakes and problems but not so much any more,' he explains.

SUCCESS & ASPIRATIONS

There's something refreshing about Philippides' openness regarding his commercial success, a singularity that also defines his attitude to the ethnicity of his work. 'I left

Greece 35 years ago,' he says. 'I try not to think of Greece when I make but of course my experiences come from there – from the heat and the shiny surfaces of the water.' It appears water is the constant. 'All my installations relate to water: raindrops, bubbles, the flow of water underground. I love water.' And now he has a studio that looks out onto the Thames. 'Yes,' he says, laughing. 'I love it. I just wish I could swim in it.'

His work ethic, range, output and reach are astounding (typified by a recently completed commission for MGM's casino in Las Vegas comprising over 260 pieces). And yet for all the private collections of his work, the yearly showings at international art fairs and the collaborations with luminary designers like Annemette Beck, it is Philippides' forays into the established world of art and ceramic institutions, such as his solo show in Galerie Besson in 2010 and his invitation to demonstrate at the Tate Modern last year, that he seems to value most. 'A long time ago someone asked me what I wanted and I said a solo exhibition at the Tate Modern,' Philippides laughs. 'You never know.' 

For more details visit sotis.co.uk