



## Force in NUMBERS

*Those who buy Sophie Cook's beautiful and elegant porcelain pots often find themselves coming back for more*

FEATURE **CAROLINE WHEATER** PHOTOGRAPHS **SARAH CUTTLE**

**M**ost days Sophie Cook has her hands full. First, she has two sons under five to look after. Second, there's a virtual nursery of ceramics to tend to: raw clay to prepare, newly thrown pots to dry, glazes to apply. 'Sometimes I start at six in the morning if I have got a big order on. My youngest son runs around creating havoc, so I have to be very organised,' says Sophie, who today has handed childcare duties to her partner Matt and firmly closed the door to her studio, a converted garage at their elegant home in Dulwich, south London.

A wall of white shelves displays her ceramics of all sizes in 'Bottle', 'Pod', and the

new 'Teardrop' shape. The range of coloured glazes – including yellow, acid green, orange and more muted tones of dove grey and aubergine – is uplifting as sunlight streams through the windows. 'When I was at college I hated all the murky ceramics and lumpiness. My pots are about creating colour and simple forms that can be built up as a group,' says Sophie, who has always loved still life painting and is inspired by the work of Giorgio Morandi and Picasso.

Sophie's story has been one of success. Now 37, she has porcelain pieces in various museum collections, including The Geffrye Museum of the Home, Manchester Art Gallery and the Indianapolis Museum of

Art. In 2002 she won the Adrian Sassoon Award for Arts of the Kiln at the Chelsea Crafts Fair. And in 1997, when she was a new graduate of Camberwell College of Arts, she was commissioned by both the interiors shop Designers Guild and fashion designer Nicole Farhi – the latter a result of a small story in *World of Interiors* magazine, which had spotted her work at the graduate show 'New Designers'. Yet despite the plaudits, her output has stayed affordable, from £120 a piece.

### HONING TALENT

Creativity is in Sophie's blood. Her father is a photographer, her mother paints and, from ►



**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Sophie kneads a slab of porcelain clay before throwing; she uses a metal 'kidney' to shave away excess clay; Sophie concentrates hard while coaxing up the spinning clay vessel; at one point in the throwing process, Sophie pulls up the clay from inside the pot  
**FACING PAGE** 'Pod' and 'Teardrop' shapes in matt, satin and shiny glazed finishes



ROADSHOW EXPERT  
Will Farmer



#### COLLECTING SOPHIE COOK

'Sophie's ceramics have a fresh and contemporary feel yet, because of their elegant form, could sit as happily on a Mies van der Rohe coffee table as on an 18th-century bow front chest. I love how her designs hark back to post-war Scandinavian pottery and glass. Her shapes are so simple yet beautifully crafted - they're achingly precise and finely finished. I love the way she selects colours too: they are bright but not brash and very easy to live with.

'She has come a long way over the last decade, with her work becoming much more refined. Her current collection is perfectly worked. Every artist produces landmark pieces at distinctive times in their career and perhaps these will prove to be so. Her work will always be considered elegant and, for collectors, will be money well spent.'



## ‘Three different types of glaze finish add to the candy shop feel of her work’

a young age, she and her brother and sister were encouraged to make things. 'As children we stayed in a cottage in Aldeburgh in Suffolk for holidays. From the age of eight I'd make painted stones and clay wizard figures and sell them from the window.'

It's no surprise then that after school in Greenwich she completed a foundation course in art, specialising in textiles, followed by a ceramics degree. 'My sister was just graduating from a textiles degree course and told me there were no jobs,' she says by way of explanation.

#### QUALITY CONTROL

Sophie works most days in her studio and throws on average four pieces a day, 'Two of which I won't be happy with, for the shape or the glaze,' she says. First thing, she kneads several pounds of porcelain clay to remove the air bubbles and make it pliable for working on her potter's wheel. Once thrown, she leaves each piece to dry for a couple of days before carving away little strips of clay around those narrow necks using a potter's 'kidney' to make the dimensions even finer. Several days later, the pots are biscuit fired then spray-glazed in a small cubicle in her studio. Three different types of glaze finish add to the candy shop feel of her work: there's ultra matt, a highly tactile satin matt, and a recently introduced shiny glaze as luscious as a boiled sweet. 'No one liked it at first but it's now as popular as the matt.'

The glazing process is followed by a final 24-hour firing and an uncertain outcome for her ceramics. 'I'm very fussy about my pots, so I get a lot of seconds,' says Sophie. Take note: the seconds go on sale twice a year at Cockpit Arts Deptford, the workshop collective at which she was based from 2002-08, before the children arrived.

#### RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Porcelain has a reputation of being hard to work with but Sophie coaxes the creamy white clay into organic shapes with ease. 'I've been working with porcelain since the third year of college. I find it easier to manipulate than other clays and it's semi-translucent, so it has a lovely glow when it's finished,' she says.

Although she likes to listen to Radio London, when she throws the studio is quiet. 'You have to be calm and focused to throw well,' she says. 'It is a meditative process that requires a lot of concentration.' Watching her make a tall bottle it becomes apparent why. At one point she has to insert her arm up to her elbow into the spinning tubular form, as she pulls the clay up from the inside - one false move and the whole thing collapses around her. 'I have three chances to pull up each pot on the wheel. After that the clay starts to split and it just doesn't work.'

Although the shapes evolve gradually over time, her ceramics are designed to sit in harmony together and she has customers who buy a new piece every year. 'One lovely couple have about 70 pots. I also made them an installation of 40 small bottles to be displayed on three shelves.' Indeed, Sophie is delighted to create groupings for customers, relishing the opportunity to create a still life of pots. She advises first-time buyers to start with a 'Pod' shape because 'it will sit happily on its own'. But not for long, one suspects. ■

❖ Sophie's work is available to buy direct (07880 524514; [sophiecook.com](http://sophiecook.com)) and also from Designers Guild (020 7351 5775; [designersguild.com](http://designersguild.com)). The next Cockpit Arts Deptford sale of Sophie's seconds will take place from 22nd-24th June (020 8692 4463; [cockpitarts.com](http://cockpitarts.com)).



**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Sophie loves combining hot tones with more muted shades; Sophie at her potter's wheel with a tall 'Teardrop', her newest shape of pot, in the making; a group of biscuit-fired porcelain bottles await glazing; a leather-hard 'Pod', left to dry for two days after throwing, is shaved to make its aperture even finer  
**FACING PAGE** Plastic pots of powdered glaze

