

MOSTYN

Video Transcript: Stephen Hepworth, Director of Kiki Kogelnik Foundation, talks about the life and work of Kiki Kogelnik, and her exhibition 'Riot of Objects' at MOSTYN.

Kiki Kogelnik was born on 22nd January 1935 in Southern Austria and grew up in the town of Bleiburg. Her father was an accountant, her mother was a schoolteacher. She was the middle of three children and was named originally Sigrid, Kiki was a nickname her elder brother Herwig gave her, and she later chose to adopt it, becoming Kiki Kogelnik.

She initially studied at the Vienna Academy of the Applied Arts under the sculptor Hans Knesel, where she made the two early plaster sculptures included in this exhibition: *Untitled Head* and *Untitled Figure* in 1954. These iconic objects are reflective of a common post-war European sensibility, both figurative and reductively angular in form they evoke a melancholic pity and sadness.

In 1956 she enrolled at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts to study under the painters Albert Paris Gütersloh and Herbert Boeckl. Her work was firmly rooted in the traditions of modernism, her paintings made with a palette of sombre colours and flat painterly forms. In 1958 she was awarded a grant that enabled her to travel to Paris, London, Dublin, Rome and Norway and with this her work became more spontaneous with looser more gestural marks.

While on a visit to Paris in 1959 she met the artists: Cesar, Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis who she became involved, and later visited New York with in 1960. Relocating there permanently in 1961 taking up residence in his studio at 940 Broadway at 23rd Street just two blocks away from the legendary Chelsea Hotel. Recollecting New York in the early 1960s film Historian P. Adams Sitney recalled “There was so much going on, in any area you want to mention. It was as if the world had turned upside down. Up in a townhouse on the Upper East Side, Leo Castelli was showing Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. You could see Merce Cunningham at the Judson Memorial Church... It was a wonderfully exciting time.”

There was an influx of creative people from around the world into New York escaping the austerity of a war-scarred Europe and Asia, encouraged by American cultural grants which lead to a heady mix of cultures and ideas, in a country that was rapidly losing its straight jacket of conformity. Pop Art was in its ascendancy fervently embracing mass produced imagery.

Kogelnik, introduced by Sam Francis, quickly became part of the New York Scene, a fixture at openings and parties becoming friends with artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and Larry Rivers amongst others. Andy Warhol when writing about her in 1964 just wrote the word “Great” 25 times.

When interviewed in (1996) said, “I was on the side-lines of what was going on - I was appreciated by the people, but I was not one of the Pop Artists. I didn’t want to be, and I wasn’t.”

This statement is perhaps not unsurprisingly. As a European who had lived through the war in Austria and experienced its aftermath, she was resistant to the glorification of commercialism preferring to refashion found objects as elements within paintings. Her form of pop is closer to the French Nouveau Realists (many of whom she was also friends with) who incorporated everyday objects into their work.

She declared in 1966:

‘I’m not involved with Coca Cola...I’m involved in the technical beauty of rockets, people flying in space and people becoming robots. When you come from Europe, it is so fascinating... like a dream of our time. The new ideas are here, the materials are here, why not use them?’

Here she is in her studio with a number of decommissioned US military shell casings which she’d transforming into sculptures. In the background can be seen an array of large paintings made in 1964 which contain brightly coloured bodies floating in cosmic spaces made up variously sized discs.

Claes Oldenburg reminiscing about her in 1997 said “She was to be seen in the early sixties in costumes using new materials, fake fur and vinyl, which were just coming out, they made her a walking work of art”.

And here Kogelnik can be seen wearing her cowhide dress lying on Oldenburg’s leopard chair at his exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles in 1963.

She in turn made her friends into art, tracing their bodies and cutting the resulting silhouette out of coloured vinyl. This is Claes Oldenburg’s silhouette cut out of black and yellow vinyl draped elegantly over a chrome clothes hanger in a piece entitled **Claes** from 1970.

She remained a constant visitor to Austria especially after the birth of her son in 1967, choosing to spend the summers there and it was here in 1974 that she was first introduced to ceramics by her artist-ceramist friend Renate Fuhry, who she would later share a ceramics studio with in Vienna during the 1970s.

