In Studio with José Maria Mariscal

Evelyne Schoenmann

José, I like to start each interview with the background of my guests. Can you tell us something about your biography? Did you always want to become a ceramist?

Yes, I have always worked as a ceramist/potter. I was born in La Bisbal d'Empordà, Spain, an important ceramics town in Catalonia. My father was a potter who worked all his career throwing for others and I learned how to throw from my dad. In 2003, I rented a studio in La Bisbal and started doing low-temperature pottery, making bowls, vases and other functional items. I worked alone, although my wife Maite helped finding clients and selling my work in the markets. In the beginning, I did low-temperature glazed ware in a big diesel-fired, 2 metre (6½') square kiln. And also did some raku and terra sigillata pieces. In 2008, we bought a house in Albons, a small village only 20 minutes driving from La Bisbal. A house with a big studio space on the first floor. Now I work there and I teach in many countries.

You are a master of crystal glazing. How did you develop a passion for this type of surface?

It was in 2010 when I saw a potter in a market selling crystalline glazes. I

bought some books on crystalline glazes and I was instantly hooked. Once I discovered crystals, I became obsessed with them and just couldn't stop. I'm interested in the never-ending possibilities that these glazes offer. I've gained a great deal of knowledge through crystalline glaze websites and through correspondence with other crystalline glaze potters.

You once said: "My particular concern, while attempting to achieve harmony and balance in the work, is to express my feelings for the natural world". Can you elaborate?

Yes, I love how the crystals grow. With crystalline glazes you can "control" only a few parts of the process. I like to achieve harmony and balance between the background and the amount of crystals and I love to see the shapes that the crystals create naturally. Each person can see something different in my pieces: the sea, the universe, flowers etc. This is because the crystals are something natural and I love it.

On the NASA website one can see incredibly beautiful pictures of supernovae and star forming nebula which remind me very much of the crystals on your pots. Is outer space an inspiration for you too?

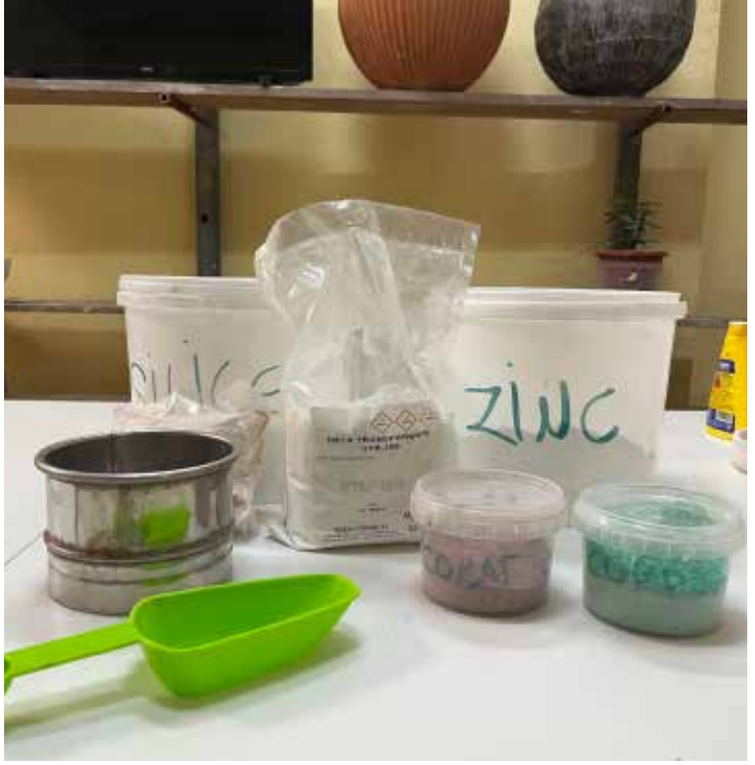
Yes, of course. The sky, sea and landscapes, together with the multitude of flora are a constant source of wonder, inspiration and delight to me. The sea and the universe especially have fascinated me since I was a child. I named one of my favourite glazes the Galaxy glaze. This was because the potter Bill Powell, a friend of mine from Australia, once called out: "Oh, these crystals look like a galaxy!" Now a lot of potters know this kind of glaze as Galaxy glazes. Also, years ago, I won a prize with a piece named Nebulosa, (nebula in Spanish).

Do you still experiment with glazes or do you already know almost everything there is to know?

