

In Studio with Evelyne Schoenmann

MONIKA GASS



photo - Stefan Schmidlin, Basel, Switzerland

Evelyne, we have known each other for a long time – through *New Ceramics* and the AICIAC – but through your ceramics too. But ceramics was not your first calling. How did you become involved with clay?

Your question is apt, Monika. Before I became a ceramist, I was a pianist. So I was working with sounds – before I became a ceramist. For personal reasons, I had to stop playing the piano, and working with clay was initially therapy for me. It became a passion that took me all over the world. I can't imagine a life without clay – nor without music, without the sounds.

Your ceramics are characterized by clay as a material with an earthy character, often with smoked surfaces, more cultic than simple... I would describe them as spiritually defined – created under the influence of other cultures. Have your travels inspired you to do this, or has that always been a focus for you?

Definitely the many trips to South-east Asia. Korea, Japan and Taiwan have greatly inspired and influenced my work. I am thinking in particular of the rituals present in everyday life, the traditions in these countries, the connection with ancestors in religion. For me there is nothing

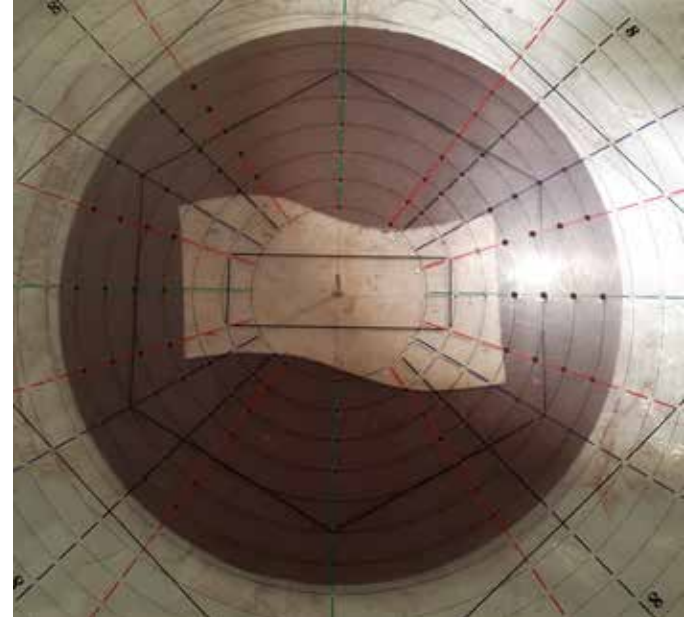
more beautiful than sitting on a bench in a temple and just being. I would also like to mention the traditional architecture prevalent in Asian countries as a source of inspiration, both the typical wooden houses in the countryside, as well as the landscaping that arises through rice and tea plantations, or the temple complexes and their temple gardens. And of course the traditional clothing, which is a work of art in itself.

How do these ideas, these typical shapes and surfaces develop in your work?

In these countries, I stroll around,

with my eyes wide open and full of curiosity, through alleys, villages, bamboo groves, botanical gardens, past temples and ancestral sites, over bamboo bridges by ponds and lakes, along the walls of the temple gardens with their typical stone window bars in the bamboo pattern and the wooden or stone temple sentinels. I spend countless hours in the art

and ethnological museums there, taking in all the impressions. Back in Switzerland, nothing happens immediately in my studio. My subconscious is then working at full speed though, combining everything I have absorbed and spicing it up with emotions, longing and remembered smells. And then, one day, I go straight to my studio and start on pieces





that are finished in my head, waiting to be made.

When you work on these pieces, how can we imagine it? Do you need a meditative atmosphere?

No, I'm not really into meditation. I usually have an incense stick smoking, but otherwise the way I work is pretty straightforward. I'm not very organized, I tend to work intuitively. For example, if I can't find a special object for the surface design straight away, I just use another one. I work playfully. No detailed planning, not too much form, not too much design. Rather just one special feature that stands out. Less is more.

You're not short of recognition – even internationally – what fascinates people about your work?

