

In Studio with Johanna Beil

Evelyne Schoenmann



photos - Axel Fidelak

Johanna, let me begin with the video on your website. You can be seen strolling around a market, approaching a stallholder and asking him if you can take his photo because he has got such a jolly face. That is refreshingly straightforward and brave!

Yes – I have to admit that I definitely have to force myself. I only do it when I am really itching to. But usually, with a bit of charm you can get people to agree. Apart from that, you can collect interesting faces anywhere, even without speaking to the people directly. Nowadays

you can take a photo with your mobile quickly and unobtrusively. It is often only about a special detail, an impressive nose, a receding chin, a particular posture. The photo is only a reminder and as source material. Usually, the individual head or figure develops in its own way as I work.



Humour is always in evidence in your life and in your work. Personally speaking I find that very appealing. Are you simply someone who always thinks completely positively?

I try to be, as much as possible. I have a natural predisposition to thinking positively as well as being naturally friendly. I grew up with Loriots Ratgeber (a "guide" by German humorist and caricaturist Loriot, Ed.), which my parents had in their bookshelf. Loriot is part of the basic humorous equipment of my generation. That helps and it lays down a good foundation. Later, I began to appreciate the humour of the versatile artist F. K. Waechter and the subtle wit and humanity of the graphic artist and caricaturist Sempé. Luckily, I laugh relatively easily. And I also enjoy it when people chuckle or laugh out loud about my figures. And they do that a lot!

You also take commissions - portraits, for instance. How do you manage to get humour into these figures without turning them into caricatures?

I have to exaggerate a little of course to achieve a likeness as my monochrome figures make demands on the viewer's faculty of abstraction. But they have never turned out to be caricatures yet. Caricatures often have something nasty about them and that is not my style. Sometimes I try to talk people who want a portrait out of the idea, for instance if I get the feeling it might collide with their vanity. They usually enjoy the humour in my work but when it is about your own personality, about being looked at by someone else, it is not so easy to be humorous. Women in particular want to be beautiful – and that often doesn't go together with my sense of humour. Most of all, I like to make portraits of men or women who regard their own imperfections benevolently – like I do myself. That certainly seems to be easier the older you get. And also, my portraits show how I see the person and it is not an exact reproduction like a 3D scanner would produce. This is a slightly different way of seeing that perhaps you have to get used to a bit first.

How much does your first profession as an illustrator help you with your current work as a ceramic artist?

I think it definitely helps. I worked as a illustrator for many years and that trains

your imaginative powers as well as your sense of proportion ...

... and how did you make the transition from paper (illustrator) to clay (ceramist)?

It was while we were travelling around India. We bought some chess figures, beautifully carved from bone but unfortunately only a few because the rest of the set had already been sold to someone else. So that led to the idea of making a complete chess set myself. Just heads as the chess pieces. Forming the crazy, wrinkled heads of the pawns, horses or elephants was so exhilarating and deeply satisfying, and I found I had a knack for it so I just carried on. Later, I made complete figures, mainly couples: frustrated ones, with a crush on each other, people laughing, sleeping or chatting. Men and women, girlfriends, dogs and their owners, kids playing football. Couples where you can feel some kind of vibration between them, human and human or human and animal. Making this visible or discernible gives me a lot of pleasure. When I have finished, I love to see a little figure, sitting or standing in front of me that could simply get up and walk away or call me crazy.

Your sense of humour, your wit is also revealed in the figures of this interview. In the pose of the photographer, but especially in the pose of the fair maid, who seems to think herself already standing on the red carpet. Could you talk us through the journey of how you make your figures....

Basically, after it has become clear what I am trying to achieve, I start with the legs and the trunk. The feet, including the shoes, are formed in some detail right from the start because they dry out fastest in the course of the work process and so they can't be changed so easily. I always model my figures naked first and then dress them. I hollow out the trunk a little, then I add the arms. Then I begin to "dress" the figure.

That means I model the drapery of the garments onto the figure. It is always more convincing that way as every fold follows what lies beneath it. So it is easier if you have already got what is underneath. After that, I do the head. Sometimes I experiment with several different heads for each figure, just trying things out. With a couple that is looking at each other, it's better to have a choice. These final stages often give the individual figures an unexpected spin. I



Fotos - Axel Fidelak



can often only see what is really going on between the two of them when they look at each other, or don't look at each other – they have lives of their own ... the precise gesture, the other fine points, the details come at the end. I fire my little people in an electric kiln to 1,040°C.

It is tempting to say that in their facial expressions and their posture, the figures you have created show their feelings – which makes them come alive and makes them very endearing. Would you like to give the world a message through your figures?

I haven't really thought about it. Yes, perhaps I do, but with the lightest of touches: Why can't we see ourselves and others a bit more kindly and sympathetically and not take ourselves so seriously? We all have our faults and we are not here for long.

Is there any special reason why you leave your figures white and unpainted?

My figures already have an obsessive amount of detail and to go further into detail would definitely be too much.

Johanna, where do you see yourself in, let's say, five years time?

It would be nice if I could continue to go out into the world with my "little people" – to make others smile or laugh out loud, or to move them. This sounds sentimental but that is what emotions do. Of course it would be nice if one or two of them were to find a new home with some nice people – otherwise there might be too many people in my flat share here.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Satoshi Kino, Japan

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