

In Studio with Sabina Betz

Evelyne Schoenmann



Sabina, I always like to invite guests who have not done classic ceramics training but simply indulge in their passion for ceramics. Please tell us how you came to be involved in ceramics.

Oh – I remember it well! During my first year of training at the teacher training college (1976), pottery was also on the schedule. I loved it and continued to attend classes for the following 2 years.

I later met my teacher from back then when we were both working at a special-needs day school, where we experimented with low-firing techniques and then also attended a course together with Stefan Jakob, where we built an "Ochsnerkübel" raku kiln (made of a galvanised steel refuse bin). Now I finally had my own kiln and there was no stop-

ping me: I set up a studio at home and worked with clay whenever I had a spare minute.

In time, I added a raku gas kiln and a small electric kiln, which enabled me to fire at higher temperatures and also to venture into porcelain.

Did the many courses you attended and the well-known artists you met influence you in any particular direction?

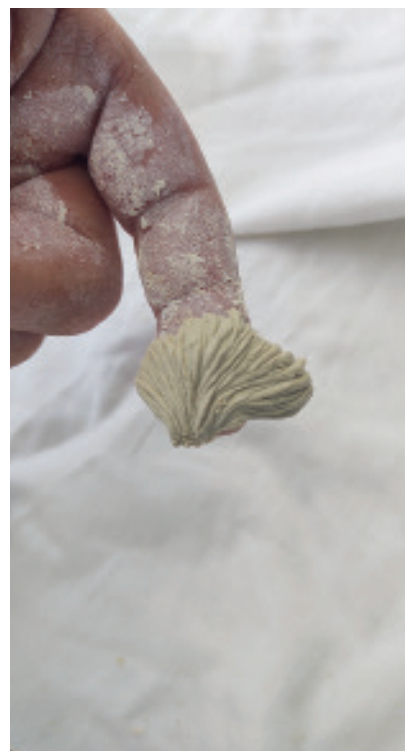
Yes absolutely! Probably the most important thing from the encounters with Stefan Jakob, Shozo Michikawa, Fritz Rossmann, Markus Klausmann, Peter Beard, Alberto Bustos, Curtis Benzle and many others was the message that they stated more or less in so many words: "Be brave and try things out, play with

the material and create something of your own!"

In retrospect, thanks to your question, I see that I have moved further and further away from glazed objects and have turned to other possibilities for surface treatment instead.

Surface treatment and movement in form seem to be important themes in your work. What can you tell us about the design of your works?

You've addressed my passion for surfaces now! I love polished objects and can spend hours trying to figure out the best way, whether it's low-fired stoneware clay objects or nerikomi porcelain vessels. On the other hand, I also really like natural-looking, rough surfaces and I



frequently combine these two opposites in my work.

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

Usually, I just try something out, playing around with it, or I suddenly have an idea. Then I think about what I could create with it. This results in making notes, sketches and drawings that sometimes "mature" for a long time before I make use of them.

Have you ever thought about mixing the different techniques you have learned in courses?

Yes, I do that all the time and I always find it an exciting challenge to combine one thing with the other. The motivation and goal are always to find your own approach or style. That is also the case with the light object I describe below. I got to know the technique in a raku course with Stefan Jakob in 2009, practiced it again and again and used it from time to time in works made of finely grogged stoneware clay, for example





when I placed individual leaves as decorative elements on burnished surfaces. In 2019 I was sitting in front of a block with leftover coloured porcelain scraps from my Nerikomi experiments (online course with Curtis Benzle) and had the idea of trying out this scraping technique with porcelain. Technically it worked, but visually the result didn't meet my expectations, so I have only worked with white porcelain ever since.

Just talk us through the various stages of this piece.

It doesn't take much to make these light objects: a suitable porcelain body, a pottery knife, two finely woven cotton cloths, a brush and some water, a water atomizer, a porous mould to shape the piece in, a bowl of water and a towel to

wash your hands, time, maybe some patience too and above all practice.

The porcelain body should fire translucent and be relatively plastic. I use powdered Mont Blanc porcelain and add some VeeGumT (tip from Curtis Benzle), which makes the body more plastic. I pour the liquid body into a plaster mould. I leave it to rest there for 24 hours and then it easily releases from the mold. I quickly knead it to form a thick coil before it is allowed to rest in a freezer bag, packed as airtight as possible, for about 2 weeks. If the porcelain feels too dry, I put 2-3 puffs of water from the atomiser into the plastic bag. For the rest phase, airtight storage boxes that you use in the kitchen for food are ideally suited.

Before I get down to the "real" work, I set up my workplace. First I spray one

of the two cotton cloths with water until it's damp but not wet. The bottom third stays dry. I also moisten the second cloth and then lay it on top of the first. The individual leaves are kept moist between the two cloths until they are placed in the mould later on.

Then the coil of porcelain is beaten to form a rectangular block. Depending on the situation, I also moisten the area at the lower edge of the cloth with a little water from the atomiser.

To make the scraped leaves, I pull the absolutely clean blade of the knife over the surface several times in a row. I want to make the leaves as thin-walled as possible so that the candlelight can ultimately shine through them, so I run the knife across the block relatively flat. With each scraping movement, the leaf gets bigger.



As soon as it is the desired size, I gently wipe it off the blade with my thumb and place it between the damp cloths. In the lower, dry third of the cloth, I then wipe the porcelain residue off the knife so that it is completely clean again. This process is repeated until there are enough leaves for the mould and it takes about an hour for a small mould of about 10 cm in diameter.

The most difficult thing is finding the right degree of moisture for the porcelain, or developing a feeling for when it is right so that the knife glides effortlessly over the block and there are no crumbly bits or, conversely, it is just smeary. The time window for this is relatively short because porcelain dries quickly. The block can be sprayed with water two to three times, kneaded well and reused before it needs to rest and I have to go on working with a new block.

I let the scraps from cleaning the knives dry, I need them later.

Before shaping in the mould, I spray it inside with water. This gives me a little more time, because not too much moisture is absorbed from the individual leaves too quickly. I start with four leaves, which I put as close together as possible and with the structured surface to the outside in the mould. I then carefully join the edges of the leaves with a damp brush. Then I position the next leaves, choose them so that there are no holes between them or only very small ones and continue joining them up.

I fill the holes with particles of the dried residue from knife cleaning by picking them up with the damp brush tip, carefully placing them and joining them to the leaves. When the piece is finished, I wipe the inside with a damp sponge, spray a plastic bag with 3-4 puffs from the water atomizer and put it over the mould with the piece still inside. After a day or two, I remove the bag, remove the bowl from the mould and let it dry.

As an alternative to using a mould, I have also worked over a balloon.

Then it is bisque fired in an electric kiln at 1000°C with 20 minutes soak. I glaze the inside transparently and fire it again in the electric kiln at 1240°C with a soak of 20 minutes. Now the light object is ready, it looks magical with a tea light or floating candles inside and it can also float if all the holes have been plugged!



What if: What do you want to achieve in the future, Sabina? Are more courses planned, or is something completely new coming into your life?

In fact, something new did come into my life last December: I became a grandmother and regularly spend time with my little grandson. In addition, ideas for nerikomi patterns and a project with 12 steles made of stoneware have been maturing in me for a long time.

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Evelyne Schoenmanns next
 interview partner is
Ute Naue-Müller, Germany

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