

# In Studio with Keith Varney

BY EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

*Keith, congratulations again on the Innovation Award at the 2018 Keramiktage Oldenburg. I remember you were quite astonished to get the award. Why?*

Thank you! I was genuinely taken by surprise to hear my name called. It's lovely to be around when awards are given but I never expect to receive one. I'm a bit of a perfectionist so it's easy to be

so I have difficulty with space and access, which has made it quite challenging to do much teaching from my studio. I taught ceramics at the local college and really enjoyed the experience, so it would be great to have more opportunities to teach in the future.

*Originally you were a successful furniture designer and maker. What transfor-*

ceramics. It's quite fascinating to me that so many of the processes have carried over from the past. The crossover of techniques, problem solving, hand skills, precision, drawing and design have all found their place in my new sculptural creations in clay.

*When I first saw a piece of yours, folded multiple times and in addition in*



critical of one's work and have some self-doubt. There were many other deserving ceramists showing their work in the exhibition, so it was amazing to receive the award. Coming to a new country where my work is being seen for the first time and getting this recognition is a fantastic feeling.

*Following your workshop there I was under the impression you like teaching. Right or wrong?*

I love teaching although I sometimes struggle a little with nervousness when I'm the centre of attention, but it's so rewarding and satisfying to help others discover the wonders of clay. My workshop is quite small and it's in my garden,

*mation lies between then and the no less successful ceramic artist of today?*

I reached a crossroads in my life and took a leap of faith into the unknown. With furniture, I had always been constrained by function and the needs of my clients. Using clay gave me an opportunity to truly express myself without limit. I didn't plan to become a ceramist, but during a multidisciplinary college course in glass, fine metals and ceramics I found myself drawn to clay. It's such a fabulous material to work with, it has allowed me such a wonderful creativity that I had not found before.

I spent many years honing my skills in woodworking and have carried those skills with me and applied them to my

*a slanting position, I thought it was done by a 3D printer. I hope that doesn't offend you....*

Not at all, I've been asked this question many times and I actually find it quite flattering. It's lovely to see people's faces as I explain the technique, as they are often quite astonished by the explanation! One of the big attractions of working with clay is the wonderful ability to work essentially using only hands. My technique is very simple using very few tools and no machines. A complete contrast to my furniture making.

*Curved Folds: would you guide us through the making process of your sculptures?*

My process is a combination of traditional ceramic processes but also crosses over, rather unusually, into origami!

Initially I slip cast a very thin sheet of porcelain onto a corrugated plaster slab. The casting time can be varied, but I'm looking for translucency so I cast as thin as I dare! The slip contains a small proportion of paper fibres, which gives sufficient strength to enable the sheet to be folded. The sheet is usually left over-night on the plaster slab, so that it will be ready for use the following day.

Next I begin by carefully peeling the sheet from the plaster before trimming to get a precise edge. The sheet is marked

to the joint and then leave it for a few minutes before continuing with the folding. Gradually little by little the two ends come together and are then joined with slip, it's only at this stage that I can finally relax a little. The joints are then strengthened by the addition of more slip.

Each of the sections are made this way and then kept under plastic until they firm up a little and are ready for the final construction. I also make a base for the vessel forms using some of the offcuts from the sheets. Each of the sections is then assembled with slip and the base added to construct the final finished piece. Firing is achieved in an electric kiln

sometimes when something unexpected happens!

*Can you tell us about your plans for the near future?*

That's a difficult question to answer, I'm on a journey without a map or ultimate destination. Although I'm always looking for new forms and directions, many ideas cannot be realized, so ultimately the clay will decide for me. I have plans to experiment with colour and increase the scale. So far it has been a slow evolution, each idea informing the next step and sometimes a happy accident!



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out with a sharp blade to give the positions for the curved score lines. This has to be very accurate as many of the pieces are made in sections and they must fit precisely to each other. I use a very fine pallet knife to score the curves through the corrugations, just deep enough to allow the sheet to be folded.

Once all of the score lines are complete, I stand the sheet on its edge and start to gently fold the form. This is the most difficult part of the process, it's very easy to lose control at this stage, as there is only a tiny amount of clay holding each section of the sheet together. The folding takes some time, as I have to gently coax the sheet into its form in a number of stages. After each stage I add slip

at 1220°C to 1240°C, with a 10 to 25 minute soak and is dependent on a number of considerations.

*You work with porcelain and the walls are extremely delicate. How do you avoid stress cracks or fissures in the heat of the kiln?*

Occasionally a fold or join will open up in the kiln or the form may collapse or distort badly. I have to offer the piece to the kiln and trust that it treats the piece kindly. It's somewhat out of my control although I try to predict how the piece will be affected by the intense heat and adjust the firing programme and position in the kiln to suit.

There can be a gift from the kiln

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Alvin Tan Teck Heng** (Singapore)

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