

INTERVIEW

Lindsey Mendick: Why do we expect women artists to be less laddish than men?

The sculptor talks about double standards in the art world, her wild exhibition and how her anarchic ceramics saved her life



Lindsey Mendick in her studio
GEMMA DAV FOR THE TIMES

Laura Freeman

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The first thing you notice about Lindsey Mendick's studio is that it is warm. This is unusual. Artists' garrets, with their north-facing windows, are traditionally freezing. Tracey Emin, proprietor of TKE Studios in Margate, which gives residencies to artists aged 24 to 36 believes that her students should not shiver for their art. It's thanks to these digs that Mendick tells me it's the first time in her working life she's had a studio with heating.

The second thing you notice about Mendick's studio is that it is alarmingly alive. Forget simple moth infestations, Mendick's long, low galley studio is absolutely crawling with sinister beasties. Mice run riot, frogs hop from every corner, bugs beetle across her workbench, tentacles beckon from cracks. When Mendick shows me the krater vase that is candling in the kiln, a dozen snake heads snap up from the depths. Only Mendick would keep a hydra in the back room.

We meet two weeks before the opening of her exhibition *Hot Mess* at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich, part of the gallery's *Why Do We Take Drugs?* season. Mendick is on a hot, if messy, streak. In 2022 she took over an entire room of the Hayward Gallery's *Strange Clay* exhibition with a diabolical diorama teeming with ceramic rats, cockroaches and caterpillars. In 2023 she went head to head with [Grayson Perry](#) at the Edinburgh Art Festival: a grand retrospective for Perry at the Scottish National Gallery, a wild ride of an installation for Mendick at the sculpture park Jupiter Artland.



Mendick's new Hot Mess exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich
KATE WOLFFENHOLME

I was tough on one half of the exhibition — *Sh*tfaced* — and raved about the other — *I tried so hard to be good* — staged in the Jupiter Artland ballroom. The ballroom vases — exquisitely modelled from the front, decaying and demonic from behind — count among the most beautiful, bizarre and covetable objects I have seen in recent years. Her apothecary of anti-ageing serums, sending up the perfume bottles and false-promise tinctures of the beauty industry, stole the show at this year's Frieze. In September she won the visual arts Sky Arts award for the Jupiter Artland show and gave quite possibly the worst acceptance speech I have ever heard. It started with her telling the room she had laddered her M&S tights and continued shambolically thereafter. In fairness, she tells me she really hadn't expected to win and that it would have been ridiculous to "bother" writing a speech in advance.

Mendick is immensely good company: funny, swear-y, clever, unstopably chatty, honest to a fault and so plagued by self-doubt I don't know whether to hug her or shake her. Her work is a pleasingly catholic mix of the highbrow and the lowest of the lowbrow. The installation she has unleashed on the Sainsbury Centre is inspired by the *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, a comic epic and parody of the *Iliad* and the very definition of a trivial argument. The proper name for the battle is the *Batrachomyomachia*, which Mendick has to look up on Wikipedia because

Another influence on *Hot Mess* is the Sainsbury Centre's collection of Francis Bacon paintings. Mendick identifies a double standard. "I love his work but I do not understand how he gets written about so kindly while women who have acted in similar ways [the drinking, the fights, the callousness] are written about as if: 'And now they're not like that anymore.'" Women must be redeemed, men may be irredeemable. "We expect more from women, expect them to be less laddish. Tracey [Emin] can't ever do an interview without it being pulled up every time that she was a wild child."



Mendick: "Sometimes you have to be faced with real ugliness to be able to appreciate beauty"
GEMMA DAY FOR THE TIMES

The Sainsbury Centre's drugs season looks at stimulants, hallucinogens and intoxicants from across cultures and the visual culture that has gone with them. Mendick talks openly about her own "constant battle" with OCD and depression since she was 13 — she is now 37 — and about her experience of taking antidepressants. "When I first took them not everything was better, but there was a more positive outlook."

