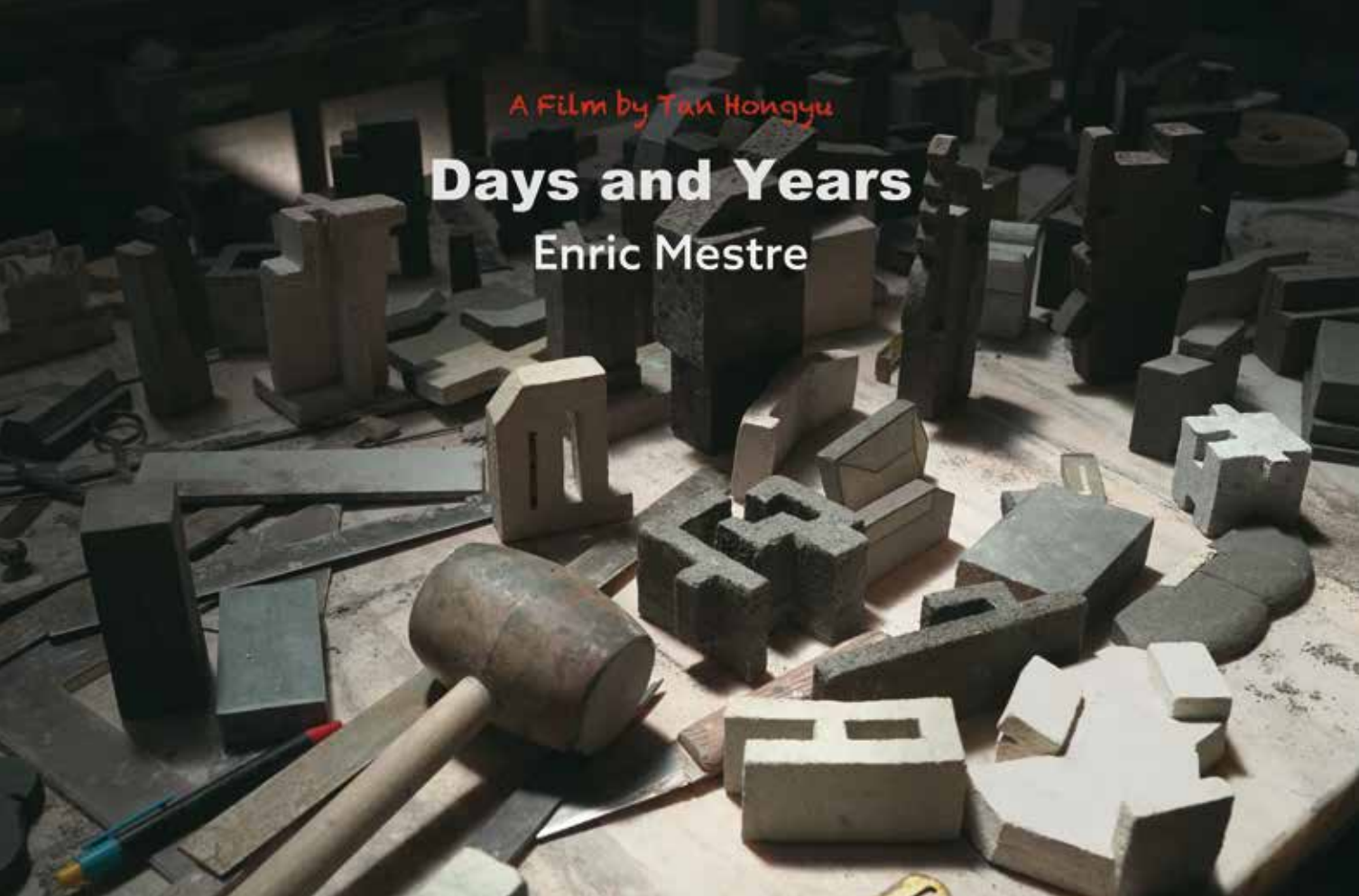


A Film by Tan Hongyu

Days and Years

Enric Mestre



EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

A hot day in July 2011, in Castellón, Spain. The 1st International Ceramics Film Festival is in progress. Two professors, who have travelled from the People's Republic of China, Tan Hongyu and Lu Bin, show their film, Pottery from the Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, and with it they win the first prize as well as the audience prize. Later, Professor

