



# GILDED BIRDS

A snapshot of  
contemporary ideals of  
beauty

**Artist, Nina Mae Fowler, on her Royal Doulton  
sherry decanter**

**GB Tell me why you chose this.**

NF I chose him because I love searching through antique shops and going to car boot sales. When we left London, our flat in Shoreditch was full of things that I'd found. Old vintage furniture and little bits and bobs. The guy who bought the flat wanted everything in it. It was a huge compliment but hard at the same time. I took a deep breath, closed the door and thought about making a new start. The idea of starting again was appealing because it does get to a point where you have too much stuff. I haven't looked back and this sherry decanter was the first thing I found in Norfolk.

**GB So you don't get sentimentally attached to things?**

NF I'll think I am but then I'll lock something in a cupboard for a few years and forget it. But this guy was the first thing I bought for our new house and he encapsulates a lot of things I love. He's black, he's mysterious and he was made in 1937. I love that he's Royal Doulton. I wouldn't have imagined him to be because I think of Royal Doulton as being quite chintzy. He's made in England but he's based on a Spanish Caballero. He's the Sandeman from a brand of port. I'm really drawn to functional objects of beauty, especially when the function is a secret, so you take off his hat and there's a cork there.

**GB Did you fall in love with him as soon as you saw him?**

NF Yes. I absolutely had to have him.

**GB And a lot of your work is based on Hollywood in the 30s so was that part of the appeal?**

NF To be honest, I wouldn't have guessed that he was from that era, but now I know, I do like the fact that it all ties together. I'm always drawn to things that are dramatic but well made. He also has a really dark side. It's unclear what the expression is on his face. But for me, he's just this side of tacky. I also love Spain. My dad took me to my first bull fight when I was sixteen. We used to go on holiday to Spain and I fell in love with everything – the food, the language, the dance. The Spanish



do drama incredibly well. Bull fighting has the terrible dark side to it but it's still so beautiful. It's like a ballet with a terrible twist.

**GB So is this why your work is usually about quite a dramatic point in a narrative?**

NF Yes. I like to get an immediate reaction with my work. I like to pull on basic human emotions, the sort of things that make us cry when we're watching a film.

**GB And is beauty something you're looking for when you create the work?**

NF 100%. It's so important for me to make work that I consider to be beautiful. I like making work that appeals across the board in terms of beauty too. I think, to enjoy my work, you don't need to have studied contemporary art. I love contemporary art but I like to attract people just because of the technique, because it's well executed – or they might enjoy the work because they're a fan of the person in it, or because they've seen the film. I want people to be able to associate with it, so like the cinema, it appeals really widely.

**GB When you started making that kind of work, did you feel as though it might be harder to be taken seriously?**

NF Definitely. When I studied sculpture at Brighton University it was a totally conceptual course. I made video and performance work. I love art and I'd pored over the history of art and I wanted to try everything – and I did. But when I left university, all I wanted to do was to start drawing again. I was desperate to go back to the art I loved making when I was twelve. I was tired of critiques and the intellectual pressure my work was under to be pushing the barriers of contemporary theory. So it was lovely to go back to drawing without anyone looking over my shoulder for a few years. I worked as a technician in a school to get by and I went back to what I love doing and why I love doing it. I knew that if I wanted to do anything new or original I had to rely on my instinct more. I still think there are people who don't take my work seriously but I don't really care any more. There are enough people that do and all that matters is that I can carry on doing it. I love what I do and I think that comes across in the work.

**GB Do you ever find it hard to part with them?**

NF NO! I love it more than anything when my work goes to another home. Apart from making it, the most gratifying part is when someone wants to live with it or loves it as much as I did when I was making it. My current show is called "While I'm Still Warm" and Marilyn Monroe had that engraved on a tie pin which she gave to her long standing friend and make up artist who helped her to create the Marilyn we all know. So the joke was that he should do her make up when she died. I feel that way about my work. I want people to appreciate it while I'm still breathing!

The notable burial series of sculptures are from a pilgrimage I made to Rudolph Valentino's funeral parlour in New York. The owner gave me a private tour and there was an open casket in there with a dead body in it. I'd never seen a dead body before and I was so uncomfortable I said I'd have to leave. He said that before I left I should take their list of notable burials. It was like an advert for the funeral parlour with a long alphabetical list of all the people they thought were noteworthy, so I'm working through the list making bronze busts of them. The Bs are in this show; Basquiat, Ballanchine, Tallulah Bankhead.

**GB What do you think about the difference between art and design? Do you think that whoever carved your sherry decanter really wanted to be known as an artist?**

NF I often get referred to as an illustrator which I don't entirely relate to. Who knows what the Sandeman creator thought. Maybe he didn't have the mind of a fine artist. Maybe he had more of a vocational approach to his craft. A lot of people just like using their hands and I really admire that. I think you're either satisfied with a craft or there's something more to what you want to portray. I like working to a brief as well. It's very comforting to take instructions. In the fine art world it can be overwhelming, deciding which direction to take. Maybe the person who made the decanter didn't want that. And maybe he wanted a routine and a salary.

**GB What makes something worthy of the word Beauty to you?**

NF I wouldn't have been able to answer that question until I had my son. He's goes beyond beauty. But he's not an object so I chose this because every time I look at the decanter he gives me a little shiver of pleasure – from every angle. He's beautiful to me but I doubt many people will find him as beautiful as I do.

Nina's show at the Cob Gallery, Camden, is on until May 27th