

# A Kiln of One's Own: The Work of Kathy Kranias

Written by Lera Kotsyuba

**M**aking is about movement. The sinuous malleability of clay, the direction of hands upon the surface, the tension between maker and material. Drawing from myth, and her dance background, ceramicist Kathy Kranias moulds and transforms clay to not only tell a story, but to capture movement and emotion. And while there is an absence of a figurative body in her work, there is a trace and memory of the artist's gesture. Kranias' sculptural work is as meditative as it is spontaneous. Ceramics demands precision as well as patience, yet is infinitely diverse in its many forms. Kranias' vessel forms bring to mind a long history of clay referencing the female body, while simultaneously capturing the experiences of the maker's life: muse, motherhood, making.

An important element for making is time, and how it's measured. From the working of clay by hand, to waiting for that leather-hard stage, air drying, kiln firing, all measurements of quantifiable time. Yet life is less orderly. Time for making is siphoned and tucked away, revealed in quiet moments in inspiration and hard work. Priorities of family and public life interfere, yet the driving force is the act of creation. The need for it. And in those moments siphoned from your other life, it's worth it when you create something tangible.

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The need for one's own space is one that has followed women since the establishment of patriarchal systems. In ceramics, the act of making is its own revolution. Motherhood is a wellspring of emotion and inspiration, but finding time to create work while raising children is a challenge in a patriarchal system that does not account for child rearing in its creation cycle. Raising young children is often relegated to one parent, and being a young artist at the same time is a difficult juggling act. Responsibilities pull in opposite directions, and time for making is delegated into segments of priorities. No muse guides hands that are busy with the everyday motions of housework and childcare. What can be gleaned from weeks and months and years spent away from the malleability of clay?

Shaping and moulding clay, bringing to life something with the care and work of your hands is akin to creating life, giving birth to your art. And thus motherhood changes you: you are caring for, working for, and loving clay like you do your children. Teaching and learning in turn, clay is receptive and grows with you as your practice does. Kranias' practice has evolved over time, engaging with Greek mythology, motherhood, and the prominence of the maker's hand.

**I am a dancer**, 2011,  
press molded paperclay,  
glazes, 12 x 9.5 x 6 in  
(30.5 x 24 x 15.25 cm).  
Image credit: Marina  
Dempster.



In this is the multivalent expression of womanhood: showing growth, transformation, the change inherent in motherhood, and clear markers of time.



**Persephone Emerges,**  
2009, earthenware  
clay, glazes, 13.75 x  
13.75 in (35 x 35 cm).  
Image credit: Marina  
Dempster.

In her earlier work, Kranias' figurative sculptures engage the long history of the female form captured in statuary and decorative art through vessel forms. In her sculptures, the body is caught mid-movement, between one moment and the next. Kranias' background in dance informed her early explorations in the movement of clay, its elasticity and ability to stretch and hold entrancing forms. Her later vessel work follows a long line of historic ceramic vessel forms. Vases, pitchers, myths and legends abound museum collections, decorated with stories and histories in pictorial form. Kranias draws upon her Greek heritage to reinterpret vessel making, bringing together the movement of the maker's physical manipulations, with a vessel form. Often in reference to the female body, its physicality raw, emoting joy, pain, loss, euphoria.

Kranias works in series, with clearly defined allotments of time imbued in each work. This exploration shows the temporal meanderings of artistic fervour, as well as real life incumbent upon the work.

Stepping away from figurative representation, yet still referencing the body, Kranias' *Earth/Sky* series features hollow forms of flora and fauna that directly influence the feeling of clay as it is constructed. The forms undulate upward, as if spinning in place (a recurring theme in her work, culminating in the *Danaid* series). A cracked, raw texture to the base showcases the material element of the clay itself, as well as the work of the maker's hand building upwards, a tree establishing roots, a body seeking connection to gravity and the sky at once. *Molten Earth* (1994) depicts the worked core, foundational elements at play with the delicate tips as fungi growth, as leaves, as hands extending outwards. Even the untrained eye can see where the presence of the artist's hands made impressions in the clay, scored and shaped and fluted the material to express a longing, nurtured upward towards the sun. Here Kranias employs vibrant glazes, mixing the fiery reds of raw clay with almost metallic grey-blues in glazes, natural materials from an alien world, ones that invite attention, seeking to connect with others. Yearning and euphoria emote through the very forms of the work, reaching upwards in aspiration.

In a return of her figurative work, Kranias' *Becoming the Persephone* series was an exploration of a different method of making, one of storytelling. Working on seemingly functional objects of plates and platters, symbols of connection and gathering in their relation to food and company; Kranias explores in this series a contemplation of not only the subject matter, but roles of womanhood. Plates, food and preparation are linked with the traditionally feminine role, and here Kranias juxtaposes functional/non-functional ceramics, food/story, maiden/motherhood.

