

Hungarian Reflections, Part One: Julia Kunin's Luminescent Sculpture

June 12, 2012 by [Suzanne Russell](#)



Nectar, 2010, ceramic, 9 x 14 x 11 inches (22.9 x 35.6 x 27.9 cm)

The Journey to *Nightwood*

Julia Kunin's ceramic sculptures are composed of cast elements from the natural world such as insects, shells, and rock formations in which figure and landscape merge. Kunin's complex baroque structures are glazed with special metallic glazes from Hungary that create luminescent, often iridescent, effects. Despite the ornamental quality of Kunin's work, the sculptures explore the fundamental themes of beauty and decay, sensuality, nature, and death. Her work has been widely exhibited in the United States and Europe. Kunin lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. WVFC recently met with the artist at the [Greenberg Van Doren Gallery](#), in Manhattan, to discover how she achieves these unusual, luminescent glazes. —Ed.



Pantagruel, 2010, ceramic, 17 x 13 x 12 inches (43.2 x 33 x 30.5 cm)

WVFC: Tell me about your most recent show, *Nightwood*, at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery.

JK: The show was up from February 23 until April 21, 2012, and it was incredibly exciting for me. The work for the show was all made in the past two years, but I started experimenting with luster glazes using different techniques about three years ago. So the show was a good three years in the making. There were 18 works in the show, and they were made in my studio in Brooklyn and in Hungary.

WVFC: Why did you work in Hungary?

JK: Some of the luster glazes that I used in the work are called *eosin glazes*. *Luster glaze* is a general term for ceramic glazes that have a metallic sheen. And eosin glaze is a very specific, unique type of luster glaze. The eosin glazes are used by only one factory in the whole world, the Zsolnay factory, and it is in Pécs, Hungary.

The factory was established in 1853 by Vilmos Zsolnay, and the eosin glazes were invented and developed there. Eosin glazes often have an opalescent surface—which I think is beautiful. They were originally used in Art Nouveau ceramics and ceramic building materials in Hungary. The Zsolnay factory is still the only place in the world where eosin glazes are used. They are proprietary glazes, meaning that the glazes and the techniques for using them are, more or less, owned by the factory. So I had to go to Hungary to work with these glazes.



Golden Grove (detail), 2011, ceramic, 13 x 11 x 8 inches (33 x 27.9 x 20.3 cm)

WVFC: How did you learn about these glazes?

JK: Oddly enough, I was at the Strand bookstore doing some research when I happened upon a book called *Hungarian Ceramics from the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001*, edited by Eva Csenkey and Agota Steinert. I was blown away! I fell in love with the glazes—I had never seen anything so iridescent, so psychedelic, so over the top. Coincidentally, I had gotten the 2008 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant that year and I was already planning a trip to Hungary in the summer of 2009 to do a residency at the International Ceramic Studio in a town called Kecskemet.

When I got home, I mailed the director of the residency. He told me that the Zsolnay factory was still producing tableware, figurines, and other ceramic objects, and was still using the eosin glazes. He said that he would try to put me in contact with a man he knew, a talented craftsman who had worked at the factory for 16 years as a porcelain and plaster expert, Sandor Dobany. Then I did some research on the Internet and I found the beautiful website of a ceramic artist with an engineering background named Ferenc Halmos. He was living and working in a tiny village called Band, Hungary. He is an expert in ceramic architectural restoration, and has been working for more than 25 years trying to create luster glazes similar to those used at the Zsolnay factory on his own. I wrote him an email asking if he would teach a glazing workshop. He declined, explaining that he would not reveal the glaze recipes and firing techniques that he used. After several mail exchanges, he agreed to allow me to visit his studio when I was in Hungary. He also agreed to glaze and fire some of my sculptures for me, using luster glazes.



Outlook Garden, 2011, porcelain, 32 x 16 x 11 inches (81.3 x 40.6 x 27.9 cm)

WVFC: What an adventure!

JK: Yes! By now I've made the trip to Budapest many times. But I remember that I was so nervous about meeting Ferenc for the first time that I asked a Hungarian friend to drive me and my sculptures there. It took about 2 ½ or 3 hours from Kecskemet by car. I wanted to get the work to Ferenc without breaking it. Fortunately, Ferenc speaks German, and we were able to communicate. I was learning Hungarian, but I was not very good at the time.

WVFC: How is your Hungarian now?

