Amy Cesal’s Play-Doh infographics bring fun and colour to datavis

These award-winning data visualisations are like nothing you’ve ever seen, and bring a new playful edge to data.

Clay is back in play, people. With viral sensations like Kirsten Lepore’s *Hey Stranger* and the work of Azod Abedikichi, along with the whacked out animation sequence from much talked-about 2018 comedy *Sorry to Bother You,* it seems we can’t get enough of the squishy stuff.

Chicago-based Amy Cesal takes the love one step further though in an entirely unexpected way, her award-winning project Day Doh Viz (#DayDohViz) visualising data using Play-Doh of all things. The results, as you can guess, are some whimsical yet enlightening 3D works which bring a playful edge to the world of infographics.

Amy, an information visualiser and graphic designer, has tasked herself with making one infographic a day from the colourful kids’ stuff on subjects ranging from the financial to the personal. DayDohViz projects shared so far on her Twitter have included a breakdown of dog ownerships costs and a projection of expenses when working as a freelancer – something a lot of us can relate with – to more meta examples including the amount of Play-Doh in Amy’s house and the various figures you can make with the few remaining Mold-A-Rama vending machines (think 3D toy printing but during the ’60s).

“I wanted to do something fun, funky and easy to work with,” Amy tells us about the origins of this most playful of projects. “Play-Doh seemed like a retro and relatable medium that would be easier to work in than Legos, and photograph

better than traditional clay.

Amy’s Mold-A-Rama project

“I also had just recently gotten back into throwing pottery on the wheel, so using my hands and working with clay was on my mind,” she explains. “It just happened to be a good mix of things. I also hope that more people start using physical mediums; working with your hands to make something is such a good change from working on a computer.”

This isn’t Amy’s first foray either into making dataviz fun again – as a Master’s thesis project, she created a physical workbook that allowed people to track aspects of their daily life and then compare their own data against recommendations or population averages.

“I’ve always tried to make the visualisations I create fun and engaging, making data less like something stuck in a report and more like something out in the world that is tangible and people can interact with – especially when it’s their own data,” Amy says, looking back.

“I’ve always learned best by doing things, and I enjoy that hand-made aesthetic. I think people interacting with data helps them relate or engage in a different way.”

“I tried to bring this to a new level with DayDohViz. There isn’t a lot of 3 dimensional data visualisation work out there, and this project allowed me to get creative and experiment with how to use 3D in a low-stakes and playful way.”

Amy’s work has been recognised by Kantar’s Information is Beautiful awards, winning a nod in this year’s Unusual category. Its simple nature has also inspired tutors and designers to try out using Play-Doh themselves and with classes – no matter their ages.

“It feels amazing to have inspired people,” she tells us. “I never imagined that people would take what I’d done and bring it into the classroom, but I think it’s such a great idea.

“There are so many people, especially adults, who feel like they can’t draw or sketch and can’t make visualisations unless they are experts in some fancy software. I think using Play-Doh breaks that because *nobody* is good at Play-Doh. The medium won’t let you be a perfectionist, so you can let your guard down and try out new things.”

Amy is also naturally delighted about her Kantar recognition.

“It was such an honour to even be shortlisted among so many great projects and talented people,” she says, “and I was really touched to be awarded Silver in my category.

“Last year, I had a project shortlisted and received an award, but I didn’t attend the ceremony. I was really glad that I did

this year; I got a sense of what an exciting community of creators are working in this space, and was happy to be among them.

“I think the Unusual category was a hard one,” Amy continues. “There were so many really innovative projects that pushed the boundaries of what can be done. For example, I *really* like the Bronze award winner which communicated the costs of heath care using the time it took for a marble to travel through pathways made out of medical supplies.

“Representing that data physically with the time and sound is such a cool idea. To me, this spread of amazing projects suggests really good things for the future of data visualisation.”

While surely most if not all of Amy’s Day Doh creations caught the eye of judges, her personal favourite is usually the one she’s most recently made – one in this case which is perfect for the Thanksgiving/Christmas time of year we’re now enjoying.

“Right now, I like my teeny-tiny turkeys that I made for a viz about cooking times of common holiday proteins There’s a secret sauce of having interesting data, *and* an interesting form that’s *also* really well executed, and I don’t think I’ve created one that hits 100 on all these levels. Which is why I’m still working on the project.”

As you can see, Amy’s work is no turkey, and hopefully it’ll help you to rustle a great-tasting bird this festive season.

After all, isn’t sharing knowledge what dataviz is all about?

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https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/illustration/amy-cesals-play-doh-infographics-bring-fun-colour-to-datavis/