I think it's the stories that you can find in my works. Take the Bi Discs, for example. Thousands of years before Christ, these were discs made of jade with a hole in the middle. They were placed on the chests of high-ranking warriors after their death for ceremonial purposes so that their soul could float out through the opening. In addition, jade is also known as the stone of immortality. And now all you need is a little imagination and you can imagine the most amazing stories.

You have chosen a very special object to show us your approach – how do the individual steps follow one another?

The basic inspiration here is the Bi Disc mentioned above. In addition, there are the window struts in the bamboo pattern found in the walls of the temple gardens. The disc is double-walled. I am working here with black-firing Spanish clay (GRES NT Negro) with 0.2 mm grog and I start by rolling out two round slabs of the same size. Using a template, I cut out the window opening in the middle. I then shape realistic-looking bamboo struts and place them in the approx. 1 cm recesses prepared on the back of the two slabs above and below the respective window opening. Then I roll out a thick coil, which acts as a side wall between the two slabs, and place it on the back of one of the slabs using a thick layer of slip. Since the side wall in our object is only 2.5 cm,

no reinforcing struts are needed here. Placing the second slab precisely on the edge of the first is quite tricky. The two window openings and the bamboo struts have to line up so precisely on top of each other that you can't see any misalignment from the front. So I put a wooden barbecue skewer in each of the four outermost window corners of the lower slab and guide the upper slab down along the skewers. Then I tidy up the side walls. I add parapet-like borders around the windows by rolling out thin slabs and imprinting them with lava stones, gravel and sand, interesting profiles of shoe soles or other exciting objects. I tear the slabs into manageable pieces that I think suit the respective windows. Then I spend a whole day with magnifying glasses on my nose to cleanly remove any imperfections that might have crept in. I fire the object once in an electric kiln, unglazed, to the final temperature of 1280°C (1°C per minute). The object is fired standing up so that it receives the same amount of heat in the kiln on all sides. The diameter of the fired object is 23 cm.

In what areas do you expect problems

In the case of this work, it was definitely the bamboo struts. They can't be too wet or too dry during the forming process. They can't sag during assembly (so always put thin sponges underneath), as there is a high risk of cracks between the "window sill" and the free surface. There would also be problems if the side wall were wider than 3.5 cm. Then you have to put struts between the two panels to reinforce them before you assemble them on top of each other. But grogged high-fired clays are actually good-natured if you follow a few important working principles. With porcelain, this would be a completely different story...

How do you fire your sculptures – both the more archaic ones and the more delicate ones?

Up to three years ago I still had a studio in Italy, in the middle of an olive grove. There I could easily fire my pieces in the archaic way in an open pit. Oil barrel firings, sawdust firings and obvara were also among my favourite firing techniques there. We have since sold

the house in Italy, and unfortunately, in Switzerland open fires for the production of ceramics are prohibited. I could simulate archaic firing methods using saggers in an electric kiln. But of course it is not the same!

Today I fire in an electric kiln, usually without glaze. I work with unusual, high-firing clays, which in themselves produce beautiful, earth-coloured results.

What is the most important thing to you for your artistic development?

The freedom of expression! There are these identity movements, especially in the West, that want to dictate or prohibit everything under the banner of supposedly correct thinking. Who knows, maybe one day someone will complain that my works are cultural appropriation. Let's look at the history of art over the last 5,000 years. Everyone learns from everyone else, everyone is inspired by something or someone and creates something new. That is valuable and beautiful! I find this wokeism to be hostile to creativity and restrictive of freedom.

Final question: What are you looking forward to in the near future?

To the woodfiring symposium in Guan-Xi, Taiwan, which I will be holding in March 2025! I was in Taiwan for three weeks in June this year to make preparations for it. As you can see, I take every opportunity to travel to Southeast Asia again.

Evelyne Schoenmann / Switzerland
ceramist/curator/writer
art@schoenmann-ceramics.ch
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch

MONIKA GASS – graduate ceramist, artist, writer, curator, former director of the Keramikmuseum Westerwald, vice president of the AIC / IAC, Geneva.
monika.gass@googlemail.com

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is **José Maria Mariscal, Spain**. Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, curator and writer. She is a member of the AIC/IAC and lives and works in Basel, Switzerland.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch