

In Studio with Ester Beck

Watching Ester Beck at work, you get the impression you are watching hard labour. With great physical effort and with the use of a hammer, she creates floating forms from an initially heavy block of clay. In this Interview, I would like to find out how the “Hammer Lady” sees herself.

Evelyne Schoenmann

Ester, when I watch videos of you at work, I am astonished by how you seem to prepare and work on heavy pieces of clay energetically but without any difficulty. What precautions do you take to protect your joints?

I find this extreme physical interaction between the massive lumps of clay and myself very exciting. I never worry about whether this great use of physical strength could harm me. At my age, you might call this ill-advised. But as yet, I

and at the same time I was expecting my second daughter, I made the changeover. My attraction to clay and to the wheel as well as the examination I subjected myself to as to whether I could be a good enough ceramist finally led to me giving up my first profession in favour of ceramics

Why do you prefer to call yourself a craftswoman rather than an artist, although your works leave an abstract,

inspiration from hiking in this region? Do you even approach your work spiritually?

That is true. I like the Negev Desert very much. And my objects really have had a similarity with the geology of this place in recent years. But I never made a conscious decision about it. I work intuitively and generally I am interested in the dynamic of becoming, and I happily devote myself to a study of forms and colour contrasts.



do not have any problems with my back or my joints. Well, OK, sometimes when I am carting heavy lumps of clay back and forth, I may strain a back muscle. That might induce me to get help sometimes.

You haven't always been a ceramist...

I began my professional life as a psychotherapist. But at the time I had a dream: I wanted to become a ceramist. First I went to evening classes. But when I reached a crossroads in my working life

sculptural impression? Is that a question of conviction for you?

Although I developed towards a rather freer, sculptural approach from what was originally work I did exclusively on the wheel, I never go further than to call myself a ceramic artist. I thus maintain the link to craft. That suits me better. It corresponds better to my character.

You live near the Negev Desert with its remarkable rock foundations. Do you get

Your hammer technique has become famous and it has earned you the nickname of “The Hammer Lady”. Could you explain your working method please?

After I had worked at the wheel for over fifteen years, I felt I needed a challenge. I wanted to continue developing my objects, to break them up. I experimented with clay blocks of various sizes on the wheel. I was fascinated by the results I got in this way, by the distortion. I started scoring the objects on the outside

and then pressed from the inside outwards to get stretch marks. And then after a time I realised I had to abandon the wheel and work more freely. Another reason was that the large quantities of clay I was working on threatened to damage my wrists. Working freely means using other tools: this was the moment when the hammer made its appearance. A wonderful tool to open and stretch the block of clay in a direct and dynamic way and create organic, offbeat forms. I used rubber hammers and wooden mallets of various sizes. But first of all I prepare the clay block I want to work on with the hammer. The bodies I use have to be plastic enough to tolerate the stretching forces I subject them to. On the other hand, they have to have enough grog to prevent them from collapsing at the same time. In the past few years, I have mixed several coloured bodies. Since the BLACK AND BEYOND exhibition in Tel Aviv in 2014, I have concentrated on fewer colours. The basic body is a black, Spanish stoneware (SIO-2 PRNF*E with 0-0.5 grog). I mix in porcelain (Tom Coleman), terracotta and grey

which can weight up to 60 kg, by the way. The coloured clays embedded in the black clay become visible. Then I throw one half on top of the other. I repeat this until I am satisfied with the lines that appear on the exterior surfaces. The next step is to create the deep, irregular grooves on the outside of the clay block with a spatula or a twisted wire. To open up the clay block and make a vessel out of it, I work with a hammer. This gives me the opportunity to work the walls in various ways, to stretch and thin them. It is important that I am in harmony with my hammering movements and that I always take the time to step back and observe the piece critically to decide where to apply the next blow. Alternatively I use my fists and my fingers, throwing ribs and sponges to obtain the desired effect. The shaping has to flow to be able to give the object character. When the desired result has been achieved, I let the object dry a little before I finish the piece with a turning tool, which I use to emphasise the lines of different coloured clay. I also only decide now, when I have the object in front of me, what the base

intentionally or unintentionally, and the piece splits while I am working on it. I integrate these splits into a new overall whole. I must say, I enjoy going beyond my limits and allowing unplanned and spontaneous things to enter into my work as a liberating element.

In a preliminary conversation before this interview, you mentioned a completely new project. Can you tell us something about that?

In the summer of 2016, the next ceramics biennale takes place in Israel. I plan to make a video in which I maximise the hammer method. Using my body and large Japanese hammers, a shovel, an axe, a saw and sticks, I want to make a huge block of clay. As a culmination, my ultimate dialogue with clay.

And after that? Are you going to hang up your hammer in the foreseeable future?

I will only do that when I feel that working with a hammer has become a meaningless gesture, an empty routine.



photos – Ran Erde

and yellow stoneware. In the final object, I would like to achieve a sort of calligraphy, meandering lines. The mixture of the clays is thus very delicate. I start working with a block of black clay that I repeatedly throw on the table so that it takes on a square shape. Then, depending on my idea of where I would like to position the lines, I put slices of the coloured clays, or perhaps just porcelain alone, on this cube. Then a block of black clay comes on top of this. I then halve this large new block

or foot should look like. After the definitive drying period, I fire my object in an electric kiln to 1220°C.

Is it difficult to stop working at the right moment? There is always a danger of beating and scraping, scratching, stretching and smoothing too long... and then everything collapses.

Various finishes give different, always very interesting results. It depends what I am looking for. Sometimes I go too far,

Ester Beck, Israel
esterbeck@yahoo.com
www.esterbeckceramics.com

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview will be with

Antoinette Badenhorst, USA

Evelyne Schoenmann ist a ceramist. She lives and works in Basel, Switzerland, and in Liguria, Italy.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch