

## In Studio with Martin McWilliam

*Martin could actually be an archaeologist too because of the way he works, using a hammer and chisel. What he wants to achieve is to partly reveal again the miniature vases and bowls buried in a block of clay, like in an archaeological dig.*

Evelyne Schoenmann

*Martin, it is relatively difficult to catch up with you. You move around from one exhibition, residency or workshop to another, all over the world. How does one become so successful?*

Hmmm, you should have asked me that between 2001 and 2008. Back then I was asking myself the same thing – How can you make that kind of money from clay. Now I just look after my image as a successful ceramist... But joking aside, it is a luxury to have created a frame-

southwest England was a hobby potter and a fan of the Far East. That was why I spent nearly my entire A-Level time in the art room.

*Tell us something about the wide range of your handbuilding techniques...*

I mainly work in a very free slab technique but every one of my ideas demands different solutions and so with time I hit upon a kind of coiling technique (derived from the Korean coil and throw tech-

jars. In my subsequent work, it wasn't just the interior that I studied but the core itself, the clay body. After firing, I break open prepared surfaces with the hammer and chisel to reveal an archaeological "core". That is the theme of this interview. My latest work, Time-Space, is about what is THERE, and not what can be seen. My field of deconstruction around this theme has expanded.

*Do you like firing in your Japanese*



work within which it is possible to work relatively freely. This can't be achieved over night. I think I am quite tough and I have got a lot of idealism. That helps! You know, people used to ask me "Can you live on it?" My answer was always, "I live for it – not on it". But it involved a lot of compromises.

*And how did the "adventure" of ceramics begin in your life?*

My art teacher at a state school in

nique). I also work straight from a solid clay block.

*In your work, we find a lot of playing with dimensions. Can you explain your ideas behind this?*

For two decades, I pursued studies around how the vessel is outwardly presented, this led to my typical inverted trompe-l'œil style ("The Vessel and its Image"). After that, for two years I studied the interior of these archetypal bowls and

*woodfire kiln best or can you imagine other firing methods for your work?*

Obviously I love working with the wood fire kiln, but I have recently exhibited a couple of newer pieces from an electric kiln at Terra in Delft. And then there are bronzes too.

*The technique we are looking at in our series here is called the chisel technique and it looks sensational. Can you take us through the various stages?*

To make my small vessel forms, I must have sat there for a week handbuilding them at first, until I realised that I know a super technique that is ideal for making round forms quickly. I throw them on the wheel! So suddenly, after what must be twenty years of abstinence, I was working at the wheel again for the main part of my work.

To make them as wafer thin as possible, to give these miniaturized forms the maximum effect and to simulate the effect of an archaeological dig, the cavity and the surrounding material had to be the same. Therefore I threw the core solid and then I dipped it in thick slip. This was supposed to be the actual “vessel”. There are a lot of variations in the composition of this material. In this sequence of photos I have mixed 60% kaolin and 40% white stoneware because I find it interesting if the “buried” pieces stand out from the surroundings. When everything has dried,

I plan the “picture” and abide by the idea of “jar and bowl” – the outlines of the two archetypal vessel forms. It was also very interesting for me to see how the various clays, the various degrees of hardness separated differently: from coarse, earthy stoneware to the almost feathery, layered breakages in porcelain. In the first series, I used the two techniques “splitting the surface” and then “chiselling”. Sometimes it worked but I usually found it a bit too much. Two themes then developed from this: only the splitting before the firing (archaeological) or only chiselling after the firing (geological). In the “geological” version illustrated here in this sequence, I simply scrape away the outlines of my Jar and Bowl when the clay is leather hard. In this attempt, a few buried pieces emerged, just enough for my taste.

The whole thing was then covered with 60%/40% kaolin-stoneware slip. When I stack the kiln, most of my pieces go down

hammer and chisel, I was very reluctant to start (and this is still the case!) Then, after the first few pieces, I get almost in a state of frenzy. Gradually, I learned to control how the material split off. This technique permitted me to develop my own “ceramic language”, because where else would you see that the inner core of a piece is revealed except when it is tragically broken!

*I expect your immediate future is completely booked out, am I right?*

That is pretty much correct. I usually plan six months to two years in advance. There are exhibitions running or starting in the Netherlands, South Korea, Greece and the UK. Three workshops over the summer in Germany and Austria. And finally, I have been invited to a symposium in southwest China. Next year, it is the turn of Canada again – workshops in BC and an exhibition in Banff.



I assemble the “block”. With some of the first pieces, I was sometimes disappointed because after all the preparations, parts of the surface had split open and only drew blanks, i.e. there were no vessels to be seen. So then I started to document the location of the “burials” (to make sketches of WHERE exactly the small vessels were buried in the block so that I could plan better. But this wasn’t very successful, either. I also noticed that fewer buried pieces tended to be more successful. So now

in the fire box. I bury some of them up to a depth of one third in a mixture of sand, sawdust and ashes. It is remarkable how far the fire penetrates in this area!

The firing lasts three and a half days. That sounds very long but the first two days are simply preliminary heating. From 1000°C, each chamber is stoked direct (side stoking, as this is called).

After three and a half days cooling, we can unpack the kiln. The first time, when I was standing there armed with a

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Evelyne Schoenmann's  
next interview is with  
**Corrie Bain**, Scotland / Spain

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