

Janina Myronova

CHARACTER COUNTS

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson



Rising star Janina Myronova and her colorful, rosy-cheeked figurative sculptures made from clay are moving around the world, capturing new characters, and telling their stories along the way. Born and raised in the Ukraine and living now in Poland, Myronova has been enjoying the artist-in-residence life since completing her PhD studies in 2019. Her self-described “chubby, anatomically misshapen” forms have been handbuilt in Taiwan, South Korea, Denmark, France, Turkey, China, and Poland in the past three years, with each culture making a mark on Myronova and the stories she wants to tell.

Beginning a Career in Ceramics

Born to creative souls (but not makers), Myronova is very close with her parents and two older sisters, who collectively have had a big influence on her life and career as an artist, as well as the content in her work. Her interests in art and dance were nurtured when she was

young, and when it came time to prepare for her school exam, she chose art as her focus. She made a figure the first time she touched clay, pursued ceramics, and then in college realized that she was most excited about decoration and surface, so she focused on decorative tile work. It was not until Myronova was studying for her first master’s degree in sculpture at the Lviv National Academy of Arts in Ukraine that her exploration became more sculptural, and she got her first taste of travel with a semester abroad in Gdansk, Poland, where she went to the Academy of Art in Gdansk as an exchange student in the sculpture department. She continued her studies with a second master’s degree in ceramics and design and then a PhD in ceramics at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Arts in Poland. Switching between two- and three-dimensional approaches, art and design, functional and non-functional pieces, as well as different media (like glass and other materials), Myronova found her voice in the narrative figure. She explains, “each sculpture is a different personality, a personal story, a graphic novel featuring favorite motifs: images of family relationships, parent and child, partners and pets.”

Influences and Expressions

Myronova’s unique style is heavily influenced by her cultural heritage. As a child, she enjoyed Ukrainian and Russian folk films, which featured rich characters such as what she calls “big babushkas” (grandmothers) with painted-on rosy cheeks. Similarly, Russian nesting dolls and Dymkova toys of family figures, heavily stylized and painted with bold, black outlines and vivid colors, remain a big inspiration. In addition, pre-Columbian figurative sculpture inspires what she describes as her “clunky” forms, which sometimes only suggest the form of a figure and largely act as a clean surface on which to draw or scratch in the details of her characters. To top it off, contemporary graphic novels influence some of her story-telling techniques, which include layering comic-book-like scenes within or on the figures themselves to enhance the character’s narrative.

For Myronova, the stories she tells through her sculptures are full of emotion. Her figures are what she calls “an expression tool,” revealing the stories in her head, the people in her life, and their inner worlds. With clay, she says, “I can build soft transitions, sensitive skins . . . I chose the material because I could feel it.” Furthermore, color is extremely important as she explains, “the story of every person has different colors.” For example, when she was in residence in Taiwan at the New Taipei City Yingee Ceramics Museum in 2018, she was inspired by the Taiwanese children she encountered. She made seven sculptures of seven happy Taiwanese



Taiwanese Children, to 37½ in. (95 cm) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, high-fire glaze, 2018.
Photo: Ma Kang Li.



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1 *Family Love*, 34 in. (86 cm) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, 2021. 2 *Ceramic Family*, 24¼ in. (62 cm) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, 2021. 3 *Clay Father*, 23½ in. (60 cm) in height chamotte clay, underglaze, 2021. 1-3 Photos: Dzikie Studio.



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kids in red, yellow, orange, and blue, detailing their clothing and hair styles, their interests, and their unique expressions. On their bodies, Myronova painted scenes that recall her observances of their family life, spirit, and joyous activity. It was during this project that she realized how her characters can capture a sense of place and culture, and she experimented with this approach in future residencies.

