People

‘Everything I’m Scared of Goes Into the Work’: Rising Star Artist Lindsey Mendick on the Alchemy of the Kiln and Making Friends With Tracey Emin

We caught up with the artist at her studio in Margate.

Lindsey Mendick. Photo ©Elissa Cray.

Naomi Rea • September 14, 2023 • Share This Article

How old were you when you first knew what you wanted in life? What about when were you brave enough to admit it?

For artist Lindsey Mendick, it might have been that day she was sitting on her stoop with a university friend, in a confessional mood after getting tipsy on cheap prosecco. “What do you really want, more than anything?” her friend prompted.

“I want to go to the Royal College… I want to be a successful artist.” It was barely a whisper.

More than a decade later, Mendick is well on her way to achieving that dream. She has a degree in sculpture from the Royal College of Art in her arsenal. This year has seen two major exhibitions of her installation work, the lift-off of a successful editions business, and increasing market demand for her oddball ceramics. She is best friends with Tracey Emin—but more on that later.

Lindsey Mendick, “Where The Bodies Are Buried,” installation view at YSP, 2023. Courtesy the artist. Photo © Jonty White, courtesy YSP.

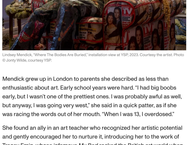
I visited Mendick earlier this year at her studio in Margate, in the basement of TKE Studios, home to Emin’s new art school and residency program.

The emerging star was deep in production for a recently closed exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park—her most ambitious show to date—and was surrounded by a jumble of her quirky sculptures: a TV dinner erupting with maggots and cockroaches; a zombie hand lurching out of the middle of a scribble board; and others in a cacophony of textures; bumpy and glazed, cozy and gelatinous. A flurry of yellow sticky notes on the wall let me in on a weird and anxious to do list, including items such as “put eyes on vases,” and something about making custom stickers for the 1990s children’s game, Pogs.

Mendick’s energy is what you’d expect after seeing all that. Coiffed with a shock of cyan hair, and wearing a pair of crocs bearing the Greggs logo—a beloved British fast food bakery chain—she perched nervously on a stool, twiddling colorful hair wraps onto a brown wig.

The hallmarks of anxiety showed themselves through her punctuation of otherwise very eloquent sentences with nervous reassurance-seeking. She shared openly the details of her inner life, explaining that she has an obsessive thought disorder, and is plagued by intrusive thoughts and graphic nightmares.

For the Yorkshire Sculpture Park exhibition, she recreated fragments of a house that has recurred in her nightmares, in an effort to reveal something of her inner psyche. “Everything I’m scared of goes into the work,” she said. Inspired by the bravery and vulnerability of artists like Emin and Paula Rego, she finds herself in a lesser stage of insecurity when immersed in her work and, despite the uneasy feelings it evokes, there’s humor in there, too. YSP director of programme Helen Pheby said she was by Mendick’s “rare” talent. “Each project she commits to extends her practice, thrives on collaboration and shares something both deeply personal but also fundamentally human that everyone can relate to,” Pheby said.



Lindsey Mendick, “Where The Bodies Are Buried,” installation view at YSP, 2023. Courtesy the artist. Photo © Jonty White, courtesy YSP.

Mendick grew up in London to parents she described as less than enthusiastic about art. Early school years were hard. “I had big boobs early, but I wasn’t one of the prettiest ones. I was probably awful as well, but anyway, I was going very wrest,” she said in a quick patter, as if she was racing the words out of her mouth. “When I was 13, I overdosed.”

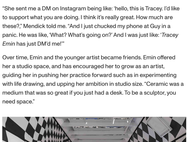
She found an ally in an art teacher who recognized her artistic potential and gently encouraged her to nurture it, introducing her to the work of Tracey Emin, whose infamous *My Bed* rocked the British art world when it was first unveiled in 1998.

