

PROFILE

RIGHT: Into the kiln . . . Jewellery designer Tracey Spurgin loads another piece of silver clay for firing

PICTURES: SIMON KENCH



WILL RAMSEY meets a member of the Silver Art Clay Guild and a qualified instructor in the craft to find out all about her unusual creations

'Magic' that turns clay into silver

In a red brick farm building, set in the gently rising farmland above Bishop Burton, a very modern form of alchemy takes place. And although it's far removed from the potions of medieval scholars, it doesn't mean it's any less magic.

Here, in a well-lit workshop, jeweller Tracey Spurgin takes putty-coloured art clay silver – a by-product of the film and printing industries – and creates intricate jewellery.

"It's almost like alchemy," said Tracey, as she busies herself with her latest set of creations – a series of finely-shaped rings.

"Taking a piece of clay and creating a piece of silver jewellery out of it nearly defies belief – it's such an exciting thing to work with."

Tracey, who is originally from Liverpool, has worked in art and design since her college days.

Trained in fashion design and textiles – she is also a skilled dressmaker – her introduction to art clay silver came by chance.

"I had been at a craft fair, when I came across some polymer clay teddy bears," she said.

"It was a material I had worked in before, some 20 years previously, and was interested in exploring again. But as I was looking on the Internet I saw mention of silver clay and was captivated by the idea."

Metal clay, a soft and unprepossessing lump in its raw form, was developed in Japan during the early 1990s – using the precious



metals, such as silver, left over from the creation of cinematic film or the printing process.

The clay contains tiny particles of silver or gold, mixed together with an organic binder that burns off when fired.

"With it being such a squidgy product, you can roll it out into a sheet as you would pastry," said Tracey, as she puts the final touches to a delicately-beaded ring.

"It can be rolled on to a mandrel to make a ring, or shaped into pendants."

Once the material is dried – in its pre-firing form it is as delicate as plaster – extra designs can be added. For the swirls and beading featured on the latest set of rings, Tracey had used a syringe in much the

same way a piping bag is used on a wedding cake.

The designs are then fired, either with a blow torch or in an oven, which reveals the silver as the binder burns away.

Given the malleability of the clay, the creations are limited only by the imagination of the jeweller. And in Tracey's case that's something hardly in short supply.

In the glass cabinets at her studio are a dazzling mix of different designs – star-shaped pendants, leaves, hearts, even a skyscraper ring, featuring three towers inspired by a recent trip to Chicago for an international conference for art clay jewellers.

She's modest enough to say that much of the appeal for students – Tracey also runs a series of workshops at the studio and across Britain – is the simplicity of shaping the clay.

But the desire to push ahead with her own skills – she's currently taking the Master's Registry, a series of 50 challenging projects set out by a group of American silversmiths and artists – means that the work on show is getting ever more complex.

The heart-shaped pendants, for example, appear to be made from a web of silver. Created by Tracey piping thin strips of art clay silver over a solid piece of heart-shaped cork clay – which burns into nothing in the kiln – the finished design is a delicate lattice of silver work.

"I enjoy the experimental side of things," said Tracey.

"I have been working on hinges, so I can create small silver boxes – the issue is that they are so fiddly. With sterling silver, there are other elements, such as copper, which gives it strength.

"With the clay, it is 99.9 per cent pure silver, so it's more brittle – the challenge is how to give it thickness and depth."

Alongside the complex pieces of jewellery are those which are simpler in style.

Tracey estimates a plain ring will take around an hour to make, with the more embellished designs – some of which are inset with coloured glass "lampwork beads" created by the Scarborough-based artist Emma Green – taking four hours or more.

"I do lose all track of time," Tracey admits.

"You get into your own head space with the work, then look at the clock and think 'I should eat something' or 'I should get home and make dinner'."

Home, which she shares with her husband and two sons, is only a short drive away in Walkington.

It's easy to see the appeal of this studio, however, to an artist who needs to focus so intently on her work.

As we talk, the only sound is the bubbling of the tumbler – filled with water and steel shot – which is easing away the final remnants of clay from her latest design.

"It's a lovely setting," she said.



Rings and blings . . . Tracey displays some of her rings made from silver clay; above, a selection of her pretty pendants

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“The only sound you’ll get is the occasional rumble of a tractor going past.”

Tracey’s studio, a former cowshed, is one of a series in the grounds of a working farm.

What were once the agricultural outbuildings for the Lord of the Manor of Bishop Burton, Richard Watt, are now Calf House Studios – where sculptors and painters now ply their trade.

Created by Heather Hayward and her father John Dunning, who run the adjoining Cold Harbour Farm, the red-brick Victorian buildings are a neighbourly network of studios.

Next door, artist Graham Chambers – who specialises in rural scenes – is busy finishing a portrait for a client in Germany.

“I find it an incredibly inspirational place.” he said.

“I think back to how it must have been in 1884, and I can see how it must have looked with the all the steam engines and threshing machines at work.”

It’s back to the alchemy again – clay into silver, farm sheds into studios. As strange as it might sound, it works.

■ For more information, visit: www.calfhousestudios.co.uk and www.craftworx.co.uk



Clockwise from below: Tracey outside Calf House Studios; some close-up work on a piece; Tracey involved in another jewellery making process; a selection of her work

