



What's stopping you?

From Game of Thrones to 'loving noses': life as a self-employed sculptor

It takes a meticulous eye for detail to become a sculptor, but for Lydia Smith to make a living out of her art she needs to be equally diligent with her business planning
by Bonnie Christian

Sculptor Lydia Smith splits her time between her personal sculpture projects, running workshops, and the sets of films and TV shows for which she has sculpted props - such as Game of Thrones and Tomb Raider. The 24-year-old artist behind Lydia Smith Sculpture says the secret to fitting it all in is her constant companion: a paperback diary.



Lydia Smith at work in her studio

I think with my hands. I always wanted to use clay and do 3D stuff but I wasn't allowed. I completely fell in love with sculpture, and figurative in particular, when I started my art foundation. Making something 3D makes so much more sense to me than drawing. My hands just know what to do.

One of my tutors told me: "Use a model to make a sculpture, but don't make a sculpture of the model." I'm attracted to models who have different angles in their faces and good noses. I love noses. I ask people I know to pose - raise their arms, twist a bit, look in different directions. Depending on what I'm trying to achieve with the mood of the piece, I might elongate or shorten limbs, or twist the torso more to give more drama.



Tools of the trade. Smith's implements and studio interior

I worked on Game of Thrones season eight. There's quite a lot of polystyrene sculpture used for trees, or castles, or rock formations. Little animals on the King's Landing set were sculpted out of clay. The time pressure of working on set and never knowing if designers will change their mind is a challenge. My colleague and I had an hour to clad a whole piece and sculpt some rock detail into it, we were completely exhausted by the end, then the designers came back and said they now didn't need it until the next week.

It's part of my ethos to bring sculpture to younger people. I run portrait sculpting and torso sculpting workshops. You just don't get the opportunity to do it in schools because of all the processes involved, you have to know your anatomy and there are just so many different techniques. It's just so involved. Most people would have no idea how much stuff goes on behind the scenes of creating one sculpture.

Health and safety is a massive part. We use knives and electrical equipment, so I have masks for breathing protection and eye goggles and gloves, which we wear when operating heavy machinery and moulding and casting. I have insurance to cover injuries, to cover my tools in case someone breaks in, and I have it to cover my apprentice, who was working for me one day a week.

I'm trying to make my studio as eco-friendly as possible. I make my sculptures on armatures. I mould them and then get them cast in bronze, plaster, and a material called jesmonite. They're non-toxic, so it's more eco-friendly than resin. That's something I'm trying to really bring into my studio, because there's so much waste within the whole process.



In addition to her personal practice, Smith also runs portrait and torso sculpting workshops

This year, I had five months off where there was no film work. Having that time off really pushed my personal work forward. It was really quiet and it enabled me to do some courses in Athens and in Spain. I've got five sculptures on the go at the moment, and I did two ice sculpture competitions over the Christmas break. But five months of no pay and all of a sudden it becomes: "I really need to find another film."

I always ask the question and I'm a little bit ballsy. I got my first actual job by wandering around on my tea breaks with my portfolio and breaking into art departments so I could speak with art directors. I love networking, I'm a network addict and I'm always paying attention to what might be next, even though I'm already doing something.



I don't know where I would be without my diary. If something is not in my diary I will just completely forget what it is: film work, my personal stuff, my social life, gym, everything. I'm a very visual learner so everything is on this bit of paper, written down, rubbed out, scribbled out, different colours.

I'm the most scatty person ever. To run my business as a sole trader I have a business account that everything goes into. I have an app to scan all my receipts and my invoices that calculate all my tax and expenses for the end of each year. A couple of years ago to get my head around it all was hard, but now it's fine. I'm always on my emails, I always sit down at the end of the day and run through them to flag up the ones I need to reply to.

I want to have a public sculpture somewhere someday. Ideally I want to be running workshops to teach people. My own personal goal is to have my artwork in exhibitions in galleries, and for people to commission me to do portrait busts and figures, and then drop in and out of film work whenever I get asked to come in.