JK: It's coming along. I am taking Hungarian lessons from a woman who tutors me in New York, and even though I am 51 years old, she is a sort of mother figure for me. I am committed to learning the language, because it makes working in Hungary easier and I really enjoy the Hungarian people and their culture. I don't think you can understand the culture of a country without knowing how to speak the language. I have made a lot of good friends in Hungary. My knowledge of German has been helpful, too.

WVFC: And how did your first meeting with Ferenc Halmos go?

JK: It was wonderful! He showed me some glaze tests and some fired pieces. They were even more beautiful than they looked on the Internet. I had never seen such amazing colors: they were coppery and pink, luscious blues and purples, all sorts of rich greens, and brilliant golds.

We glazed some of my work with one of the most stable glazes, one that consistently gives good results. Even the most stable glazes turn out differently every time, depending on the texture of the piece, the thickness of the glaze, the placement of the piece in the kiln, and how the kiln is packed. I remember that one of my

sculptures was just gorgeous! The glaze was pink and blue and purple: we have never been able to achieve that look again, and we have tried many times.



Janus of Flowers, 2010, ceramic, 20.5 x 11 x 9 inches (52.1 x 27.9 x 22.9 cm)

WVFC: So, obviously, you succeeded in working well with Ferenc.

JK: Yes. We now have a sort of ongoing collaboration and great mutual respect. I have been traveling to Hungary to work with him whenever I can, usually during school vacations, since I also teach.

I tell him what I hope to achieve with the glaze. He does the chemistry, glazing, and firing. But we experiment together, and our discussions are part of the process. I decide if I am happy with the result, or if a work needs to be glazed and fired again.

WVFC: Is there a limit to how many times a work can be fired in a kiln?

JK: Sometimes there is. It depends on the work. At some point a piece will crack. I have never fired a work more than three or four times. I have found that if the glaze isn't working, it is because there is something wrong with the form of the sculpture. While the glaze can transform a piece, and is a critical part of the sculpture, if the underlining shape of the work is in some way not what I want, no glaze can make it right.



Vesalius, 2011, porcelain, 49 x 5 x 10 inches (124.5 x 12.7 x 25.4 cm)

WVFC: Back to your first summer in Hungary. Did you ever get to visit the Zsolnay factory?

JK: Yes, I did! The director of the International Ceramic Studio got in contact with Sandor Dobany, who had worked at the factory for 16 years and was still well connected there. As luck would have it, Sandor was teaching in Scotland, but was coming back to Pécs, his hometown, for one week in August on a summer vacation. My dream was to tour the factory. So you can imagine how thrilled I was when Sandor called the director and said that, because of my timing, I might be able to make a few sculptures at the factory. When the time came, I took a five-hour bus ride from Kecskemet to Pécs. The director of the factory, Katalin Marosy, wasn't there when I arrived, but Sandor knew everyone and introduced me to the people in the Design Department.

I was given a space to work in an area where highly skilled women were painting elaborate decorations on vases and plates. They worked from 7 am until 2 pm. I only had a few days to produce three small pieces, so I arrived every day in the morning and worked as fast and as hard as I could, for as long as I was allowed to be there.

The clay the factory uses is very different from the clay that I was used to working with. It is very plastic, and it is meant to be poured into molds. I didn't have any molds for poured works, so I had to discover other ways of working with this very challenging clay. I succeeded in wedging it up and using it in some small press molds that I had brought with me.

Two weeks later, I returned to the factory to pick up my sculptures. The results were amazing. I knew that I had to find a way to come back and make more work. At that point, I introduced myself to the director, Katalin Marosy, and thanked her. She seemed very positive about having me at the factory, and said that she hoped that I would return.



Untitled, 2011, porcelain, 9 1/2 x 7 x 13 inches (24.1 x 17.8 x 33 cm)

WVFC: It sounds like you were on a roll.

JK: I thought so. So many opportunities had lined up to make it possible for me to have this wonderful learning experience and to produce this exciting new work. But then I had some setbacks. Once I was back in New York, I tried to arrange an artist residency with Katalin Marosy at the factory for the summer of 2010. I came with one proposal after another to her and the other directors, but all of my proposals were denied. I had applied for, and been awarded, a travel grant from an organization called the Trust for Mutual Understanding to help pay for the trip, but I needed a letter of invitation to receive the grant. I couldn't even get anyone to write me a letter of invitation.

I decided to make some more work in Brooklyn and return to Hungary in February, during my school's spring vacation, to have Ferenc glaze and fire it for me. I also arranged to go to the factory and have someone at the factory translate for me, so that I could talk to Katalin Marosy face to face and better understand the situation.

