

# In studio with Stela Ivanova

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN



*First of all: congratulations on the 2nd prize in the International Ceramics competition of Castellamonte, Stela!*

Thank you, Evelyne! I'm proud because this award is recognition on the international level where I can join in with some good artists. At the opening of the exhibition, I was able to observe how visitors interacted with my piece, which made me very pleased.

*Let's start with your biography: You are both Bulgarian and Portuguese. Would you tell us about your life so far and how you came to be a ceramic artist?*

I was born and raised in Bulgaria. My grandfather was a shepherd, he carved figures in wood and drew very well. My grandmother spun the wool from our sheep, knitted and wove textiles on her loom. My mother ran a serigraphy workshop, where I spent whole afternoons watching what

she did. At primary school, one day, I made such a good clay figure that the teacher took it to an exhibition. Later in Lisbon as a student at the Faculty of Architecture of the Technical University, I made a clay architectural model and felt the fantastic plasticity of the medium. In 2009, after a few years of practice as an architect, I happened to visit the Aveiro Ceramics Biennale in Portugal and the works exhibited there touched something deeply rooted in me. I immediately looked for a place to study ceramics – the Gulbenkian Cultural Center in Aveiro. I made a firm decision: as soon as possible to dedicate myself entirely to ceramics. Simultaneously I learnt by myself, studying with masters in workshops. Even today I continue to learn; the last course was this summer with the Spanish artist Alberto Bustos. In 2013 I was distinguished with an honour at the Biennale of Faenza. Nevertheless I had to find means to support my daily life. I had to move from town to town, but I never stopped dreaming of becoming a ceramist. I used my small electric ceramic kiln when moving, it must be the most travelled kiln in the world. In the spare time I made ceramic pieces. Family and close ones mocked my attempts at wanting to be a ceramic artist.

In 2019 I created a piece that was selected at the Biennale of Aveiro. In 2021 I was selected again at Aveiro as well as at the International Competition in Castellamonte in Italy, where, for my second participation this year, I was awarded the second prize. In recent years I have lived with my partner, who is an experienced potter with a captivating philosophy of life. Thanks to him I learnt to pick up stoneware clay from the cliffs of the beaches near the house in Portugal and started firing in a wood kiln. I created and developed my own technique of intertwined fabric-like coils. The new language I found is very rich in formal variations and possibilities and can have both figurative and more abstract approaches.

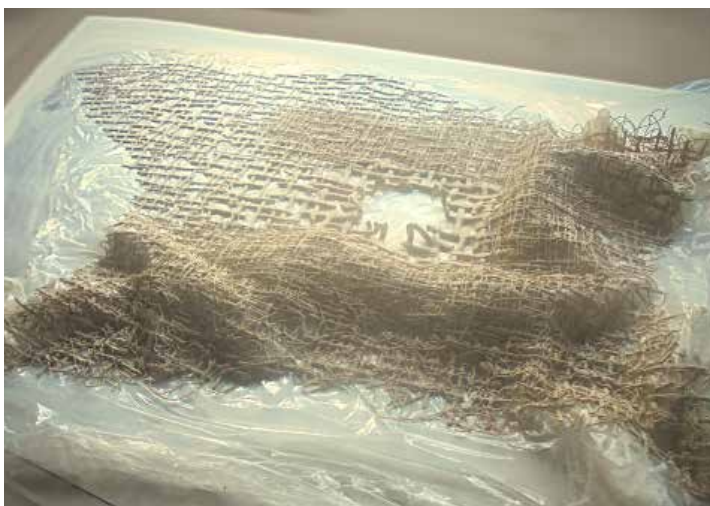
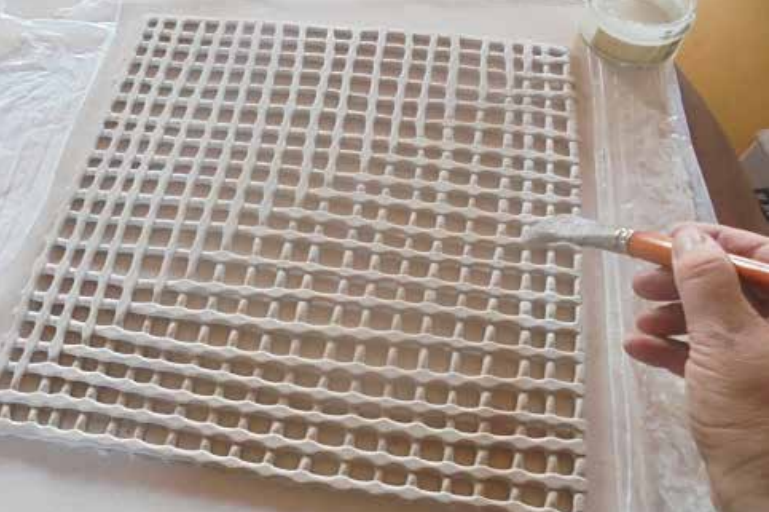
*For me, your works look a bit like ancient, already threadbare tea table doilies. What is the idea behind this design?*

