

In Studio with Sylvia Nagy

Evelyne Schoenmann



Sylvia, please kick this interview off by telling us about yourself and your journey in clay so far.

I studied mural painting at a specialized art and design high school in Budapest, where a major competition and exam were held to select 10 students from thousands of painters. We studied several hours of fresco, mosaic, enamel, oil painting techniques, and sgraffito, which is a colourful layered wall painting. In the final year of my four-year programme, I wanted to take ceramics classes as well. After high school, I shifted from painting to ceramics, which included porcelain and glass blowing. I earned an MFA in Silicate Industrial Technology and then in Ceramic Sculpture from the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts in Budapest. I later studied at Parsons School

of Design, where I was invited to be a teaching assistant. The students asked me to create my own course, which I did - called "Mould and Model Making in Plaster" - teaching industrial technology through ceramics and product design.

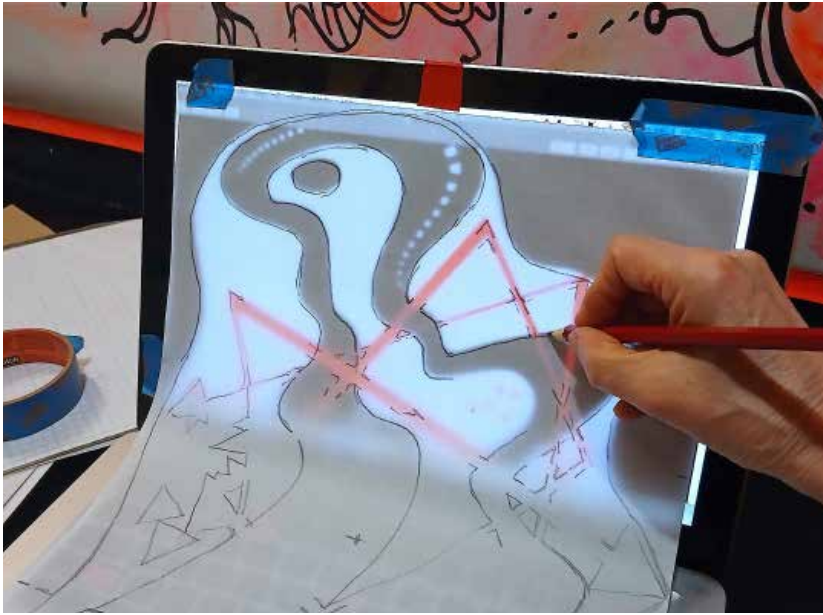
Do you remember the first time you touched clay? What did that moment feel like, and how did it shape your connection to ceramics?

We lived in a house with a garden. I was about seven years old when I asked my mother why we didn't plant flowers or grow vegetables. She told me the soil wasn't suitable for gardening - it was clay. I asked her what the difference was between clay and mud. She said clay is good for making pots, not for planting. That fascinated me. So, I secretly started

digging clay from the garden to make an ashtray as a gift for my dad. I shared the idea with my siblings, and we locked ourselves in the bathroom to make objects from the clay. Of course, we made a huge mess and locked our parents out. The bathroom was flooded with water and clay, but we had so much fun. That's how I became a ceramist - ha-ha.

Are there specific emotional states - joy, grief, solitude - that drive you to create? How do your emotions shape the forms that emerge in your work?

I've always been sensitive to the micro and macro vibrations around me. My siblings used to call me a "mimosa", a sensitive flower. I didn't like that - because they didn't understand what sensitivity meant. I closed myself off from



people who couldn't relate but stayed open to those who shared a similar mindset. When emotions build up, I look for analogies or references to express those feelings visually. Music, dance, science, history, new technologies and spirituality all inspire me.

Speaking of emotions, the explosions of colour in your works are wonderfully enlightening and uplifting. What do colours mean to you?

I studied painting and read a lot about colour theory, especially from Johannes Itten (Swiss painter and master teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar). I've always been interested in the effects of colour in space and their psychological impact. Since COVID-19, I've often used orange as a source of energy and sunlight - to

project a sense of positivity onto people.

Having exhibited internationally and participated in various artist residencies, how have these experiences influenced your work? Are there particular exhibitions or residencies that stand out as pivotal moments in your artistic development?

I loved being in Japan. I did a two-month residency at the Oribe Design Center in Gifu. After returning to New York, I made sculptures inspired by Japanese culture - mostly in black, white and red. Colour meanings vary across cultures: black represents life, white is used in mourning, and red symbolizes the sun and energy. I've also enjoyed residencies in Römhild, Germany; the Czesky Porcelain Factory; the Ceramic Studio in San-

bao, China; Barcelona, Spain; and the Siklós and Kecskemét ceramic studios in Hungary, where I plan to return 2026.