Her first works were a series of bulbous heads, made from discarded vase forms that Renate had made. To these she added elements and applied glazes. Many of these original works are probably self-portraits and capture various aspects of how she used to dress-up.

The airman’s helmet and goggles of **Starry-Eyed**, reflect her earlier aspiration for space travel, its eyes reduced to small circles each with their own four-pointed star set within the rich mottled red glaze she used for the skin. This sculpture shows from the start her attention to the materiality of clay and the use and control of glazing.

Blue Bird has a more straightforward blue gaze that covers the head and her jaunty peaked cap, her pursed lips are picked out in pastel pink and her large round glasses in white as are the circular polka-dots on the lenses. The green extended eyelashes of **Sleepy Head** seem to echo the ones painted directly onto Kiki’s face in this photograph from the 1960s.

Just as in her works in other mediums portraits of others also occur. This work known as **R=R** 1975 is a portrait of artist who encouraged her adoption of ceramics Renate Fuhry.

This exhibition **Kiki Kogelnik: Riot of Objects** was conceived and curated by the American curator Chris Sharp who runs a project space in Mexico City called “Lola” with the Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent.

He was interested in looking beyond Kogelnik’s contributions to Pop and Feminism to consider this less overtly political part of her practice. Where previous exhibitions have sought to reflect on and contextualize her interest in the body, its relationship to technology, and questions about feminism and its relationship to popular culture, this exhibition focuses exclusively on her commitment to making, formal innovation, materials, and diversity.

His exhibition intentionally limits itself to the just the free-standing ceramics, as these works on their own demonstrates just how vast and varied was her production over 30 plus years.

The exhibition and its design is modelled on an exhibition she had at the Henri Gallery in Washington DC in 1990 called “Inside the Clone Factory”. In this exhibition, as can be seen in this photograph she arranged a group of differently sized pedestals to form an island on which she installed her sculptures. This island cluster has been remade and duplicated across two of the galleries at Mostyn on which 36 individual sculptures have been arranged in roughly chronological order.

The second island shows examples of works that are visibly modelled in their making. Writing about her enthusiasm for ceramics in the early 1980s, she writes: “I was immediately enchanted and drawn to touch and squeeze the material. Working in clay reminds me of playing. I love to use my hands this way and it is dangerous when I get carried away doing this—forgetting that there are certain restrictions of the material. I have messed up quite a lot of pieces this way—they would later break in the oven. But you learn from experience. I still love to take risks—with the glazes. And it is always exciting to open the door of the kiln and

to see what happened. I am lucky. Mostly it turns out better than I anticipated.”

The very striking **Untitled (Sea Monster)** 1974 was made at the same time as the heads in the first grouping. Here the eyes are now hollow voids, its skin a spotted green and it appears to be wearing some form of breathing apparatus. This head sits in contrast to its appearance on a decorative base adorned with pink flowers that seems to reach back to the Viennese decorative arts of the 1900s. Kogelnik was particularly fascinated by the work of Austrian maker Vally Wieselthier, who she collected, and owned a grouping of decorative heads and figures which were similarly inventively glazed.

Also included in this grouping is **Holiday on the Palm Tree** from 1980 where a tiny figure appears to have taken refuge from a huge lizard like creature in the fronds a top of a single palm tree.

This is one of a series of Holiday sculptures that include **Holiday in the Fish**, **Holiday under the Table** and **Holiday at the Temple** all of which share a similar sense of humour. And is a theme that she revisited in a suite of drawings in 1982.

In contrast with this escapism **Bowl with Balls**, **Bookstand**, **Stitch** and **Snake Vase** all from 1986 seem more grounded in the domestic and the everyday.

A state of frustration that seem expressed in the totemic **Lonely Face**, and the spike encrusted face of **Yellow Morning** which echoes an animal trap in its folded form. Personal biography perhaps is never far from the surface in much of Kogelnik's work.

Both these two works show Kogelnik starting to build her ceramic forms using slab work which involves rolling the clay flat with a rolling pin and then cutting out a form using a template, and this in turn harks back to the silhouettes to be found in her earlier paintings and her vinyl hangings.