The Pandemic and Distance

Her 2020 sculpture *Not far from?*, made during the Sculpture Symposium at the Polish Sculpture Center in Oronsco, stands at 5 ft. 6 in. (1.72 m) high (a whole head taller than Myronova herself) and depicts a brawny, smiling father figure in green and red. From his body, three smaller black-haired female figures emerge, standing in front of each other, each a head shorter than the other. One is painted on his torso, one is in three dimensions standing on his feet, and the last one is painted on the girl's torso. They are like nesting Russian dolls, only you can see all the figures at once without having to unpack them. On his right foot, shoulder, and side, Myronova has painted three other female figures, who seem to be present in spirit, but not in body. Standing on his upper chest and shoulder are two smiling pooches, completing the family portrait. The complex figure grouping, made in two parts that stack upon each other, expresses Myronova's longing for her family, who



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4 *The people inside me*, 19½ in. (50 cm) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, 2019. Photo: Grzegorz Stadnik. 5 Janina Myronova in the studio, 2021. Photo: Dzikie Studio. 6 *Not far from?* (pictured with Janina Myronova), 5 ft. 6 in. (1.7 m) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, 2020. Photo: Jan Gaworski.

live in different parts of the world. “Despite such huge distances, we are very close to each other. I do not feel this distance. I do not count distance and closeness in kilometers. This sculpture shows a little me with a strong dad, just like it used to be.”

Closeness has been an issue for all of us this past year, due to the pandemic. Myronova’s black-and-white sculpture *Keep the Distance* expresses the overwhelming feelings she had when she went for a residency in Denmark, arriving at the center just one week before borders were closed. While the situation was getting worse around the world, Myronova’s creative process was impacted. “I had people around me, but I always listened to ‘keep the distance’ from the media,” she explains. “It was not an easy time for me. I created this piece as a response to the new style of life. I showed a person who tries to hug everyone around [them]. The graphic layer on the sculpture is also talking about close relations between people. The work became a natural reaction to feelings of longing and our new responsibility to help people to feel safer in that situation.”

Adding Depth to the Surfaces

Working in a range of scales from diminutive to larger than life, Myronova uses a grogged stoneware called chamotte clay, which translates to grog and fire sand. The body is calcined clay containing a high proportion of silica and alumina, and Myronova fires it to



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cone 6. Building from the bottom up using mostly slabs, the surfaces are scraped clean with a metal rib to reveal the grog, then finished and decorated with studio-made engobes and commercial underglazes and often once fired. The color of the clay body is important, as it often reflects the skin of her characters and large parts of the sculptures are not painted—unless the clay body is not the right color, which sometimes happens depending what clay she acquires when moving to different studio facilities.

Sketching is a big part of Myronova's process. She says that when sketching, her hands have more freedom, and she is not thinking about how to make her stories in clay. Later, she enjoys the challenge of having to figure out how to make her sketches come to life in three dimensions.

Spending many hours a day in her studio, she enjoys working and considers it her lifestyle. While working, she watches movies, and listens to music and podcasts. She says, "I can work forever! I don't do anything else." It is as if the stories drive her to the studio and don't let her stop. She shares, "If I don't work, I'm not healthy. I am happy to see the progress. The little steps make me happy." She adds, "My emphasis is not only [other] people's stories, but also mine. We go through something every day. Every day new stories accumulate over us. I transfer all these experiences to my art."

What's next? For this ambitious, full-time studio artist who really enjoys making people happy with her work, there is much to come and more stories to tell, as her career has only just begun. While she is open to what life brings to her, Myronova has not yet been to the US and is hoping to have a residency there someday soon. In addition, when the transient residency life stops calling her name, she plans to build a more permanent studio in Poland. But for now, she says, "experiences are my power. Human feelings, my subject. My artistic language is my verb. If I have all this power in me, there's no way I can stop. I just want to share my stories as much as possible."

the author *Leigh Taylor Mickelson* is an artist, writer, curator, and independent consultant working with arts businesses and nonprofits to help them develop and grow. Visit her website at www.leightaylor-mickelson.com to learn more.



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7 *Keep the Distance*, 11½ in. (29 cm) in height, porcelain, underglaze, 2020.
 8 *Best Friend*, 33¼ in. (85 cm) in height, chamotte clay, underglaze, 2020.
 Photo: Rebecca Fanuele. 9 *Play with Me*, 11½ in. (29 cm) in length, chamotte clay, underglaze, engobe, high-fire glaze, 2020. 7, 9 Photos: Dzikie Studio.