

In studio with Jennifer McCurdy

Jennifer's snow white porcelain objects seem to float weightlessly on their gallery plinths. The negative space, the vacant space, is often larger than the positive space. You are wondering why the pieces do not collapse in the kiln? Jennifer lets us into her secrets here.

Evelyne Schoenmann

Jennifer, you are a well-known ceramist and also a dedicated teacher. You give away all your knowledge in workshops, videos and books. Is there a "sense of mission"?

I think more about our sense of our community. Potters generally are supportive of each other and we share a passion for the clay. Clay is a language that is shared beyond borders of location or

portant for me as an artist to make room for the viewer's interpretation.

I am sure you've heard the same question a thousand times already: "How does she do this?"

Well, first I think about all of the qualities I want the finished piece to have – movement, balance, translucency, fluidity and an obvious interaction of

than a flat one). Then, when the form is half way between wet and dry, "leather hard", I carve patterns into the porcelain, and cut away the form to create new edges.

Then, I let it dry, and when all of the physical water has evaporated out of the clay, I sand all my tool marks away, and work on perfecting the curves I had carved into the body and the edges of the form. When I am satisfied with the



beliefs. I want to be a part of that culture and help it grow.

Looking at the elfish, windswept, almost airborne forms of your vessels I am reminded of Beethoven's "Pastorale": sublime, lovely, scenic but also energetic. Is there music in your objects?

Thank you for that lovely thought! I have heard it said that music is as much about the space between notes as the notes themselves, and I believe that is true for my porcelain as well. It is im-

the form with the firing process. Through the course of my work cycle, I use all of the stages of porcelain as it goes through its molecular changes, starting with wet plastic clay and ending with hard translucent sculpture.

When the porcelain is wet and plastic, I throw a thin spherical pot on the potter's wheel to get the initial form that I will work with. Off the wheel, by hand, when the porcelain is still plastic, I alter that form, fold it, to achieve soft shadows and add strength to its structure, (much as a corrugated roof is stronger

smoothness of the surface, I low fire the work to drive the chemical water out of the clay. This makes the form stronger, so it can be ready for the high firing.

The firing is important to any ceramic artist, and in my case, the shapes often look radically different when they come out of the kiln than when they go in. That is because slumping occurs in the white hot heat of vitrification, where I have cut into the strong arch support that is inherent in the thrown form.

The slumping shows that the porcelain has become plastic again during its

molecular change.

In ceramics, this state is unique to porcelain. No other clay body will bend so much in the firing. So to attain more curves in my forms, I use what I call “directional firing” to harness this movement in the kiln. Some of my pieces are fired up side down, others tilted on an angle. Calculating the force of gravity on the thin wall of porcelain, that has been bent when plastic, cut, then made malleable once again in heat, is the most complicated and fascinating aspect of my work.

Is altering the thrown piece before carving it key to you?

start carving the piece, but not necessarily when I alter it. I can carve the same altered piece many different ways to get very different pieces.

Poetry is never far in your work. In June 2017 you published a book, together with your sister, Wendy Mulhern.

Yes – Vessels, a conversation in porcelain and poetry, published by Schiffer Publishing. We loved creating that book – it was a wonderful collaboration. Wendy had occasionally used images of my work to illustrate her poetry before – finding them to have powerful emotional and kinaesthetic expression. We

cone 10, it is finished. Once porcelain is vitrified in the cone 10 firing, it cannot change again into another form. But as much as I might love a particular finished piece, I can always see new possibilities. The next piece, I can push further.

You have been a potter for almost 40 years. Could you imagine doing something completely different in the future?

I can imagine many things, but I know I will continue in my present pursuit. There are too many things I have yet to discover on this path. I could spend three lifetimes on it, and not even scratch the surface.



Yes, altering adds a whole new layer of curves that I can work with in creating the piece. Then there are the curves in the carving, on top of the curves of the altering, which were on top of the curves of the thrown form. Then add more curves which are created in the slumping in the firing. It's fractal!

When you start altering and carving a vessel, do you have a concept, or a mental image of the “end piece”?

I know my direction by the time I

think the images and the poetry enhance each other in the book. We'd love to hear what your readers think about it – it's available on Amazon, so can be purchased anywhere in the world.

The fired piece we see in the background has so much negative space, it's amazing that it didn't collapse in the fire. Is this it now, or do you want to still push it further?

Yes, this is it now, and yes, I want to push it further! Once a piece is fired to

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Beatrijs van Rheeden**, Netherlands

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