

In Studio with John Tuckwell

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN



John, you worked in the motor trade before you lost your heart to ceramics. Would you tell us a bit about your biography and how you came to work with clay?

It all seems like a long time ago. I grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, the poorer suburbs, and, like all good Western suburbs boys, I worked in the car business. Before I moved from Sydney I started a car spare parts business. At that stage I thought the motor trade was for life. In the mid 80's we, that is with potter and partner, Gloria Malone, decided to move from Sydney to Bellingen, a country town of 3500 people, near the coast and about 550km north of Sydney. It was wonderful for a pair of city kids. Both of us, without skills, slowly built a house on our 35 hectares of rugged land and at the end of that and without a job I started making birds and fish sculptures for a local craft shop. I knew nothing, but loved it all. Gloria and I have been together for more than 40 years. Gloria makes functional ware and I do art work. It is good that both of us pot so the harsh critic is only down the other end of the studio.

You have not worked with porcelain from the beginning, have you?

No, the bird and fish sculptures were all fired to earthenware. I played with other clays but not porcelain. My heart was not completely in the low fired sculptures but I didn't know what else there was.

Your colorful works are strongly reminiscent of impressionist painting. Is this intentional, or coincidence?

That is an interesting insight. I don't think that has been considered before. It is probably both. After I had been making for the best part of 10 years, Gloria made me sign up to the diploma course at the Australian National University. At the time we



couldn't really afford it, but it was the best place to be. Almost straight away I was introduced to Porcelain and it was love at first sight. I don't use almost anything else. The influence of impressionism also was probably there from the start. I have always looked at 2D rather than 3D Art. Well, all 2D art probably. I look at Kandinsky a bit.

As we can see in the picture series here, you add rectangle after rectangle to build the walls of your works. Please guide us through the making process of your pieces.

All of the work is constructed from slabs made from porcelain slip. I start with a large smooth bat of plaster. I spread coloured slip on the plaster and then back it up with the plain white paper slip. Because we live in a small town and bulk paper fibre is not available, I use toilet paper. To make paper slip I use one roll for 5 litres of slip but it is adjustable depending on what is being made. Because the paper rots after two weeks, I use a little household bleach. Just strong enough to smell. I use coloured dry pigment to add to the slip, without paper fibre. To get coloured slip I add the dry pigment, wet down with a tiny amount of water, to the slip and wait. I use only a few colours and I mix them together. Mostly it works, but I always test new mixes and document everything. Having an obsessive nature would help here but I haven't got one of those so I have to work hard. I only use white Porcelain, the best I can get, but most clay will probably work. Once I have a few coloured slabs I will cut and join them and maybe some plain white and textured too. Early with each pot it is good not to think too much. Intuition is good. There is a lot of trying different pieces. Sometimes mixes of colour which shouldn't work are just what is needed. This pot is one of my series that uses some small pieces which were not used from previously made pots. So in a way this is something of a memory pot. Because the colour in a raw piece and a high fired pot can be quite different and some of these pieces can be more than a year old there is an element of chance. I rely on my memory to get the colour right. For joining I use a little wa-



ter or for major joining my slip with paper the same as the body. Mostly, I find, if I take care to remove all small cracks before the bisc then the finished piece will be OK. This pot starts with me selecting fragments and adding till I'm happy with the design, then turning it all over and adding a layer of paper slip to hold it together. Some work on the face is normally necessary. Between most elements of the design, I will put a shallow cut to take some red iron and water. The iron reads as a black line when it is high fired. With this pot I have made a single slab for the major pieces, of the front and back, and then cut it, roughly, in two. For the ends and the divider, I have cast a single piece of textured slab and cut and added as needed. The major work is in the slab for front and back. For the construction phase I use an old vessel and a piece of construction timber to hold the work upright while I add paper slip and major parts. There are about 70 pieces in this one piece. After bisc I use wet and dry sanding paper to remove any excess bits and excess iron oxide. After the final firing I use 240 and then 600 wet and dry. The final polish makes it feel very smooth.



The walls of your cylinders are extremely thin because of the technique of slip construction. I wonder: why don't they collapse in the porcelain high fire?

They are a bit prone to collapse, especially where it is thinnest and most lovely. It hurts each time so some strategies are necessary. The firing temperature is kept at the lower end of the manufacturers range and if you look closely, I have a central divider. This is an artistic device and it also makes the pot stronger. Sometimes I need more so those extra pieces go in as strengtheners and also it has to look good. Vulnerable pots are maybe leant on a shelf or another pot.

2018 you were finalist in the competition "Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize" with your sculpture "towers and monu-

ments". In your statement you call it finished unfinished....

It is probably still unfinished. Apart from the original idea I had a lot of small and medium size pieces to work with. I kept shuffling until the original idea was satisfied. It is a bit like life.

For over two years now we have been working under the thumb of the pandemic. Exhibitions had to be cancelled, conferences and workshops to be postponed. Has this also thrown you off track or do you have, despite the uncertain future, still ideas and hopes?

I suppose all of us are avoiding our friends. It is important to ignore most things and close yourself in the workshop and make. The ideas are the most important thing. They never stop. Pieces you make you will need someday. The

pandemic will pass. Anyway, maybe after being a potter for a few decades I probably can't do anything else.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is

Reinhard Keitel, Germany.

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