I came up with my own glaze recipe, the Galaxy Glaze. I discovered it after the International Congress of Zinc Crystalline Glazes that I organized, which took place in La Bisbal in 2013. During the congress, Ian Childers and Phil Hamling gave a demonstration. They explained the effects of applying an acid on the finished piece. With certain glazes, the acid "eats" away part of the glaze and produces a spectacular effect. Based on the work of these ceramists and after much work and research myself, I achieved the results I was looking for. I really have many variations of Galaxy glaze, but what all of them have in common is that they are copper saturations and they have an acid bath after the firing. Now I also experiment with molybdenum crystals and also with crystalline and reduction in the same firing. With crystalline glazes the experiment never ends.

We are now looking forward to an introduction to the various stages of the technique you use, from throwing the pots to the finished work of art.

I throw my vase-shaped pieces on



the electric wheel. After that I do the bisque firing. I mix the glaze, coat the piece with it and place it on the already prepared glaze catcher. Crystalline glazes are so runny and each piece must be placed in a catcher and collector. The piece is then fired to 1265-1280°C in a very controlled firing. I can fire in both, electric or gas kilns and in oxidation or reduction. Galaxy Glazes I fire in my electric kiln in oxidation. In crystalline glazes the firing and the glaze are really very specific and important to achieve the best results. Now the coaster (catcher) is knocked off and the base is sanded smooth with a diamond disc. If I am firing with Galaxy glazes (copper saturated pieces), I now place the piece in an acid bath and then clean it well with water. If I want the colour copper red, I do a post-reduction firing.

Which shapes and clays are best suited for crystal glazes?

I usually work with porcelain. Crystalline glazes must be fired at a high temperature and many times I work at cones 10-12. The colour of the body can interact with the final results of my pieces. Porcelain, with its fine texture, purity and whiteness allows me to explore relationships between form and surface in a way that is more rewarding than with any other clay. Wheel-thrown vessel forms offer infinite opportunities for subtle variations, but my particular concern while attempting to achieve harmony and balance in the work is to express my feelings for the natural

world and to find the perfection of crystalline glazes with the perfect amount of crystals between the background and the surface. My forms are classic and conservative.

In some pieces I work with stoneware and porcelain slip. This is because in some pieces I am looking for more crystals in the background.

Can you give us a short lecture on crystal glaze and what to pay special attention to when working with this glaze?

The macro-crystals found in crystalline glazes form around a nucleus of zinc oxide crystal. In the right circumstances, zinc and silica oxide molecules will begin attaching themselves to the nucleus crystal. For this to happen, there must be an extended time at higher temperatures to allow time for crystal growth, and the glaze must have the right type of chemical composition. Firing schedules for crystalline glazes usually require a soaking period plus a controlled down-firing ramp. Since crystalline glazes tend to be quite runny, pots should be fired on a bisque pedestal-saucer to catch all the drips. The pot's bottom may need to be ground and polished after removal from the kiln.

I can share the basic recipe of my Galaxy glaze (in grams):

Galaxy Glaze (cone 11-12)
Oxidation

Fusion Frit F 644	460
Zinc Oxide	26
Bentonite	10
Titanium Dioxide	10
Silica	270

Additions:

Copper Oxide	4.5
Manganese Dioxide	2.0

Firing:
6 hours up to 1282°C (2340°F).
Hold for 20 minutes.
Natural cooling down to 1085°C (1985°F).
Hold 3.30 hours.
Natural cooling down to 1045°C (1913°F). Hold 1 hour.
Natural cooling down to 1000°C (1832°F). Hold 1 hour.

When the pots come out of the kiln, they are metallized black due to the copper saturation and must be immersed in acid. I use sodium bisulfate. Of course, if you modify the firing programme, then you modify the results and you get more secondary crystals and more halos.

You give a lot of workshops and there are also videos on YouTube. Do you also plan to offer online training courses in the future?

With Covid everything changed. I had already started teaching online. Now I have on-line courses on throwing and crystalline glazing, and I have written articles for ceramics magazines. At present, I teach throwing and crystalline glazing and have given workshops all across Europe, North America, Bali, Israel and Australia. I sell my pottery to markets in Europe and at exhibitions. I also sell through my website. This works really well for me.

I am a member of the IAC (International Academy of Ceramics) based in Switzerland. And I am considered a Master Potter in Catalonia, Spain.

JOSE MARIA MARISCAL
MARISCAL CERAMICS
c/ Migdia 10
17136-Albons - Girona
SPAIN
www.mariscal-ceramics.com
@josemariscalpaneque
info@mariscal-ceramics.com

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is
Hansueli Nydegger, Switzerland

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator.
She is a member of AIC/IAC and lives and works in Basel, Switzerland.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch