

In Studio with Steven Branfman

Evelyne Schoenmann

Steven is known to almost every raku interested person through his books “Mastering Raku” and “Raku: a practical approach”. We all learned a lot reading those books backward and forward. In this interview we have the opportunity to get to know the man behind the words.

Steven, you are a well known Raku specialist on each side of the Atlantic. What does that mean to you?

You flatter me! I was a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design. Rudy Autio was doing a demonstration and we were all totally captivated by his expertise, fluidity, ability to communicate, and by the sheer presence of this well-known ceramic artist. I remember thinking to myself “I wonder if I could ever do workshops and if people would ever

you don't hold back your knowledge. On the contrary: you generously tell people everything you yourself know. Do you like being a teacher?

From my days as a teen-age camp counselor, I always enjoyed teaching. I went to college to study physical education with my goal to be a teacher, coach, or athletic director. Circumstances leading up to arriving at college and my first encounters with faculty there, caused me to refocus my developing interests in art,

cative question. You can't make art in isolation. Art is created through a process of observation, ingestion, digestion, interpretation, formulation, and regurgitation. Contact and interaction with people is a key ingredient. Being involved, not only in ceramic related organizations, but also with groups that are theme and mission oriented is very important to me. It helps identify and reinforces my purpose and personal motivations. I am a strong proponent of “community” and community



come to watch me do one.” Be careful what you wish for! Being recognized as an expert and being a popular workshop presenter is, in some ways, a validation of my life's work as an artist and teacher. It is not about ego. It's about expression and communication.

In workshops as well as in your books

craft, and design. Teaching always remained part of the plan. I love teaching.

You are also very much involved with the American Ceramic Society, NCECA, and other ceramic organizations and foundations. Do you have a sense of mission regarding ceramics?

This is such an interesting and provo-

building. The clay world is about community and the sharing between members of that community.

You make, among other shapes, also Chawan, the Japanese ceremonial tea bowls. Did I ever tell you that I started to make them myself after having seen in your slide show the most beautiful one of

your late son Jared?

You honor my son and you honor me as his father and teacher. Jared was an extraordinary young man. Clay was in his bloodstream from the time he was a child. As a high school student of mine at Thayer Academy, his ease of learning and ability with clay amazed me daily. But it was his interest in, and understanding of the academic, intellectual, and cultural aspects of the craft that set him apart. As a student at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, he was drawn to the bowl and cup. These forms and objects became his alphabet and language. The chawan was becoming his signature. It was here that our relationship as teacher-student began to dissolve and reshape. It was here that I began to learn from my son.

long hours I learned. Over the years this became one of my signature forms.

Incorporating glass into my work began over 35 years ago with a variety of experiments. I abandoned the effort for a long time before I returned to it inspired by the way glass artists lay colors into the surface of their forms while blowing. There are four main steps to the technique:

- 1-Forming the cylinder
- 2-Inlaying the glass
- 3-Forming the shape by expanding from the inside out
- 4-Finishing and trimming

The sequence of pictures is as follows: I throw on a bat. After using liberal amounts of water for centering and the first few pulls, my hands are dried and the rest of the raising of the clay is done

the cylinder from the inside as I roll the cylinder in the glass. With the cylinder upright, I paddle the glass into the clay still supporting the clay from the inside to maintain the integrity of the cylinder. Each time I roll the clay onto the glass I do so to enhance the pattern and the coverage on the vessel's surface. To combat the cylinder becoming stretched and distorted, I grasp it around the neck and pull it up. After I'm satisfied with the glass application I return the cylinder to the wheel and complete the form throwing with one hand from the inside out. Finally the piece is trimmed in a chuck. Before raku firing it, I cast either an opaque white or transparent glaze over the piece in a spontaneous fashion. In the post firing phase I create a reduction atmosphere by means of coarse sawdust.



I can imagine that was a magic moment for both of you. - Another of your signature pieces is the big pot with the long neck. A beautiful "canvas" to cast-on glaze and to do your special glass inlay. Would you explain the process to us?

When I was a student, I had a very difficult time learning how to throw. My teacher, John Jessiman, was a master potter. I was single-minded to not only learn how to throw, but to master what was for me, and for most students, the most difficult shape, the narrow, tall neck. Through sheer determination and

completely dry. Dry throwing leaves the cylinder strong and able to withstand the stresses that the clay will have to be able to withstand later on in the process. The cylinder must also be formed with very even walls that are left thick enough for the glass to be embedded and subsequently expanded. I use random varieties of flat colored glass that I have crushed into various size pieces from dust to as large as a half centimeter. The glass is laid out carefully choosing colors, sizes, and the arrangement in patterns, visualizing how these patterns will transfer to the surface of the vessel. I hold the bat and support

Imagine a person, after reading this interview, saying: "Wow, I want to try Raku". What would be your advice?

Raku is a technique that requires rudimentary firing facilities and is relatively easy to learn how to do. It is fast and satisfies the need that many people have for immediate results. In fact, it has become one of the most popular and practiced firing methods the world over. Because of this initial simplicity, many potters doing Raku do not understand the depth of complexity and sophistication that Raku can exhibit. Nor do they understand the history and culture behind the practice.

Their wares display superficial aesthetics and lack individuality and power. My advice is to approach the technique with respect and curiosity. To seek experienced teachers who can encourage you to go beyond the common effects of bright luster's and crackle glazes. And to embrace the wide range of creative possibilities and personal expression that Raku can offer.

At NCECA 2015 in Providence you are, once again, presenter. What other projects have you planned for the future?

When I find myself in a social situation and someone asks, "what do you do?" my answer depends on how interested I think the person really is and what I think that they will understand. The simple reply is I'm a teacher. It gets more complicated

when I say I'm an artist or a potter. My work with the Potters Council of the American Ceramic Society has been rewarding and I plan to continue my association with that. I'm a founding board member of the National K12 Ceramic Exhibition Foundation and I'm committed to remain active in that work. I might have another book idea up my sleeve. My workshop presentations will continue and of course there are many more pots to make and exhibitions to have.

Steven presents workshops all over the USA as well as Canada, Mexico, and the Virgin Islands. He has been to Europe on six workshop visits and has done workshops on multiple occasions and in multiple venues in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and

Denmark. If you are interested in hosting Steven for a workshop or attending one of his workshops you can reach him at

STEVEN BRANFMAN

Sbranfpots@aol.com

www.ThePottersShop.com/steven-branfman

Tel. +1(0) 781 449-7687

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Pálma Babos, Hungary.

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist. She lives and works in Basel, Switzerland and Liguria, Italy.

www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch

