

"It's funny how certain shapes emerge from certain people," says the Margate-based ceramic artist Abigail Simpson of her stoneware vessels, currently being exhibited at the Willer gallery in London. "These feminine, rounded shapes have been coming out of me for more than 20 years, and any time I try to deviate, I end up back where I'm comfortable."

Just opened, this is her first British solo show in six years. Simpson, whose work has been bought by Annie Lennox and Donna Karan, has been busy crafting her handmade, large-scale vessels since her early twenties, after graduating from drama school ("That life wasn't for me"), having a son at 23 and stumbling into a local pottery class in east London, where she found a creche to help her take care of her baby. "Both my parents are artists [her father is the celebrated painter Michael Simpson], so for a while I resisted following in their footsteps, but, actually, my father has ended up being the greatest influence. He's currently teaching me to sketch."

Simpson's work feels robust and confident in both proportion and construction and is often presented in theatrical clusters. "I'm not really into delicate little pieces. I work by hand in the traditional African way, not on a wheel, which means I'm rolling out coils, really scrunching the clay with my hands and slowly building up the forms," she says. "I tend to work on several pieces at once, so there's an architectural feel as everything grows around me on the table. I think of the vessels almost like family, which is why I love seeing them curated in groups."

This latest exhibition — made in her studio in a Victorian ice works in Margate, where she moved six years ago — is an exercise in expert glazing, with beautifully subtle lustrous tones of copper, bronze and raw blacks. It is a collaborative effort with the gallery owner, Rebecca Willer. "I was taken with Abigail's work when I first saw it," says Willer. "It was clear that the scale of her pieces, the contemporary reference to timeless classical

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forms and the refined glazes she uses would complement our existing collections. Her approach to working on a large scale is exciting, as is her ability to coax such sensuous and elegant shapes from clay."

The result is a collection of 10 new pieces in earthy black finishes and soft metallic tones, achieved by hand-painting the glaze and firing each piece three times. "I've been working for a long time now with very textured pieces," says Simpson. "For this series I decided I wanted to go back to the pure form. I've got so much pleasure from focusing on shape. I was using a very gritty black clay that's so beautiful to work with, it feels like you're really in touch with the earth, it's so raw. I've also contrasted it with a very smooth black clay. I love the mix of masculine and feminine, the rough and organic with something far more luscious."

Firing her work, she says, is an emotional trip: "You put so much time and energy into making a pot, and once it's in the kiln, it's in the lap of the kiln gods and totally out of your control. I find that quite difficult. If you paint a painting or make a piece of furniture, you can sort of deconstruct it if it goes wrong and make it again. But with ceramics, once it comes out, it's done and it is what it is. I have a garden full of wrong pots."

Up next is an exhibition planned for Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2014. Her American gallerist, Ralph Pucci International, is opening a vast new space in the Miami Design District and is commissioning 12 giant pieces, each up to 8ft high, which will take a year to make. "It's a massive industrial garage space, so I'm working on site-specific, huge, modernist, sculptural pieces in black, gritty clay. I'm thinking of exhibiting my drawings too. This really is a dream project." ♦

New Lustre ceramic vessels by Abigail Simpson is at Willer, London W8, until October 10; www.willer.co.uk



The ceramicist Abigail Simpson with some of the vessels from her New Lustre show; pieces from £3,700

EARTH MOTHER

WITH HER OVERSIZED POTS NOW ON SHOW IN LONDON, ABIGAIL SIMPSON TELLS BECKY SUNSHINE WHY SHE LOVES WORKING WITH CLAY