These forms now cut from clay are assembled to form part of a structure, as in towering house of cards like, **Robot II** from 1986. Or as seen on the third island: **Untitled - Standing Head** where a blue mottled face has been embellished with the pink and gold hands of a clock which take the place of its nose

With **Untitled (Face)**, in its deconstructed form, the eyes becoming like daggers pointing upwards, its separated pink lower face becomes a curvaceous abstract shape with a mouth shaped hole edged in vibrant red.

Double Floating Heads introduces the persona of the doppelganger, with two interchangeable masks, their roles as yet unassigned.

Kogelnik's boundless capacity for invention and restless commitment to making really come to the fore in this exhibition. Yet, for all their difference, these works are manifestly unified by a similarity of scale, which speaks both to the experimental nature of the model (i.e. the model or maquette as an ideal site of experiment) and embracing of the intrinsic intimacy of ceramic as a medium (which is both necessarily small and handmade).

In 1978, she and her family moved to a building on Lafayette Street in New York, just above Soho, where she was able to create her own dedicated ceramics studio adjacent to her painting studio. Similarly, in the 1980's she established a ceramics studio in a portion of her mother's house Bleiburg.

Ceramics became a central part of her practice, alongside, painting, drawing and printmaking. These disciplines fed into each other as motifs developed in one, would then be adopted and explored in another, and at times were combined, with ceramic elements appearing on paintings, and forming parts of sculptural installations.

Hungry Skull is one of two suspended works in the exhibition. Like many of her ceramic works their form has many similarities with other works made by Kogelnik in this case smaller works made in vinyl, such as **Nobody Loves Me**, 1970. The skull is a motif found throughout her work and possibly references the Germanic trope of "Death and the Maiden" in it expresses the bond between beauty, sexuality and death.

The skull appears again on the final island in another doppelganger work **Carpe Diem 2**, 1993, the two heads back to back. The spiky haired face on fronted painted in broad brush stroke of green, yellow, red and blue gives way to the biscuit intensity of the skull on the back their eye-holes hauntingly aligned. Known to work in series, she would often explore a given motif, whether it be a mask with different glazes, a hand, or a totemic form, until it was all but exhausted, wringing from it, in many cases, as much variation as possible. Throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties, she produced hundreds of sculptures, made both for the plinth and the wall. And, of course, the idea of the self-portrait was always present.

The fourth and fifth islands are populated with a series of heads which further demonstrate Kogelnik's endless invention as she explored the expressive possibilities of this motif throughout the 1990s.

The nod to Brancusi's endless column echoed in the base of **Blue Clone**, the face atop an almost abstract form.

The pastel blue coloured skin of **Standing Face**, sports what appears to be a bad case of chicken pox each red glistening pustule about to burst and ooze its contents in response to a child's itch.

And **Guardian Angel** audaciously sprouting leaves from its crown placed high on a vented pedestal that also served as a maquette for a bronze and concrete public sculpture commissioned by the watch strap manufacture Hirsch and sited outside their headquarters in Sothern Austria.

Kogelnik at this time was not only making sculptures in ceramic but also casting in bronze and aluminium, and from 1994 she embarked on a series of glass heads working with a master craftsman in Murano, Italy.

The comparatively sober **Non-Dialogue** 1996 was made in the year before Kogelnik died. It is one of a series of four works, each of the two heads varies in the shape of the eyes, the form of the mouth, and spikes of the hair, their relationship to each on a flat base shifting each time.

Kiki Kogelnik died on 1st February 1997 in Vienna where she was receiving treatment for cancer. She was 62.

She left behind a rich legacy of work that in the years following her death have has been rediscovered and re-examined by a generation of artists and historians. It is a body of work that while speaking to the time it was made also defines its own cultural space. From paintings of space rockets to self-portraits, from vinyl cut-outs to ceramic sculptures, Kogelnik's work remains distinctively and uniquely hers.

CLOSING TITLE

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Film still of Kiki Kogelnik and Renate Fuhry from the documentary *Prisma: Eine Frau – Malerin 1975* © ORF 1975.

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