• [Lindsey Mendick: 'I want to blow up everything I do'](#)

As we talk, she dabs patches of glaze on to the white mice and frogs to suggest the mysterious bruises you wake up with the morning after the night before. This is Mendick through and through: modern binge-drinking and party culture seen through the lens of an ancient Greek text. Previous works have drawn on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's gothic short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She talks with equal passion about what we get wrong about the Medusa myth — in some versions of the story Medusa is raped, she wasn't born bad — and about the TV shows *Married at First Sight* and *Love Is Blind*, which she often has on in the background as she models.

I've heard that she doesn't like to be called a "ceramicist". She corrects me: "I am honoured when someone says I am a ceramicist. I say that because of the perfection involved in ceramics." It's true that when we talk about ceramics we often think of the immaculate porcelain of Edmund de Waal or the disciplined vessels of Florian Gadsby. "I think it's more sculpture," Mendick says. "If something drops off, I glue it on. I wouldn't remake the piece completely." She knows she ought to do glaze and shrinkage tests, but ... "There's nothing more wonderful than opening up the kiln and seeing a glaze for the first time."

She remembers the anxiety of first graduating from the Royal College of Art and using shared studios and always having to tiptoe around someone else's kiln. Sharing doesn't lend itself to experimentation and you don't make yourself popular if your vases explode, leaving glaze all over the shelves. "You have to be courteous." Is it nice to have her own kiln to do what she wants? "No! I need her more than she needs me. I'm like, 'How are you, baby? Shall I get you a service? Let's double-check what you're doing.'"



Mendick's SHYfaced exhibition at the 2023 Edinburgh Art Festival
JOHN MACKENZIE

Her pots are coil pots. "I can't throw [on a wheel] to save my life. I find throwing quite limiting compared to hand-building because it can only get so high — especially with me doing it." Collectors love them for their mix of classical proportions and macabre eruptions. Some of what she makes isn't easily sellable. "Not everyone wants a bag of my sick." Emin told her never to knock the commercial stuff. "The neons are my bread and butter," Emin explained, "so never hate them [the vases] because you never know what's going to happen in your life."

She says her pots have "saved" her. Part of Mendick's insecurity clearly comes from years of not knowing whether she would get a show or whether her work would sell. "It's hard going from no one really giving a f*** about you to then suddenly your parents collecting your press cuttings."

She is proud that she and her boyfriend, fellow artist Guy Oliver, can now pay National Insurance and pay into their pensions. "I can take my car for an MOT and when it fails, I don't cry." She is proud too of *I tried so hard to be good*. Every vase was sold to a collector and while she would love to reunite them one day, she isn't sentimental about breaking up a set. "I don't think I've ever made anything that was so beautiful. I couldn't believe it came out of my head. It felt like a Disney Princess moment." She stops me, though, when I ask if she could allow herself to be that beautiful all the time. "I think sometimes you have to be faced with real ugliness to be able to appreciate beauty." She likes "pushing people, prodding people the wrong way". She remembers taking her dad to the Sarah Lucas show at the Tate and how he couldn't stop telling her how "horrible, stupid and shit" it was. "Yeah," she countered. "But you had a great time."

She could make "beautiful and decorative things forever" but says: "I don't want that to be the only thing I do. I want to make people feel less alone or feel kinship or go home and talk about a show and talk about what they didn't like or just be moved, just disrupt their day."

While I haven't loved everything Mendick has made, I can think of few young artists with as interesting and anarchic a mind and creative vision. She is capable of squalor and serenity, grace and the grotesque. Traipsing round Frieze or the Royal Academy Summer Show, most exhibits blur into one; Mendick's get under your skin. I suggest she starts practising her acceptance speeches. There will be more awards to come.

Lindsey Mendick's *Hot Mess* is at the Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, Nov 23 to Apr 27; sainsburycentre.ac.uk