

# In Studio with Angela Burkhardt-Guallini

Evelyne Schoenmann



**A**ngela, how did you come to be a ceramic artist, and who inspired and encouraged you most?

I always like telling the story – thirty-five years ago, the Japanese poet, calligrapher and ceramist, Mitsuya Niiyama (\*1922) gave me a small porcelain tablet in neriage technique when we met briefly. It was hardly any larger than a thumb. But to me it was a revelation. I have been working in this technique ever since. I taught myself how to do it via research and experiment and perfected the technique. But the ceramics of the Zen monk Matsui Kosei from Japan have always fascinated me too. There is no shortage of inspiration even today – I find it in nature,

when I am travelling, but also in architecture and art.

*For Western artists, it is difficult to prove yourself in Asia, especially with one of their own techniques. But you have won prizes both in Japan and Taiwan with the neriage technique. How do you explain your success?*

I think I probably strike a chord with my artwork, I awaken sensitivities with it. And I have never stopped working with the neriage technique, I have never had a crisis with it. A love of detail is important and a love of craft and especially the Japanese appreciate that very much. And in addition, I only work with good stains

and very good porcelain. Otherwise, I don't need much: a table, a kiln, plaster moulds I have made myself, rolling pins, good wooden boards to press the slabs with, good cutting knives and a good ruler.

*In the well known Yingge Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, you had a solo exhibition in 2011. A very great honour*

... that made me very happy. I was very apprehensive about this challenge. The preparations were very elaborate; there were 35 pieces, or ceramic bowls, that had to be securely packed. But the red tape was even more complicated. I had to fill in customs forms and make sure



the exhibits returned safely to Switzerland, and so on. But exhibiting itself was a pleasure. The Swiss ambassador to Taiwan took a great deal of trouble and gave a very moving speech. Afterwards, there was a wonderful evening meal in a traditional restaurant in Taipei. Everything was perfect.

*You only work with white porcelain and porcelain from Seto that you stain yourself. What do you think of what people say, that "porcelain is simply too much"?*

Yes, it says that in the catalogue for the 2nd International Ceramics Biennial in Meissen, where I was invited to take part. It was a wonderful exhibition in the historic Albrechtsburg castle in Meissen. I would rephrase the statement that porcelain is simply too much. I would say that working with porcelain as a material is a great technical and physical challenge, like painting a picture.

Making a ceramic bowl takes weeks. In the end product, my emotions and my sensitivity are entwined. Referring explicitly to porcelain, it is a little bit like the Princess and the Pea. Since 2005, I have been working with a porcelain from Seto, Japan, which is perfect for me. It is especially lovely, it almost shines. I came across this body when in that year I won the Bronze Award in the ceramics competitions in Mino, Japan.

The porcelain from Seto comes from a small family business. But for several months, I couldn't get any satisfactory results with it. Everything warped or cracked, it was very frustrating. I first had to find out how to work with this porcelain. In 2008, 2011 and 2014, I took part in the Ceramics Competitions again and imported many, many kilos of this high grade porcelain. This paid off to the extent that in spring 2019, I had a showcase exhibition at the Keramikmuseum Staufen in Germany. Last month I received a delivery of several 100 kilos of Seto porcelain. A tonne of porcelain lasts me for about three years' work.

*In 2018, when we both exhibited together with the Nanyang Clay Group in Singapore, you showed a very informative and very aesthetic*

*short film about your work. Where can the film be seen?*

I am very happy about this film. It shows how I work very clearly. A student from the Lucerne School of Art and Design made the video as a study project, so it is his property. That is why I only show the film with his permission.

*It is probably not only of interest to me whether you have an idea of how the lines will be arranged when you start to make a piece, if perhaps you even make a rough sketch or if it is a surprise to you too every time ...*

It is true that there are many ways to an artistic end product. There is the path that is drawn in advance and there is the path that leads you through unknown territory. I used to make drawings of all my good ideas or inspirations. I didn't see then what I see today, I didn't feel what I feel today. Now, I work intuitively, instinctively. The good thing about growing older is that you know what you do by instinct.

*Would you like to explain the neriage technique to our readers with the photos in this article?*

The neriage technique is an ancient pottery technique, highly esteemed especially in Asia. With this technique, stains are kneaded into the porcelain body. The right choice of porcelain is crucial here. As I already mentioned, since 2005 I have only worked with porcelain from Seto. I buy the stains from various countries. Working in the stains is a feat of strength, but it is also very meditative. I love to listen to music while I am doing it. I roll out the white and the coloured bodies, cut them up and reassemble them to get various patterns. While I am working I must absolutely avoid any air bubbles because otherwise the porcelain would crack during the firing. While I am putting the individual layers together with slip, the strips have to be damp, and a rhythm and a flow must develop. To make bowls of various sizes, I lay the strips in or over various plaster moulds. It is essential to work quickly for the neriage technique. The ambient temperature plays a very important part





during drying. If the humidity is high, the porcelain takes twice as long to dry as in cold, dry air. The drying process is crucial and tricky. When the pieces are dry they are sanded with steel wool and various grades of sandpaper. After the bisque firing, the pieces are polished several more times with even finer sandpaper and diamond abrasives. The aim is to get a silky surface. I fire the finished pieces to 1250°C in an electric kiln. The firing is tricky too. I often have a surprise here again when something doesn't work as I imagined.

*An absolutely flawless execution is typical of your work. But can you reach an even higher level? Will we be seeing new experiments in future?*

Things are always progressing. With every piece of porcelain I have worked on, the next one is ready in my mind. I always test the boundaries of this art form to the maximum. Obviously, not everything is perfect, there are flawed pieces too. And this art form takes time, a lot of time, thousands of hours. What always comes out in the end are new, unforeseen pieces. After over three decades for and with the *neriage* technique, there is no end in sight for me. In 2019, I won the Shimada City Prize in the famous International Ceramic Art Festival in Sasama, Japan, for my newly developed "yunomi" teabowl series. And in the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale in Taipei from 9 October 2020, new work from me will be on show again.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Maria ten Kortenaar, the Netherlands**

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