

KATHY DALWOOD: NO APOLOGISTS

Yi Ling Huang visits the artist in her North London studio.

'You can't be an apologist for what you do.' Kathy Dalwood, sculptor and designer, speaks with conviction. 'I've worked hard for years to build up what I've done. You've got to have confidence in yourself, that what you've done is worth it.'

We are in Dalwood's studio in North London. The shelves are stacked with her work - painstakingly cast concrete tiles, a vase filled with plaster flowers, and plaster busts of women with unexpected objects on their heads: a typewriter, a fighter plane, a London skyline. Boundless energy radiates from Dalwood as she talks about her work. She picks up a bas-relief, a tableau of disposable cups. 'The key element to my work is that I'm casting from real things,' she says. 'I'm interested in the qualities of mundane, everyday materials. Paper card, coffee cups, packaging, things I find from skips.' She darts over to a corner, rummages, and produces a medium-sized box which has been laid out flat to showcase its structural lines. 'As someone who's interested in abstraction and modernism, this is a beautiful thing.'

Dalwood's fascination with juxtaposition is the cornerstone of her work. This gives her pieces an unexpected edge, whether she is memorialising ordinary objects as part of a bas-relief or mixing the tropes of femininity and masculinity. There are elements of architecture and engineering in her busts, like an F1 racing car or Apollo moon lander, which sit on a feminine head. 'I really like the juxtaposition between these kinds of male things with a beautiful, feminine figure,' she muses. 'Because that's what I am as well. I'm not a particularly masculine type of woman, but I'm extremely feminist.'

This is unsurprising from an artist who used to sneak out of ballet lessons aged eight to go to the library to pore over books on architecture and contemporary design. Her father was British sculptor Hubert Dalwood, and she spent many hours in his studio, watching and learning. But he wasn't the only one who influenced her work. 'My mother Mary brought us up on her own,' she recalls. (Her parents were divorced.)


'She was a stunning role model, managing my sister and me along with a political career (Mary was a Labour councillor for a number of years). She told our headmistress when I was 11 that we would go to university - not many girls did in those days. She was extremely independent and gave us responsibility and encouraged independence from a very young age. I think that her influence is responsible for my independent and confident approach to my career.'

As an established sculptor with a string of international high-profile commissions, Dalwood is conscious about sharing her industry knowledge with emerging artists. She mentors women who are in their late 40s to 60s. 'Their problem is lack of confidence,' she says firmly. 'They don't feel like they can go for this project or that. It's internal. There's one woman who does bronze casting, which is incredibly difficult. I asked her if she was applying for public art commissions. She said no - she



didn't have the experience.' She pauses. 'I said, you have the experience.'

The very basis of success is being good at what you do, in Dalwood's opinion. And, to be good, you've got to work hard, for a long time. And then you've got to build meaningful relationships. She cites a friend who was told by a gallery that they couldn't feature her work because they 'already had a woman painter'. 'You need to look for the people who are going to push and promote you hard. You've got to make demands.'

Dalwood is a strong proponent of having confidence in your work and standing up for its worth. It's one of the reasons she has managed to retain control of her career and choose her collaborations in an industry where the majority of key players are men. Her conviction is certainly inspiring, and she makes no apologies for it. 'Some men can find it very difficult for women to be strong and forceful and have the confidence in what they say. I'm a kick-arse kind of woman; I like women artists who are like that.' 

Photos Yi Ling Huang

