

In Studio with Zsuzsa Füzesi Heierli

Evelyne Schoenmann



Zsuzsa, you received the main part of your training in Hungary. Tell us something about your ceramic background.

As a child, I liked drawing and made all kinds of figures from clayey earth. At primary school and a specialist fine art secondary school in Pécs (H) I learned more. Drawing, modelling and potting were my thing and so I never wanted to try out anything else. Between 1971 and 1974, I was an assistant at a ceramic manufactory in Budapest, where I learned virtually all the processes involved in making ceramics. From 1975-79, I studied at the Hungarian Academy of Applied Art, faculty of porcelain, under Prof. Imre Schrammel. Besides porcelain design, he showed us other ways of making ceramics. After the Academy, there were won-

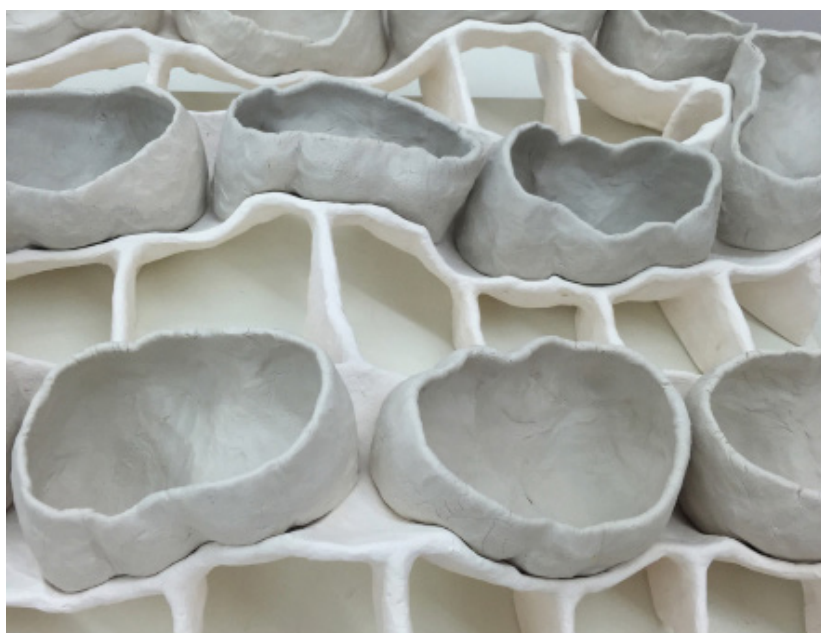
derfully formative years for me: teaching at the fine art secondary school in Pécs (1980-82) participating in lots of symposiums, artistic collaboration at the Siklos Ceramics Centre (H), participating in the Terra ceramics group, and so on. In 1992, I married my husband and came to Switzerland. That made me a commuter between two countries. In 1997, I returned to the master school of my former teacher, Imre Schrammel. I graduated from this course at the Janus Pannonius University in the Fine Art faculty in Pécs in 2008 with a doctorate in ceramic sculpture.

It is interesting that you had tuition from Imre Schrammel like your Swiss colleague Jürg Bächtold (In Studio 1/22). It looks like you are just as enthusiastic about him...

Yes! I was his student and later his master student. His teaching was absolutely formative for my development and technique. During my training, he guided me onto the pathway that I am currently following. I am very grateful to him.

The forms of your pieces are usually, well, I'd say amorphous-geometric. This seems to be an important movement in your work. What can you tell us about the design of your works?

In philosophical terms, I have taken over the "design of nature". Every single piece carries within itself the theme of self similarity together with its continuous paradoxical form transformation. For the concrete design, I have taken over principles from fractal geometry. Fractals make the patterns in nature visible and



reproduce them with mathematical formulae. They are self-similar and structure replicating (discovered by Benoît B. Mandelbrot). Self similarity is generally valid although the nonlinear dynamic of all existences produces widely differing patterns in reality. When constructing a piece, I follow the principle of the iteration of a single element, which is adapted to the various spatial directions and is continually repeated. In the way the form I have imagined adapts to space, its volume changes. Through this method, a complex organic diversity of forms develops. All forms have the same structure but changing certain factors – e.g. the sculptural design of the layout, the structure of the width, the structure of the spatial axes etc. – create new qualities.

Do you imagine a finished form before you start work or do you work in a free flow?

