In studio with Marcia Selsor

Evelyne Schoenmann

Marcia, you are a Professor Emerita. In 2016 you celebrated half a century working in clay. We have known each other a long time already, but would you explain your background to our readers?

I have a BFA and MFA in ceramics. I began teaching ceramics in 1975 in Billings, Montana. I spent a year on a Fulbright Fellowship researching traditional Spanish potters in 1985-86, and in 1994 I went to Uzbekistan on a Fulbright Award to teach studio ceramics and ceramic art history at Tashkent Institute of the Arts. In 1991 I was part of a group of Americans who hosted 12 ceramic artists from the former Soviet Union and was invited to Latvia for a month to work with the same group. Peteris Martinsons was one of the organizers. I have taught workshops in Europe since 1995. First in Spain at Centro Agost 1995-99. Then I began teaching at La Meridiana in 2001. I have had numerous international residencies and participated in symposiums in Canada, Iceland, Italy, France, Latvia, Spain, Uzbekistan, and in the US at the Archie Bray Foundation and the Clay Studio in Philadelphia. Working internationally truly broadens one's perspective.

Alternative firings are your signature technique. I heard it said that nobody knows more about this firing technique than you do. How come you are so fascinated with fire and heat?

My education in ceramics included kiln building and design. I was introduced to American "raku" by Paul Soldner in 1968. As the sole ceramics instructor in a small university, I tried to provide my stu-

dents with a broad range of knowledge. My personal work included crystalline glazes for my master's thesis, building stoneware, soda and salt kilns in college and afterwards for my studios and for my classes. In the summer my students searched for local clays, processed them and experimented with low-tech firing possibilities using pits, saggars, barrels, cow manure, horse manure, sawdust. Michael Cardew said there are mud potters and fire potters. I am a fire potter. My aesthetic concerns focus on the marks of the fire. The results of processes that I use express a raw element of nature's marks either in firing obvara, foil or ceramic saggars, or soluble salts.

Most of your works are spherical. Logical, because pieces in the roaring fire have to be round-ish. But you also make raku clay pictures …

The sphere is my favourite form to throw and lends itself as a "canvas" for markings. It can change character with a crackled surface fired in obvara, to appear as granite with soluble salts, or present a wisp of soft colour from ceramic saggars. It is very versatile. In the 1980s I took students to dig clay in the Pryor Mountains. As we were crossing high mountain ridge, a herd of wild horses came out of a cloud, surrounded our vehicles, and disappeared down the hillside. That inspired me to create horse images on raku slabs.

… and not to forget the architectural ceramics and installations!

In Spain, I visited many potters in very remote areas. I travelled along the Camino de Santiago in Castile and Galicia and encountered many ancient churches. I fell in love with Romanesque Art. The scale is perfect for modelling clay. I created an installation *Sketches of Spain*; *Marking the Millennium*, representing a cloister with 15 arches and columns with capitals and a meditative fountain. Another installation was a memorial piece for 9/11 entitled *Every Life is a Book* consisting of 42 terracotta paper clay books smoke-fired in the train kiln at the Archie Bray Foundation. The images of burnt books expressed the loss of life as being censored as in book burning.

About saggar firings: what kinds of saggars are there and how do you use them?

The ceramic saggar is a container for the ware to be fired with combustibles such as sawdust, seaweed, grasses, wire for linear accents, along with table salt and copper carbonate. The prepared saggar is placed in a gas or raku kiln and fired to 900°C. Foil

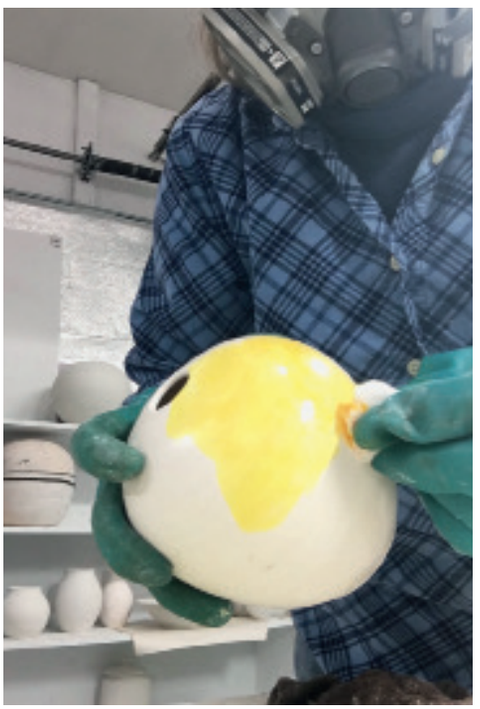
saggar pieces are coated with a wash of soluble salts and possibly granules, organic materials like leaves, and all is wrapped in 2 layers of foil. The maximum temperature for foil is about 760°C. An accidental overfiring led me to experiment with the few soluble salts used in foil saggars. I tried them without any saggars and began getting brighter colours. I tried using ice-melting salts such as magnesium and calcium chlorides. Having read Arne Ases' Watercolor on Porcelain, he mentions zinc chloride can erase cobalt chloride. So, I started seeing what combinations worked with each other.

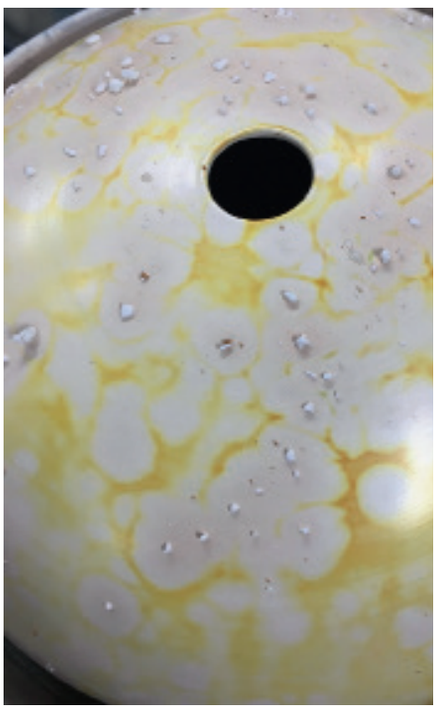
And now: Soluble Salts. Sounds enigmatic….

My further experiments with the soluble salts on hundreds of test tiles within 3 different temperature ranges (760°C, 815°C and 950°C) provided a wide range of colour potential. I mix small amounts of 6.5 grams in 1/8 cup of hot water. I use cotton balls to apply the solution. I can use one cotton ball per colour. When preparing a saggar, the pot is supported on a chuck of kiln shelf or a triangular stilt. I place the used cotton balls into saggars with some sawdust and table salt for some interesting flashes.

This leads us directly to the picture series in this interview. Please guide us through the process.

My process for these pieces begins with a simple form of an orb. I take several steps to refine the surface using ribs, then rubbing the dried piece with baby oil, applying terra sig after it dries again, and burnishing with a soft sponge. Once I have a kiln load, I bisque them to 954°C. This low temperature keeps the sheen of the terra sig and the porosity for the absorption to occur. My solutions are mixed as mentioned above and applied with a cotton ball for a base colour. Extra precautions are taken due to the toxicity of these chemicals. The vapour mask protects the mucus membrane in the nasal cavities. The tight-fitting goggles protects the surface of my eyes, gloves and long sleeves protect the skin. The second application for contrasting colours or patterns is either a sprinkling of crystals which are left to penetrate overnight, or solutions applied by dabbing with another cotton ball.





After soaking overnight, the size and outlines of the areas of the dissolved crystals are evident. The saggars are prepared with a small amount of sawdust, table salt and cotton balls. The used cotton balls included with the combustibles eliminate toxic waste. The pot is placed on a stilt above the combustibles. The saggar is covered and fired. The containers also absorb the fuming burn-off. When using a clay saggar I fire to the hottest range in my limits, 950°C. If using foil, I fire no hotter than 760°C. After firing, the pieces are washed and allowed to dry. I wax and buff the surface with floor wax/paste to protect the soft pieces.

Your next workshop will be soon, end of May, in the famous ceramics school La Meridiana in Tuscany / Italy. Are there still spots available and what is the theme?

I'll be teaching my second Soluble Salts workshop at La Meridiana from May 31 – June 6, 2020. As of November 2019, the course was 70% full. I get many requests for information on workshops. I post them on my website. Also, I have contact information there for anyone interested in hosting workshops.www.marciaselsorstudio.com/contact-and-retail-gallery-locations.html

Is there still a new technique you want to try in the future, or have you "seen it all"?

The study of "ceramics" is infinite. Accidents and discoveries can open up all sorts of directions. After 50+ years of exploring the potential possibilities, I am still engaged and open to new explorations.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's
next interview is with
Angela Burkhardt-Guallini
Switzerland

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is a member of the AIC/IAC and lives and works in Basel.
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