Tan Hongyu watches other entries to the competition, including one about Spanish ceramic artist Enric Mestre, is very impressed by it and then meets the subject, the artist portrayed, at the film festival. She subsequently visits him where he works and lives in Valencia and is so moved and absorbed by the atmosphere there that she decides to make a film of her own about him. At that

Kiln room in Mestre's workshop





One of the many sketch books ...

time, however, it was scarcely possible for filmmakers from mainland China to work in Spain. The dream remained precisely that for a long period: a dream. In 2016, the two of them met again at the conference of the International Academy of Ceramics in Barcelona and once more discussed the project of a joint video film. In the three succeeding years, Tan Hongyu travelled to Valencia seven times, two to three weeks per visit, to film Mestre at work. The expressive, atmospheric film is to be released at the end of this year (2019) on DVD in China. In addition, Tan Hongyu will be submitting the film for various international film festivals.

Tan Hongyu recently placed a roughly 80 minute preview version of the film portrait of Enric Mestre at my disposal, which I have in the meantime devoured many times from start to finish. Where can I start? At the beginning of the film Enric Mestre explains: "An artist's life resembles that of a monk. Ask a monk, what is your life? He will tell you, the monastery is my life. My life as an artist happens six days out of seven in my studio, the same ritual for sixty years. I come here in the morning, have breakfast at ten o'clock, which my wife has prepared for me, and I work all day. Sundays are the worst days for me, I don't know what to do with myself and the free time."

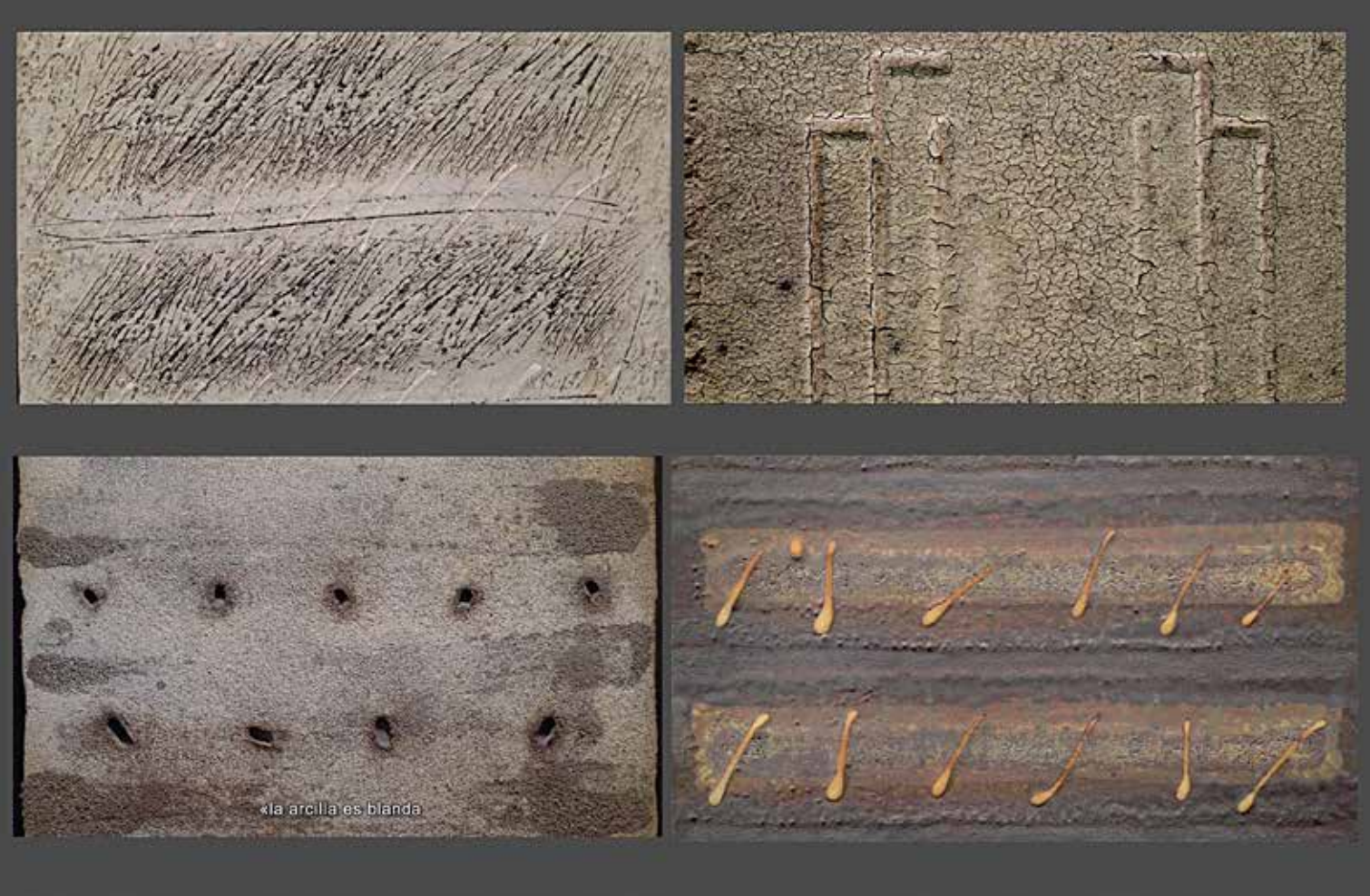
Enric Mestre's spacious studio, in which he has been making his ceramic art for many decades, is in the industrial area of Alboria in the north of Valencia. His studio boasts six large, high-ceilinged, interconnected rooms with 700 sq.mtr. of usable space, divided up into one room for clay preparation, one for making his objects, one to dry them, another for the sketches and his pictures, in addition a huge kiln room and an exhibition space – all in all a ceramist's dream! Often, the filmmaker follows him unobtrusively with a hand held camera as he strides around the suite of rooms