How do you come up with the various ideas for your sculptures? Do you just suddenly have a flash of ideas, or are they commissioned works?

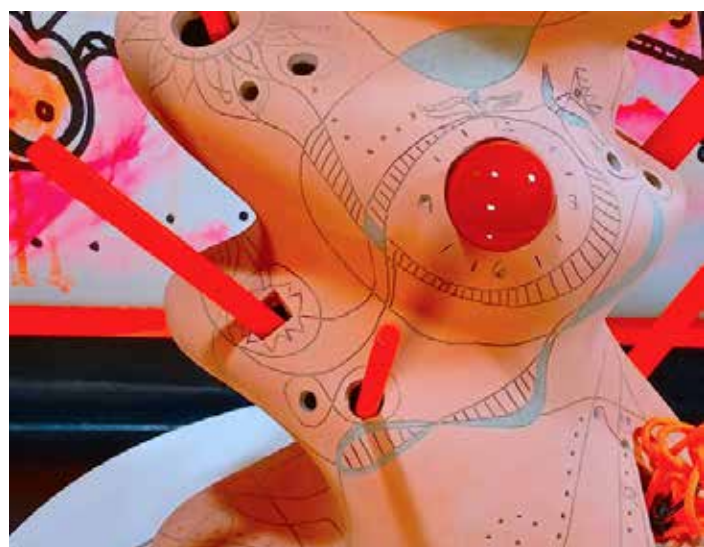
First, emotions accumulate, and I start forming a vague idea of how to express them. Then I do research, and as I go along, the visual form becomes clearer. I often create paintings related to my sculptures and sometimes combine them with ceramic pieces. As a freelance industrial product designer, I also take commissions - designing prototypes, plaster moulds, or working in latex, rubber, or other ceramic materials.

I enjoy this process. It's both disci-



plined and creatively immersive. The biggest challenge was a commission from the famous sculptor Robert Gober, who was looking for an artist/technician to create a life-size ceramic armchair cast from an ordinary plastic chair, but he needed ceramics.

Three months before his solo exhibition, other artists had refused the project and everyone else told him it was impossible, but I used my various technical skills to find the best and fastest way to complete certain projects. He was so impressed that he gave me a high five, and said: "You Hungarian devil, you did it, you did it!" I made the impossible possible and made 5 pieces.



We'd now like to read from you the technical process of this sculpture.

Once I've found the visual form that expresses my feelings, I either sketch it or keep it in my head as I sculpt. The clay "talks to me," visually suggesting the next steps. For this piece, I based it on an earlier drawing that I adapted into a 3D form. Like in architecture, I had to analyse the arches and points to make sure the form held stable before the clay dried and was fired.

I built the clay model in a lying position using slabs, made a quick splash mould, and reinforced it with construction, fibre tape. Then I created a larger, lighter plaster mould. I built the second half of the clay model and made a two-part mould.

A third part of the mould closed the base and held it all together. I poured stoneware clay upside down through two holes. The mould was heavy and hard to turn, especially when full of liquid clay. I painted the greenware with underglazes, black and orange. I carved the lines, before bone dry for drawing in fluidly on the curvy surfaces. I express

my reflection of personal, micro life and the contrast of the pressure of global energy in colours, while I cut holes for lighting up from the bottom of the sculptures with light bulbs.

When people experience your work, what do you most hope they walk away feeling or thinking?

I don't want to make the visible visible - but to reveal the invisible. Life has its own waves and rhythms, like algorithms. When I was in a better period of life, I rented a large painting studio. I painted the first wall black, then the second. By the time I painted the third wall, it felt heavy. I painted the gray floor white. That space made me realize how physical space can reflect emotional pressure.

Artists have a role to balance that pressure through their work. I created many black-and-white paintings and sculptures with red, which changed the energy of the entire space. The black wall faded into the background. Everyone who visited was excited. Without art, life would just be a gray wall.

Looking ahead, are there new materials, themes, or techniques you are eager to explore in your work? How do you envision your art evolving in the coming years?

I've always loved trying new materials and techniques - even ones I've never used before. I plan to try paper clay for large sculptures and paper porcelain for smaller objects. I'm also interested in silk-screen printing on clay, printing decals or newspaper collages, experimenting with underglazes and porcelain slips.

SYLVIA NAGY
nagyceramics@gmail.com
[@nagyceramics](https://www.instagram.com/nagyceramics)
www.facebook.com/sylvianagyceramic

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is **Yael Novak, Israel**

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