“I just couldn’t believe that art could be like that,” Mendick recalled. “It wasn’t just stuffy paintings. It was rude and it was brash and it was really punk and it was rebellious and that was *everything* I was obviously feeling at that stage and so it kind of kept me going. And through the darkest times since then—I’ve had quite a few breakdowns—channelling that spirit has kept me through.”

Her journey into ceramics began with air drying clay in around 2015, which she turned to as she attempted to materialize the images that were inside her head. She was introduced to a kiln in graduate school at the Royal College. The first sculpture she made with it was a massive toffee crisp candy.

“When that came out, it was like I couldn’t ever go back,” Mendick said. “That alchemy that you watched when something that you made comes out and it looks professional, when everything that I was making [before], seemed ephemeral.”

But after graduating, she met the cold fate of a lot of fledgling artists in the big smoke. The cost of living and keeping a studio in London was unsustainable, and she found herself taking on too much work just to afford the rent. Mendick was burning out. After she and her partner, the artist Guy Oliver, visited Margate on a day trip, and met some of the artists living there, they decided to move, just before an impending pandemic lockdown.



Lindsey Mendick, *Exhibition Fees*, Gallery 3. Copyright of Lindsey Mendick. Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery. Margate. Photo © Ellie Harrop.

Margate has offered a different speed to London. There is no time lost in commutes underground, and she feels safe walking home from the studio late at night. Mendick’s studio is down the road from her house, her gallery Carl Freedman, and a project space she runs with her partner, called Quench. In what she described as a friendly artistic community with a lively queer scene, she has found it easier to reach out to others in times of need. “You feel quite held,” she said. “I think quite often younger artists feel that they have to be in London, but actually what we’ve seen here is that building a really nice community has meant that we’ve progressed a lot further.”

And of course, small town life means you will eventually meet the neighbors.

Tracey Emin, who lives next door to Carl Freedman, popped into her life one day. Mendick was selling editions of her work online as part of a fundraiser to get Quench off the ground, and the British art icon—who has since moving back to her childhood hometown become something of a fairy godmother to the community there—got in touch.

“She sent me a DM on Instagram being like: ‘hello, this is Tracey. I’d like to support what you are doing. I think it’s really great. How much are these?’ Mendick told me. “And I just chucked my phone at Guy in a panic. He was like, ‘What? What’s going on?’ And I was just like: *‘Tracey Emin has just DM’d me!’*”

Over time, Emin and the younger artist became friends. Emin offered her a studio space, and has encouraged her to grow as an artist, guiding her in pushing her practice forward such as in experimenting with life drawing, and upping her ambition in studio size. “Ceramic was a medium that was so great if you just had a desk. To be a sculptor, you need space.”

Lindsey Mendick, “SH*TFACED” (2023). Installation view at Jupiter Artland. Photograph by John McKenna.

The friendship between the two women has helped Mendick to navigate the darker side that comes with being a successful woman. “Being a female artist, you are meant to be so many of the right things. To enjoy the party and be messy and for your work to be messy. But not too messy. Or to be able to be fat positive, but also vulnerable, to have the right amount of boundaries, but also no boundaries whatsoever. To be generous and kind and all of this stuff, it makes me just feel so pressured…” she said, tearing up before collecting herself. “People say it’s risky, being honest, but we’re in a society where your capital is your shame. Every five minutes there’s a book that’s called *I’m Sad and My Life’s Down the Drain*, by a woman.”

It is clear now that she has reached another inflection point in her career. The exhibition in Yorkshire, which attracted reviews from the *Guardian*’s Jonathan Jones as well as critic Hettie Judah, and another well-received madcap installation on view at collector Nicky Wilson’s Jupiter Artland called “SH*TFACED” that is on view until October 1, show the artist is leveling up.

But is she ready to admit that she’s finally achieved her doorstep whisper?

“Even just to acknowledge success feels so unfeminine,” Mendick said. “It feels dirty to be successful, to consider yourself as successful.”

Well if she won’t say it, we don’t mind raising a glass of cheap prosecco to the cause.

*“Lindsey Mendick: SH*TFACED” is on view through October 1 at Jupiter Artland.*

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