

Artist Lindsey Mendick: ‘Life is rich and I feel everything. That doesn’t feel awful to me’

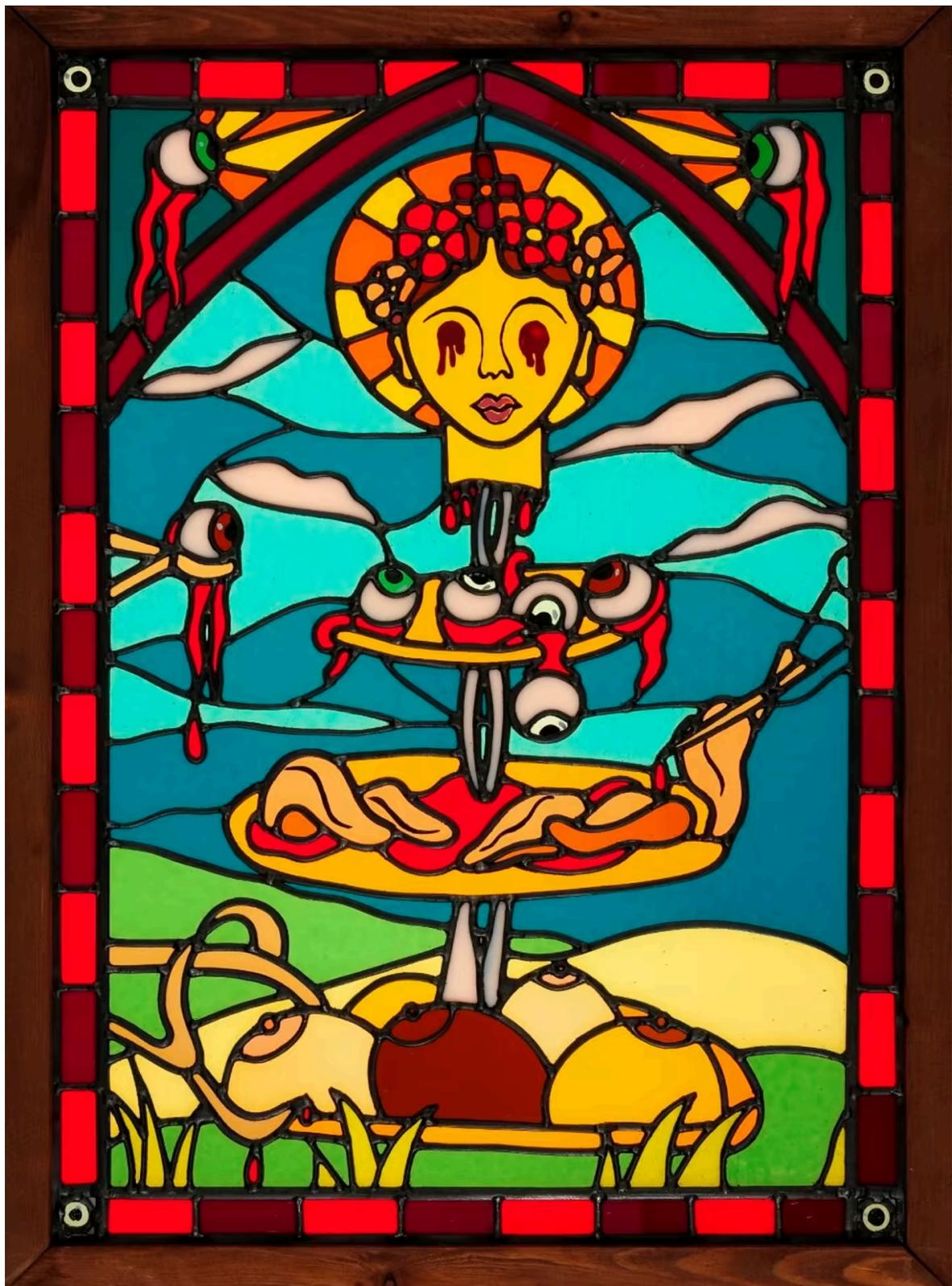
The ceramicist has been making a splash with her raw works which touch on everything from anxiety to 1990s TV

Emily Steer APRIL 6 2023

Lindsey Mendick revels in the mess of human life. Whether sculpting rotting flesh or armies of slugs, the British artist imbues her world with dark humour, grotesque horror and raw psychological honesty. Her expressive ceramic bodies, animals and vases bear the quirks and blemishes of their hand-making. These are often combined with functional furniture and textiles within immersive domestic, nightclub or clinical sets. Drawing on personal experiences, Mendick has used her expanded ceramic practice to tap into heated cultural conversations about infertility, anxiety and female subjugation.

While her subject matter can be challenging, the artist brings a playfulness to the work that makes it bearable. “I want to have fun with making and the courage to show people vulnerability,” she says when we meet at her Margate workspace.

The airy room is situated in Tracey Emin’s TKE Studios, a sprawling former bathhouse with vaulted glass ceilings and floods of natural light. Since moving to Margate in 2020, Mendick has formed a close connection with Emin, whose work could be seen as a natural precursor to her emotionally rich, candid practice.



