

In Studio with Johanna Rytkölä

Evelyne Schoenmann



Johanna, you are a ceramist body and soul. Tell us about your career.

Welcome to my workshop in Vantaa, the airport city of Helsinki. I live and work in a former village shop, about 10 kilometres from the centre of Helsinki. The store's large display windows bring a lot of light into the room and there is enough space to work.

From 1980 to 1986 I studied as a ceramic artist at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki (now Aalto University). At that time we had a great education, the curriculum of which was prepared by Professor Kyllikki Salmenhaara (1915-1981), with thorough material studies. So I'm a trained ceramist. However, I have never actually made functional ceramics. I became interested in making sculptures when I was still a student. So I am both a sculptor and a ceramicist.

When you look at the gallery on your website, you are initially overwhelmed by the abstract variety of shapes and colours in your works. Does this reflect your essence, your being?

During my studies I created representational, figurative works whose forms became simpler over time. However, if you take a closer look at my works, you can also discover figurative features. So they are not completely abstract.

Colours are important to me. I love strong, bright or clear colours. I use colour combinations that I find fascinating and atmospheric. I only use colours to achieve a mood. Colour choices often have meanings attached to them, and the colours support my story. The background of the works is usually a story or an experience, a memory. I think ceramics is a great medium because it combines colour and form. In my opinion, ceramic art combines the art of painting and the art of sculpture.

Water is a constant theme in your works. For example, you use this element to express concerns about the state of water resources as well as positive childhood memories playfully and in many different ways. What does water mean to you?

Water is definitely the most important topic for me. I love swimming. I learned to



swim at a very early age. Swimming is my favourite hobby. Therefore, it goes without saying that I am personally concerned about the state of water in nature.

Of course, it's best to swim in natural waters. For me personally, the lake at our holiday home is the most beautiful place in the world. There are thousands of lakes in Finland that we Finns really love. If you arrive in Helsinki in the middle of summer, the city will be pretty empty as thousands of people flock to the lake shores to cele-

brate St. John's Day. I draw motifs for my art from the different properties and moods of water. In early 2024, my solo exhibition *Surrounded by Hydrosphere* with works from 2013-2023 opened at the Kymenlaakso Museum in Merikeskus Velamo in the city of Kotka, about 100 km east of Helsinki. The exhibition presented 32 of my sculptures and wall pieces on the theme of water.

I am interested in the thematic starting

points of your work. At the beginning of a piece, do you have an idea of what the end result could look like? Do you even make a rough drawing? What do you focus on when working?

My work begins with an idea. It can be a conversation with other people, it can be a memory that comes to mind for one reason or another. I start thinking about the idea by first drawing rough sketches. Sometimes I even make 1:1 accurate colour sketches. However, the idea can



change during the work process. But the most inspiring thing is to form ideas from the clay and give them shape.

You also like to combine clay with other materials.

I have been combining other materials with ceramic sculptures for a long time. I have also been using recycled fused glass for a long time in my ceramic work. Last year I started collaborating with glassblowers Jaakko Liikanen and Hanssi Sirén. Currently I combine blown pieces with my ceramic sculptures or combine ceramic pieces with my glass sculptures.

Like so many of your works, the one you made for this interview shows exuberant imagination and colourfulness. Movement in form of a sculpture. Can you walk us through the individual technical steps please?

The work whose creation process we

can follow here is part of a series based on an early childhood memory and folklore. The work entitled Valkjärven Veijari will be on display in my solo exhibition at Gumbostrand Konst & Form Gallery this summer (13 June - 1 September 2024). The large, beautiful gallery is located by the sea just outside Helsinki in a beautiful natural setting.

We always spent the summers by the lake in our summer house. We children were repeatedly warned that if we went to the beach alone without parents, a water slide would come and send us into the depths. I was never afraid of these stories, but I didn't go to the beach alone either. I've thought about what aquatic creatures might look like. I think they could be pretty cute and not scary. I made a series of these imaginary water slides.

First I make a slab out of clay. I use Sibelco Vingerling K129 clay, which is great for making sculptures of differ-

ent sizes. It is coarse and that is why I use a finer stoneware clay for very small pieces.

I transfer the clay slab to a steel bowl with the cloth. That way I can quickly get the round hemisphere shape I want. I make several pieces at the same time because I work in the same rhythm while the clay is drying. I work the inside of the clay surface, pressing the clay firmly against the surface of the bowl, and make an air hole in the bottom.

Once the clay has dried a bit, I lay newspaper on the inside to ensure the shape is retained when I turn the bowl over and place it on the plastic.

I smooth out the wrinkles created by the fabric and attach the small balls to the bottom of the sculpture.

Now I start to enlarge the shape by adding strips of clay. For the clay slip I mixed clay, water and bulrush fibres.

For the narrow areas, I roll a small sheet of clay around a thin roll of news-



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paper, which also creates an air hole.

Then I form the final part and add two more balls to the object.

The work now has circular reliefs on the sides, then I work on the entire surface again and roughen it up.

Before the bisque firing, I paint the basic colours with underglaze from the Spectrum series in various shades of green and pink. Then I let the work dry under a plastic sheet.

The bisque firing takes place in an electric kiln at 920°C. I glaze the work by spraying glazes I have coloured myself and ready-made Spectrum series glazes with a brush. Finally, the work is slowly fired in an electric kiln at 1240°C.

On the subject of public contracts: Can you tell us something about your large-scale projects?

I find art projects in public spaces particularly meaningful and interesting. I think it's great that public art outside

and inside is visible to everyone.

I'm currently working on a multi-year public art project where I have designed five granite sculptures for parks. In these sculptures I combine Finnish granite with colourfully glazed pieces of porcelain as small details. The parts are embedded like inlays into the surface of the granite. There will also be art tiles in various granite colours that I designed for the road surface, as well as a collaborative work with light artist Tarja Ervasti. The work will be finished in a few years in a new residential area in Vantaa.

You recently gave me the beautifully designed book, DIVING IN THE SUMMER NIGHT. Tell our readers about it.

I received an invitation from ceramic artist and museum director Karin Widnäs to exhibit my solo exhibition, Diving in the Summer Night, at the KWUM Ceramic Museum in Fiskars in summer

2022. In connection with my exhibition, we decided to publish a book with the name of the exhibition, in which my current work will be presented. By the way, the graphics for the book were done by my daughter, the graphic designer Seera Rytkölä.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is

Carol Sinclair, Scotland

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

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