The *Kore/Persephone* myth of a young girl transformed into a woman wielding great power in this series is told through shaped plates, with etching and deep glazes. Viewed from above, the plates are almost time capsules, each holding a particular moment: from *Kore* (2008) to *Persephone Emerges* (2009) and *Diamond Queen* (2009), the story unfolds in clay. From a two dimensional plate with minimal etching, growing upwards through upheaval, layers of clay unfurl peeling back to uncover a face. Gone is any semblance of functional plate, here emerges a work of art. The layers of *Persephone Emerges* (2009) are raw, jagged, coloured by multiple firings to draw attention to its creation in the kiln, the effect that of emerging from the ash. Recalling the transformative element, ground granules turn to glass in the glaze, only the centre has the liquid quality of new growth, a new self. Its size is on a human scale, and while not realistically rendered, the face holds a poignancy of being certain in one's self, an assertion, knowledge, and embrace of one's power.

The *Danaid* series continues an exploration of the female form, as well as engagement with the history of vessels, and their reference to the female form. In her own words:

*I was thinking about the female body and its miraculous function as a vessel. A vessel of contradiction, perhaps: able to contain and carry another being, another body, while containing the woman herself. Able to release into the world the being that is carried, and still remain full. I wanted to capture this paradox in clay: the vessel that is perpetually full, even when empty.*

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This tension between the apparent fullness and emptiness of the vessel creates a movement for the form. At once a garment, drawing from her earlier *Garment* (1994) series, to the invisible body encased within, invisible to the eye but visible to our interpretation and understanding of the work. *I am a dancer* (2011) is hand-built, shaped and moulded of paper clay, a juxtaposition of fragility and strength. The glaze is vibrantly hued; coral, turquoise and deep blue recall water and its multifaceted power, soft and gentle as well as ferocious. The form stretches upwards and outwards at once, caught in a moment as if twirling and dancing across the air – with only gravity holding it to the earth. Imprints of hands and fingers prevent the form from being too rigid. It is organic and strides forward with an elegance and determination.

Caught, as if frozen in time, *Invisibility Cloaks* (2018-2019) flutters and hovers over the ground, as ephemeral as air, as tangible as their bright glaze. Ceramic forms in the work of Kathy Kranias follow an unheard music, as if dancing upon air. Their grace and the plume of form akin to gowns float across the ground to music we cannot quite hear. Their forms are more assured, less ephemeral than that of the *Danaid* series.

The running glazes of *Invisibility Cloak I* (2018) create a mirror image of trees and their reflection – perhaps upon water – suggestive of the boundary between our world and the underworld. Longer root systems sprawl downward, a descent mimicking Persephone's descent into the underworld. Running across the form with a water-like quality, the folds and cracks in the clay form create divots and waterways descending downwards. Here Kranias explores the human form through myth, as the *Invisibility Cloaks* are at once armour and a vessel. Reclamation of not only history but the myth of Persephone and of female empowerment runs throughout much of Kranias' work. The figures glide upon the ground, the body absent but psychologically present, the hardened glaze filling cracks like armour to protect its wearer.

The juxtaposition between soft clay hardened when fired, sand transformed to glass, and a vessel that is both full and empty at once

continue to be central themes in Kranias' new series in porcelaineous stoneware. The *Wings* series is also hand-built. Each *feather* pressed together, irregular indentations showing the human touch of sculpting, the vessel form asymmetrical to give the impression of where hands may press to hold it.

In *Growing Wings* (2017), this impression of holding; the cradling of a vessel whose wings are emerging, reaching upwards like that of a child whose metaphorical wings are manifest in this vessel. The soft off-white of the stoneware brings to mind the fragility of porcelain, and grants the vessel a raw, organic quality that recalls not something unfinished, but something that is not yet fully grown. The unglazed clay is without glass armour, a new beginning emerging from an old self of bone and glass to strive towards a new future.

Kranias' practice is constantly informed by movement and transformation. Clay is shaped and worked into sculptural vessel forms that imply a change to the state of self. Whether balanced as if floating or reaching upward/outward, the clay yearns for our gaze as if simulating human touch. Movement to draw the eye; frozen in time as if waiting with bated breath to be seen, to be acknowledged, seen past seeming fragility, the sculptural vessels yearn to be seen as they are, strong at their core. Like maiden to mother, from Kore to Persephone, the works transform before our eyes – alight with their inner strength.

Movement is captured in Kranias' vessel forms that recall the female body, bridging historic references with contemporary expression. The series she created spanning her practice flows into one another – following her from youthful figuration to vessel juxtapositions – bringing her to clay stripped bare of decoration, transformed for the new phase of her career. For what is clay but a reflection of ourselves? Kranias is raw and genuine with her expression and exploration of emotion; her work is a physical manifestation of her life. In this is the multivalent expression of womanhood: showing growth, transformation, the change inherent in motherhood, and clear markers of time. ■

**Growing Wings**, 2017, hand-built porcelain. 18 x 6 x 6 in (45.75 x 15.25 x 15.25 cm). Image credit: Marina Dempster

### About the Author

Lera Kotsyuba is an editor, art critic and art historian based in Toronto. Working across disciplines in architectural history and craft, she has recently been working as a contributing writer and researcher for various publications, including *FUSION Magazine*, *GLASHAUS*, and *Urban Glass*. Lera has also edited a new book by Sarah Hall entitled *A Thousand Colours*, and convened a session at the 2017 *Canadian Craft Biennale on Craft and Public Art*. Lera is currently the Managing Editor of *Studio Magazine*.

