

In Studio with Curtis Benzle

By Evelyne Schoenmann

"The purpose of my art is to embrace the illusive, emotional content of traditional beauty. I aspire to communicate the feeling behind magical moments – light filtering through leaves that make memories of a sun-filled afternoon." Curtis Benzle

Curt, looking at your colourful pieces, one is reminded of nature and architecture... What happens in your head between looking at, say, a butterfly and the idea of a new piece?

I would say that there is never a direct inspiration. For one thing, you are correct in noting the sources of my inspi-

perception of my vessel-oriented sculpture is to a large degree based on the available lighting. Under indirect light, the vessel will appear quiet, with very muted coloration. Under direct light, the very same vessel will glow with a vibrant translucency that reveals layers of imagery buried intentionally within the porcelain wall.

The funny thing about Nerikomi is that I thought I invented the ceramic process! I had been in a graduate programme at the School for the American Craftsmen, majoring in glass, but eventually missed the tactile sensibility of clay.

My thought upon returning to my ceramic origins for a different degree pro-



ration, but with nature, I would be both presumptuous and naive to think I could ever reproduce the glorious and complex beauty of the natural world. My goal with nature is only to reference the feeling of harmony, visual complexity and, yes, beauty. As for architecture, the relationship is easier in that I am simply trying to find a balance between structural integrity and, again, beauty – only in this case three-dimensional.

I have read that you want to “create a visual sanctuary”. Can you expand on this statement?

Yes... This statement primarily references my architectural scale lighting but it is still connected to the vessels. The visual

With my lighting I intentionally turn the tables. These pieces contain their own light source and because of this, transform the visual environment they inhabit. Whatever the initial, internal light source, upon passing through the porcelain wall the initial white light, is converted to a softer, more comfortable colouration. My artistic goal in creating this luminous transformation is to provide a soothing space – a visual sanctuary.

You work with the Japanese Nerikomi technique...

For over forty years now and I never tire of it! For me it combines the “happy surprise” of opening a good glaze kiln with a bit more human control.

My graduate programme at Northern Illinois University was to bring aspects of glass into clay. The luminous qualities of glass were found in the translucency of porcelain and I translated the imaging and patterning qualities of the “millefiori” glass technique into stained porcelain clay.

It was a perfect match for me – colour, light and pattern in a tactile material. It was only later, after I delved deeper into the history of ceramics, that I discovered that this magical material and technique had satisfied artists for centuries.

Your work is extremely delicate and eggshell thin. How about stress cracks – or do you maybe anticipate fissures and work with them?

For years I regarded the inevitable stress cracks as an unavoidable problem with eggshell thin porcelain and I would painstakingly work to repair them by filling and re-firing the pieces until the cracks were closed. Again... ceramic history intervened and added an important aspect to the intellectual complexity of my art.

Despite the lack of any apparent visual connection to my work, I have always loved the vitality of Japanese Momoyama period ceramics. The integration of artistic effort and chance occurrence resonated with me. It resonated so much that it eventually broke through my thoughtless attempt to disguise the true nature of my own material – stress cracks – and celebrate this very same nature through the use of kintsugi technique.

1. Email me at curtisbenzle@gmail.com
2. Watch the very detailed video on my web site <benzleporcelain.com>. Or...
3. join us for the La Meridiana workshop.

These techniques are not particularly difficult to understand but can take a lifetime to master. I am always happy to help.

I chose to illustrate the Nerikomi technique here because it is a personal favourite, great fun and has virtually limitless potential for individual interpretation.

I will offer one bit of advice about Nerikomi. Just as an architect creates a plan, it is good to prepare your process before you start a Nerikomi project. Almost every Nerikomi I ever make begins with a visual diagram in which I outline dimensions, colour choices and ratios.

am working on some architectural scale lighting pieces that are too large for my current space. While I assemble them in close proximity, I need to be able to step back and assess the visual impact from a distance.

And, although we have not touched on this during the interview, throughout my entire career I have balanced my personal, sculptural work with design oriented, product development.

For twenty years I designed, made and marketed a line of porcelain jewellery and even though I stepped away from that business many years ago, the ideas still come. So, I am testing some new jewellery concepts to see if they continue to successfully make the translation from idea to reality!

Thank you!



In truth, I never know for certain where a crack may appear and I never create or encourage a crack. It is funny to me at this point that when the occasional piece emerges from a kiln without a crack, it feels incomplete – much like a child, free from the stress lines that provide our mature, human appearances with visual evidence of the lives we have led.

We are very curious to hear from you how, step by step, you build up the beautiful bowl in the picture sequence.

I always feel “a picture is worth a thousand words”. However, even with the photos, there may still be questions. If any readers would like greater detail I can think of three good options:

I like the example we have used in this interview because it incorporates the complicated process of creating a dot surrounded by a gradation. Again... please follow the photographs.

In May 2019 you will give another workshop at La Meridiana in Tuscany. What else does the future hold for you?

Thank you for mentioning my workshop at La Meridiana! There are so many great schools but for me returning to La Meridiana is like going home. And even better, once I arrive there I am greeted by new friends I have yet to meet.

Back home, I am currently preoccupied with a studio expansion. New ideas inevitably require additional space! I

CURTIS BENZLE
706 Randolph Ave.
Huntsville, AL 35801
Curtisbenzle@gmail.com

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Keith Varney, UK**

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