

In studio with **Melanie Ferguson**

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

Would you tell us about your very interesting biography and how you came to work with clay?

Growing up on the Oregon coast, the beach was central to my focus. A beach walker who became friend was a noted coastal potter that welcomed

me to watch and listen as she sculpted with clay, sharing salty analogies such as, "pinch the clay like a crab", or, "cut the clay like a whale's tail slices through the water in breach", while moving her body to the cadence of the story as a gesture to the cut. During that period, my pas-

sion was map illustration. Clay dug from a beach hillside added a topographical dimension to my pen and ink illustrations that were influenced by the progression of similar ocean-related analogies for each mountain, river, or valley added to the topography.

I know that you first focused on hand blown sheet glass and painting with light. Can you please elaborate.

As my pen and ink illustrations became tight and detailed, the completed illustrations felt as if they could not "breathe". Realizing I had become uncomfortable within this black and white colour dimension, a decision was made to loosen up and add colour. Collaboration with a building contractor allowed me to create site-specific coloured glass installations that captured and cast external light in a way that stretched colour and visual imperfections of hand-blown glass through the configuration of light and shadow. This sheet glass, produced locally from two sources, offered a cat's paw and water-like texture with areas of imperfection that could be enhanced within a design structure. I created designs specific to the glass to be used, featuring striations and thickness variations to replicate a sense of movement that "painted" colour and light-cast shadow. Painting with light.

You worked on different series, and you gave them meaningful titles like Tossed Ashore, Chandler's Cove or Storytellers to name just a few. Are these meant as stages in your life?

Beginning as a handbuilder, my question was, "what do I build?" The answer was to build what you



know in a way that you tell a story. My life experience centred on the ocean, so those experiences dominate my work. Tossed Ashore includes forms that represent sea life tossed ashore with the tide. Crusty, broken, iridescent. Chandler's Cove was so named for a dog – my running partner. He loved one particular wind-worn hillside to sit and watch, as I searched for driftwood and unusual treasures, many of which are interpreted in the ceramic forms featured in this series. Storytellers is a relatively new series that is all about surface expression and connection. For this series, underglaze is layered and sanded to reveal or tease

a known visual or tangible expression. Each work evolves around a central character and the adventures that character encounters.

I understand you let yourself be influenced by the spirit of a piece, let the clay speak to you as the form evolves ...

As a handbuilder, I coil the clay, building up to a point where it must rest to firm up before continuing. It is at this point that I study the form to understand a sense of how the moisture flows within. Like the ocean tides, you can observe and embrace the form to feel this inner movement and know when it is time to continue. Having

paused to study its flow, I then understand how to proceed with form development. Reminded of the first violin gifted to me by its maker, inside hung the tail rattles of a rattle snake. There are many folklores surrounding this practice, though he believed that the rattles infinitely resonated the vibration of sound. Much like the flow of water within the clay, it is important for me to understand that influence within the clay to infinitely and respectfully resonate its core spirit.

So, the making process as we see in the pictures here is influenced by the spirit, but also by trying to give the piece





an edge of uncertainty and vulnerability?

When I began working with layered underglazes, the intent was to create a sense of light and movement in the work by layering dark pigments to light to dark, then sanding through the layers to expose the colour variation – much like the concept of painting with light discovered in glass. The goal of this interview's featured work is to express life within

an inanimate form, establishing movement while pushing the limits of balance, rhythm and repetitive pattern. Built from hand-rolled coils that measure 25 mm in diameter, the finished work stands 432 mm. The construction is thicker at the base to add support and increased balance to the figurative movement that occurs at the vessel top. I used a Cone 3 white stoneware with fine grog added.

The entire vessel is coil built, including the top leaf detail. Coiling is more structurally efficient as the leaf folds downward than a flat rolled sectional application. Swimming pool noodle foam is used to support the weight-bearing points and figurative shaping as they firm. The drape of the leaves is secured to the form where their tips touch to create additional support. Care is given to allow for shrinkage

at these points with added hydration to the secured area during the drying process. All work is slow-dried in a tent to near bone dry and bisque fired to Cone 05. Once fired, underglaze is applied in layers, dark pigment to light with a final dark pigment layer. I sand through these layers using various sandpaper grits and light pressure to expose the layers, similar to how an ocean breeze might sand blast a hillside. My studio includes a custom filtered exhaust system to remove the particulate as I work. A respirator is always worn when sanding. This vessel's final fire was to Cone 02 in oxidation. The surface was finished with a cold wax sealing medium that is thinly applied and hand buffed to a semi-matte surface finish.

I would appreciate a few words about the stories on the Storyteller pieces.

My favourite, titled "Leap of the Lone Katydid", tells the story of the adventures, as shared by a grandfather, of a young boy exploring Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp. The boy can be viewed near the top of the work holding out his arm in a show of character power. As your eye roams, you encounter symbols of joy, evil, decay, rebirth, and ponderance, all surrounded by the flow of water, the movement of plant life, insects and surprise discoveries of creatures hidden within the shadows. Another, "Nectar of Your Being", is symbolic of the core of life, featuring a conjectural form of a young bird nourished by the nectar from a higher, undefined source. "Lost At Sea", the first Storyteller, dated 2009, is based on an actual experience while ocean fishing. A nearby boat broadcast a call for assistance as it confronted a freak storm. Within minutes, this powerful storm reached our boat. Eight hours later, I was grateful to have survived. As I etched through the top black layer of this piece, small forms began exposing within the layers as if they were floating to the surface. It was a surreal moment, as was the reality of the experience.

We look back on a time when we had to work under the impact of the pandemic. Has this thrown you off track or do you still have ideas and hopes, despite the uncertain future?

The first year of the pandemic, I found myself very tired, as if everything around me had become quiet and it was time to rest, so I took the time to read, write, and hone my culinary skills. I did not work



with clay for several months and slowly emerged feeling re-charged, though changed. Friendships are now prioritized and there is a sense of urgency to deeply invest in the time needed to reach the core or spirit integral to my art.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is
Stela Ivanova, Portugal

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

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