When I got to the factory, the man who said he would interpret wasn't there and Katalin was in Frankfurt. I called Katalin from the factory, and she said that it wasn't a good time for the factory to work with an artist. Then I called Sandor. He offered to let me work at his studio over the summer, and then bring my sculptures to the factory to be glazed and fired. In July, Katalin finally agreed to let me have five sculptures glazed and fired at the factory. And I even received the Trust for Mutual Understanding grant!

WVFC: Why do you think you were suddenly met with so much resistance at the factory?

JK: Well, I am an outsider. It's pretty remarkable that Sandor was willing to help me as much as he did, knowing as little as he did about me. In addition, Pécs was chosen as a Cultural Capital of Europe in 2010. As a result, the city received funding to renovate parts of the factory, and convert some of its buildings and grounds into a new cultural quarter. My guess is that there was too much going on to accommodate an artist-in-residence. The great news is that ever since the summer of 2010, I have been going back to Pécs whenever I have had time. The factory charges me a fair price to have work glazed and fired, so we have a clearly defined business relationship now. And I have access to the eosin glazes.



Butterfly Rock, 2011, ceramic, 14 1/2 x 18 x 8 inches (36.8 x 45.7 x 20.3 cm)

WVFC: And how did the show at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery come about?

JK: I had been showing my sculptures with the luster glazes to the gallery director and assistant director as I was developing the work, and they were very encouraging. Finally, when they thought that I had enough work for a solo show, we set the date.

I have been working with the gallery since 2006, and I had a two-person show there in 2007. The gallery currently represents 16 living artists and several estates, and most shows are on view for two months. So if you do the math, you can see that there is a lot of competition for six or seven shows a year. So I was extremely lucky!



Nightshade, 2011, ceramic, 12 x 11 x 9 inches (30.5 x 27.9 x 22.9 cm)

WVFC: I know that we have talked a lot about your adventures in Hungary. But now I want to give you a chance to touch on some of the ideas and influences behind your sculptures. I realize that this could be a whole other interview.

JK: Well, yes. I have a lot to say about my work!

I am influenced by many different artists, decorative arts and ideas. For many years now, I have been fascinated by the work of 16th century French ceramic artist Bernard Palissy. He made porcelain platters that resemble ponds filled with all sorts of reptiles and other animals that he cast from nature. He inspired other generations to make what is now known as Palissyware.

I am also really interested in Chinese Scholar's Rocks. A scholar's rock can be used for religious or aesthetic purposes to focus the mind. The name in Chinese is *gongshi*: *gong* means "spirit" and *shi* means "stone," and refers to the belief that inanimate objects have spirit. I try to create work that feels dynamic; work that seems to change when it's viewed over time, as if it is alive.

And, of course, I am influenced by both the style and philosophy of Art Nouveau. I use the psychedelic colors and flowing lines of Art Nouveau in my work. The philosophy of Art Nouveau was to infuse domestic life with all aspects of nature. For example, silverware, vases, tables, and desks were all decorated with imagery and shapes from nature. But it wasn't just the beautiful aspect of nature that was important—the flowers, butterflies, and twisting vines. Art Nouveau was also interested in depicting the destructive power of nature, represented by snakes and other menacing creatures.



Gargantua, 2011, ceramic, 18 1/2 x 11 x 10 inches (47 x 27.9 x 25.4 cm)

WVFC: To me your recent work is a bit less figurative, a bit more abstract, than your earlier work.

JK: In the new work, I continued using many of the forms that I used in my previous work in new ways. I took forms like an elephant foot and a gorilla head—cast from the real thing—and covered them with animal forms to create what look like semi-abstract masses. If you look closely, there are identifiable details like octopi, shells, worms, and butterflies. An eye here and an ear there. I try to make artwork that has lots of details and texture, and that takes time to explore. And I love anything fantastical, over the top, psychedelic, or even freakish. I am always trying to work at the edge of kitsch and see how far I can push the work.

WVFC: The show at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery is no longer on view. Where can we see your work now?

JK: The best thing to do is to contact the gallery. The gallery has a few of my sculptures, and the people there are happy to take the work out and show it.

WVFC: One last thing, when are you going back to Hungary?

JK: Soon! I am planning to go back and work this summer. I got a Fulbright scholarship, so I will be taking time off from teaching so that I can go back again from February 2013 until school starts in the fall.

*For more information about Julia Kunin, watch the interview below as she discusses her work at the [Greenberg Van Duren Gallery](#) or [click here](#) for an in-depth interview with the artist in *The Brooklyn Rail* from April 2012 by Maria Elena González.*

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