I have been inspired by the traditional Bulgarian textiles called “kenareni”, hand woven from natural materials, they were thin, semi-translucent with opaque bands. I wanted to create light and subtle fabrics, gushing like fountains, flowing like waterfalls. Why do they look threadbare? Because I love the themes of subtleness and lightness and I wanted to reach the ultimate limits of fragility. I make coils so thin that they occasionally break here and there. I flirt with the breaking of them. Besides this I am looking for the random character of the texture because it suggests dynamism. I think that we are able to appreciate a texture fully when its surface is altered with creases and undulations so as to escape the uniformity of flatness and when it presents irregular densities. As a result, the act of observation becomes emotional and the object captivates the interest, is memorized.

*And, in addition, some of your work look crumpled and crushed. Do you achieve this effect by using a cloth or plastic pad under the clay ropes which you crumple into these interesting shapes?*

You know Evelyne, you're so close! I put the raw porcelain coils between two layers of plastic, because then I need to crease them to give them the desired folds. They adhere to the plastic film and when manipulated they remain cohesive and do not tear. Underneath the plastic I have a sheet of





tracing paper, to keep the folds formed up, as the porcelain is very soft and unstable.

*The piece you actually made for the competition in Aveiro and now show here for the first time is called Overflow and has something to do with your grandmother, hasn't it?*

Yes, in the way she pulls yarn from the ball of wool I see a lot of similarity to my process of forming coils from the porcelain. But Overflow is also overflowing with memories about the fabrics my grandmother wove and the chest where she kept them as priceless relics.

*Please explain the technical steps that led to the artwork shown here.*

The final piece is composed of three elements, bisque-fired separately at 1000-1050°C, a temperature that depends on their location in the kiln. Then these three pieces will be joined together and fired again at high temperature.

The first element (which I call the chest) is made of stoneware clay and of three layers of intertwined porcelain coils above it. The chest is built from leather-hard stoneware slabs textured with a wooden ruler; then is brushed with glaze in the following proportions: red stoneware clay 70 g, pinewood



ash 30 g, iron oxide 6 g; and finally wrapped in plastic film. I place the whole set on a refractory slab covered with sand with which it will go into the kiln. At the top, inside the chest, there is a rim that serves as a support for the layers of porcelain. In addition to holding the porcelain layer, I place a refractory brick flush with the rim in the centre of the chest on the refractory slab. It will be removed after the second firing. Then a square grid of thick porcelain coils is placed to rest on the rim. So that the stoneware rim and the porcelain layer can adhere to each other, I brush them with transparent glaze and wrap them in plastic so they don't get contaminated colours. On top of the grid, I place two other layers, made of crisscrossed thick and thinner coils. These thin pieces dry very quickly and become brittle, even though they are wrapped in plastic. I try to keep the ideal humidity in the studio above 80% and a temperature lower than 21°C; if not, I have to spray steam inside and even water the outside of the roof with a hose, which helps to bring the temperature down.

The second element made of two corrugated layers of porcelain is fired on top of a previously fired stoneware cone covered with refractory fibre. The third element is composed of a crumpled layer of coils inside, this time, a stoneware cone smaller than the previous one and also lined with fibre.

In the first two hours of bisque firing, I raise the temperature to 200°C, keeping the fire at a minimum. As the workshop is located on a hill by the ocean, firing depends a lot on the direction and strength of the winds. For optimal firing, it is better to have wind speeds inferior to 10 km/h. When I reach 200°C, I push the fire but slow it down again at 520°C to 650°C and at 900°C to 1025°C. The bisque firing over, I will assemble the three elements into one piece. While firing at high temperature a few days later, I watch through the peep hole in the kiln door to control the progressive collapse of the porcelain layers. Around 1250°C they have already collapsed, but still with some erected parts; then the firing is over.

*We look back on a time of crisis and uncertainty. Has this thrown you off track or do you still have ideas and hopes, despite the unstable future?*

Thanks for the question, Evelyne! I think that an artist, despite the external events, will always be creative in his soul and will seek to produce art, because art is a vehicle of positive messages. Actuality is ephemeral, Art transcends actuality.

### Stela Ivanova

[stela.ivanova.007@gmail.com](mailto:stela.ivanova.007@gmail.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/stelaivanova07/>

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is

**Marga Boogaard, The Netherlands**

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

[www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch](http://www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch)