

In Studio with Hansueli Nydegger

Evelyne Schoenmann



Hansueli, you have a thoroughly sound training in ceramics. Was it always your dream job? And since you qualified, have you always wanted to work as a ceramist?

I discovered clay as a material early on, but didn't really want to follow a career in that direction. For me, wood sculptor or wood turner were more of a goal, where I would have liked to have a job. Working with plants that still accompany me today would also have been a career goal, for example as a gardener. But then I did a trial week as a potter and was even more enthusiastic about it. Sometimes it's a good idea to let something good mature, and that was also the case with the scary leap into self-employment. Some colleagues expressed their concerns as sales of ceramics were gradually slowing

at the end of the 80s, and then it was becoming even more difficult to reach customers with such a time-consuming and expensive product. It was obviously not easy, but I still managed it step by step. Opening my own studio in 1996 was a good decision, it really showed me that there are still customers who have not lost their eye for "the genuine article", handmade, although at that time the ceramics market was being flooded with very inexpensive mass products, including in the figurative sector. I was lucky enough to be able to show my exhibits to interested customers thanks to gallery and boutique owners who were not only profit-oriented.

Although I never stopped making ceramics after my apprenticeship, I worked part-time in the construction industry for

ten years. I got to know a range of techniques that are still helpful to me today for the surface treatment of my pieces. The correct condition of a part is often crucial for its further processing into a precise shape.

How did you come to make animals of all things?

As a person who is very close to nature, I was very interested in the way animals move and in their diversity from an early age. Modelling is a way of expressing surfaces and movements that takes you further than throwing. During my apprenticeship, there were already opportunities to make animals in the pottery, and that was when I was finally hooked. So I gradually developed a technique that allowed me to create relatively thin-

walled but still stable animal forms, even including some extreme movements, without using the casting technique.

The skin structures and movements, and the general expressiveness of your animals are amazingly lifelike. How and where do you study the animals you create?

How do I best manage to make what I see and feel? I think training your eyes is one of the most important prerequisites for this. Look closely, understand the structure of a surface and then work on the layers from bottom to top, that is, the overall, flowing surface first, then define the finer details. I study in nature, in zoos or with the help of animal films and good animal photographs. I also find a very good basis in anatomical drawings of animals, from which the proportions of the body structure and extremities can be easily determined. Of course, not everything can be implemented in ceramic form as stability is a key concern in our craft. Once I have internalised the basics about an animal, I am often able to implement it directly without having to look at it again in a picture. If I am uncertain, it is always worthwhile examining the piece from a distance, and then I often see if any corrections are still needed.

What kind of clay is best suited for animal sculptures?

Clays with around 25 to 45% grog are best suited for my techniques. They are stable and relatively free of warping, and are also shock-resistant in raku.

(Tip: The company G&S, for example, supplies clays 474 and 480 – both light grey stoneware bodies – or 373, a black-grey variety. And the company Potclays also has excellent sand-coloured clays with bodies 1114 or 1153, which are suitable for hand-building and a wide range of firing processes).

Have you ever worked with porcelain, for example for elephants' tusks?

I really like using porcelain in vessel ceramics because you can quickly get a clean, dense cup or bowl, which often makes the colours stand out really brightly in a gas firing and also reacts well to a reduction atmosphere. An additional effect can also be achieved through the translucence of the porcelain body. It makes the pieces really classy and the shapes even more unique.

It would certainly be worth a try for animal figures too, as there have been bodies mixed with grog or natural fibres for some time now. Translucent polar bears, that could be a project! Tusks made of porcelain would probably be a bit too sterile for the structure of skin. You also have to take the different shrinkage into account.

Can you tell us some tools that are good for structuring the surfaces of the animals?

Would you like to see the whole range? It is mainly potter's needles, scrapers, wooden modelling tools, loop tools, various tubes, expanded metal, natural materials such as nectarine stones, etc. My aim is to texture the surface effectively, expressively and clearly.





We are now very curious to hear what you have to say about how the elephant transforms from a lump of clay into a work of art...

I throw and alter the basic shape: it is important for me to create a smooth foundation for the texture, many things are much easier then because we don't have to work on an uneven base.

Then I shape the legs and attach them to the basic body when they are leather-hard. The nails and the folds can be partially formed at this stage, this is often easier to do.

I texture the first elements, attaching the neck and tail, always using slip, but not too much!

I shape the head part as a whole unit with the trunk, bringing the shape into its final form with my fingers and an unpainted wooden tool. I press the indentations alternately with the appropriate modelling tool, then carefully bend the trunk, structure it with the potter's needle and let it dry some more.

When I am shaping the ears and tusks, I carefully smooth the tusks in particular with the scraper and shape them.

Head/trunk part: When the head is dry enough, I attach it firmly to the neck, then attach the ears.

I define the eyes and skin structure of the forehead and, as a dessert, add the tusks by pressing the teeth onto the skin pocket from the inside and securing them with additional clay coils. The piece is finished.

A little tip from me: Check again to see if the piece has really retained its texture everywhere.

Dry, bisque firing, apply patina and glaze – I use a very watery patina that contains frit and cobalt and copper oxide. It works best with a soft sponge so that the patina only adheres in the depressions.

A raku firing to approx. 1000°C follows, smoking, then I leave it to cool and wash it. So, now the elephant is ready for exhibition!

You must have a favourite animal that turns out especially well?

I am often asked about this. I have definitely created a whole zoo of animals over the last thirty years. I like to model a whole group of the same species, then you really get into the subject. Every animal inspires me. The elephant was there from the beginning and certainly still is today.

The highest degree of perfection is characteristic of your animals. Can you still go on improving? Will there be any new experiments in future?

There is always room for improvement and sometimes it is good to look at your first figures and see the development in the forms. As long as I can work creatively, I see change and the adaptation of movement and surface as a necessity. Growing and sticking with it is also very helpful and I hope I can continue to do that for some time to come.

NYDEGGER KERAMIK
HANSUELI NYDEGGER
Schloss-Straße 22
3672 Oberdiessbach
SWITZERLAND
Tel. +41 (0)31-7 71 04 51
nydegger.hase@bluewin.ch
www.nydegger-keramik.ch



Evelyne Schoenmanns next
interview partner is
Sirin Koçak, Turkey

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