It is a mixture of the two. I plan and model the layout, choose the elements and their connecting system very carefully as the statics, the construction and the vibrating motion of the body during firing require it. Apart from that, I work in a free flow. For parts, volumes and spatial directions, I don't think much, I just do it. The work process is very long, I work 4 – 8 weeks on one sculpture. The piece is always wrapped in plastic, so I do not look at it as whole before I come to the end.

Can you talk us through the various stages as far as that is possible with such a complex technique?

First I model what I call the supporting form from light-coloured, low firing clay. Of these supporting forms, there are lenticular and oval forms, convex and concave ones, and some with a more complex form. I decide how many double walls the piece should have and in what form they will ultimately stand (e.g. as a ring, a serpentine form, or forms like a switchback, which have ups and downs). They are then pre-fired to 960°C. Then I press in the positive forms and build up the side walls with my porcelain body, a mixture of flax porcelain (paperclay) and Southern Ice porcelain, 50:50. This is how I get the negative base form, which I also pre-fire to the same temperature. Every piece has its own base that I only use for this object. The base is very important because it holds the piece together during firing and its sculptural design defines how the finished piece behaves at high temperature. Constructing the object starts by moulding the base to shape and making holes in it. The holes perforate the clay body, which virtually excludes the possibility of cracking during drying and firing. As I work on each piece for a long time, I have to concentrate from the beginning on keeping it moist. That is why the artwork



is always wrapped in plastic and I only see the area I am actually working on. I work by coiling, almost without any tools at all. On the thin edge, which is coated with slip, I layer the coils – about 8 mm thick – and repeat and smooth it until it is homogeneous. Depending on the chosen system, the cavities are then built in and connected with the closed spaces layer by layer.

The piece grows in layers from bottom to top. After I have worked in a coil, I immediately make the holes as there is no way to alter the form in any way afterwards. In my experience it is most important to carry out each stage at the

correct degree of moistness. I leave the finished piece to dry for several weeks. I bisque fire with a slow firing curve to 960°C.

For the high temperature firing, I paint the supporting form with a mixture of aluminium oxide and olive oil as a release agent, otherwise the object would adhere to the supporting base. At very high kiln temperatures, porcelain sinters and becomes soft. I fire in an electric kiln. Every one of my pieces is usually almost as large as the chamber of my kiln. I vary the temperature of the high temperature firing between 1290 – 1315°C, depending on the form.

You work with porcelain and the sculptures have many cavities. I would like to know something about the statics of your works, the relationship between mass/form/structure and the behaviour of the objects during high temperature firing.

I wrote my doctoral thesis in 2008 on Material Meaning – Materiality, where I comprehensively collate my research. To save space, I will just give some key terms here: the forms are stored in the properties of the clay mineral. Individuality, dependency on water, energy transformation. The clay mineral is a permanently



changing, disperse, unstable system. The “amorphous” mass has a crystalline structure with strained water molecules in the lattice. Owing to these characteristics, it can easily absorb the forms that give space to the vibrations caused by dehydration. I look for structural systems for the forms based on their inner structure. Not forms with closed clay walls, instead loose relationships between the walls, where ribs can simply shift and there is enough space for structural movement.

I do not use straight starting planes but spatial curves. I use the memory of clay minerals for the forming and sintering process (softening of the material through the fine “vibrating dance” near the final temperature) as a principle of shaping. My construction systems are spiral double-walls and their intersections, wave motions and their intersections, cell system, zigzag-hexagon-system, funnel system and weaving system.

For me, all of these structural possibilities are spatial patterns of fractal geometry that are in harmony with the character of porcelain. Static stability results naturally from the fact that the life of these patterns developed as growth principles for survival. I surrender my works to the heat of the kiln so that ultimately they find their form themselves.

They have to continue to develop in the heat following my “suggestions”, which is why I fire to above the stated highest temperature. It is always an intuitive decision how much higher the temperature is set for a specific piece. I can only make assumptions of how connections, bridges, spatial directions and volumes will change in the kiln.

What wishes, ideas and projects have you got for the near future. Or in other words, what would you like to discover for yourself?

I would like to continue searching in this treasure chest. There is so much to be found in it!

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Evelyn Schoenmann's next interview partner is **John Tuckwell, Australia.**

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