'I Drink To You Lucy Philomela and St Agatha' (2022) by Lindsey Mendick © Lindsey Mendick. Courtesy Carl Freedman Gallery. Photo © Ollie Harrop

Mendick's profile has been quickly rising since she graduated from the Royal College of Art with an MA in sculpture in 2017. Her final installation "Clever Girl" demonstrated an early commitment to ambitious sculptural work: a giant close-up print of blue cheese hung from the wall; the floor and plinths were covered in vibrant strokes of paint; a glaze-spattered platter of ceramic prawns invited a visual tug of war between repulsion and attraction.

In 2021 she had a star turn with Carl Freedman at Frieze London, presenting vases with phallic tentacles erupting from open mouths. *Off with Her Head*, Mendick's riotous 2022 debut solo exhibition with Freedman's Margate gallery, was a carnivalesque walk through famous and mythological women who have been villainised or publicly humiliated, from Medusa to Diana, Princess of Wales and LGBT+ rights activist Marsha P Johnson.

The exhibition's London Dungeon aesthetics mirrored the rabid, punishing lens often used by the tabloids. "We expect more from women, we expect them to be nicer, to play by the rules and not be messy," says Mendick. "I think one of the most frustrating things is when you're not given the capacity or the power to be bad."



'I Drink To You Tracey' (2022) by Lindsey Mendick © Ollie Harrop

She describes her upcoming show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park as her most revealing yet. *Where the Bodies Are Buried* brings together Mendick's recurring nightmare with a plot from 1990s TV soap *Brookside*. In her dream, she is desperately trying to stop the police from finding a dead body. The original *Brookside* narrative followed a mother and daughter (played by Sandra Maitland and Anna Friel) who killed their abusive husband and father and buried him in the backyard.

“In my recurrent nightmare, I know there is a body in the garden,” she says. “I don’t know why it’s there or who it is, but I know I did it. Sometimes my mum is helping me hide it. I have had other dreams where I am cutting up a body and trying to get rid of it. The show is not about a specific body; it’s about how bits of culture bleed into our dreams.”

The installation is an Escher-like haunted house, with ceramic bin bags, skeletal hands bursting from floorboards and references to 1990s teen pop culture in the form of Pogs, dream-catchers and collaged J-17 magazines. There is also a sofa printed with the UK’s first pre-watershed televised lesbian kiss. While this speaks to a broader cultural moment, it has enabled Mendick to investigate her own psychology.

“I have Pure O, which is a form of OCD where you have intrusive thoughts, like a flash in your head that you’d have sex with your sibling,” she tells me. “Really intense, scary thoughts of the worst thing you could do. When I was at my illest, the thing I missed the most was just being able to watch TV in peace, because every second was taken up feeling like I was horrible and everyone would shun me. That is what this show is about. The symptoms of Pure O make for the perfect soap opera.”



From Mendick's show at the Hayward Gallery © Mark Blower

Mendick is opening *Sh*t Faced* this summer at Jupiter Artland in Scotland. The exhibition looks at “my intense shame about how messy I am as a human”. But *Sh*t Faced* (asterisk the show’s own) is not a call to tidy things up. Inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Mendick presents the complex relationship many people have with alcohol, bouncing between denial of pleasure and destructive revelry. “This duality is in all of us,” she says. “I am ashamed when I’m too drunk. I’m ashamed of lots of things I’ve done. But I think that’s where the fruit is: in the shame, and in not being ashamed of it. Life is rich and I feel everything. That doesn’t feel awful to me. What feels dangerous is shrinking it all down.”

Since moving to Margate, Mendick has launched Quench with her partner, fellow artist Guy Oliver. Through fundraising initiatives and Arts Council support the gallery shows emerging artists, many of whom have traditionally non-commercial practices. Quench has a ground floor shop with items created by exhibitors and a cavernous basement gallery. They found the space while browsing the high street and knocking on doors. “There are so many disused shops and buildings,” she tells me. “People talk about everyone moving to Margate but there are so many empty spaces. It’s a seaside town and if we don’t find a way to bring people year-round it will suffer.”

On social media, Mendick reveals her personal life with the same openness she applies to her work. She shares an online intimacy of her relationship with Oliver which has fed through to various pieces, most recently for Hayward Gallery’s expansive ceramics exhibition [*Strange Clay*](#), in which her immersive domestic space spoke to the turbulence of romantic love.



'I Drink To You Elizabeth' (2022) © Ollie Harrop

“People responded really well and said, ‘I’m in the same place as you,’” she says. “We are quite good at talking about the surface things in relationships, but the very deep, core vulnerabilities that you feel with your partner, or how ashamed you feel that you’re letting someone behave in a certain way, are very difficult to talk about.”

While much of Mendick’s work takes a deep dive into her psyche, often as a way of exploring universal feelings, she does not see this as a quest for healing. “If I didn’t have OCD, I wouldn’t have the empathy I have,” she says. “People really want to be healed. I was searching for so much of my younger life to be cured and I imagined this place where I would be thin, not have anxiety and have a boyfriend. Now I have this life, where everything isn’t resolved, and I am so much better for it.”

‘Where the Bodies Are Buried’, April 6-September 3, [ysp.org.uk](https://www.ysp.org.uk). *‘Sh*t Faced’*, July 15-October 1, [jupiterartland.org](https://www.jupiterartland.org)