.... and drawers full of tools



Fired pieces in the kiln room





Surface patterns

and walks towards her. As a viewer, you get an impression of being personally present in the studios and knowing exactly where his drawings or his tools are and how far the firing of the kiln has progressed. The drawings are important because Mestre originally trained as a painter. In one sequence of the film, he opens a wall cupboard, shows the viewers an impressive array of black note books, takes individual ones out and leafs through them, speaking with nostalgia, pride and emotion in his voice about the individual sketches and drawings. Many of them later became ceramic sculptures. He trained in ceramics at the San Carlos Fine Art School in Valencia and the school of ceram-

Irrigation canal outside Mestre's studio



ics in Manises. The renowned Alfonso Blat was his teacher. In Spain, Mestre is considered the undisputed forerunner of geometric abstraction in ceramics. His work is slab built, with right-angled, box-like structures and is distinguished by clean, hard lines reminiscent of architectural severity: utmost aesthetic purity. It is very close to Mestre's heart to make strict, pure forms, very geometric, flawless, with a special touch. His work often looks as if finished individual pieces are dovetailed together. Here a broad furrow, there one or more rectangular recesses – windows on the world. As Mestre emphasises, architects work very rationally so that their works look like they do. In contrast, he wants to give his abstract works a special touch, something personal, even a certain emotionality. And again and again we hear his motto: "Less is more".

The surroundings are reflected in his sculptural work, the landscape of southern Spain. Viewers are given an impressive picture of it in an expressive shot with Enric Mestre standing on the balcony of his studio and showing the viewer these surroundings. Beneath the wide, clear sky of Valencia with its evening clouds and the dead straight, randomly interlocking contrails of the aeroplanes, the flawlessly ploughed furrows stretch across the fields, intersected by narrow irrigation channels. Further away, there are railway lines, power lines, industrial structures that introduce another straight line into the geometric whole. Irrigation channels from close up: everywhere there are angles, edges, transitions – before the viewer's inner eye, the maestro's ceramic sculptures become more and more distinct. Standing on his balcony, commenting on the landscape that inspires him, with sweeping gestures of his arms, he seems to me like a conductor giving cues, cues in his head that lead to new masterworks. He says,

“The difference between an artist and a non-artist is that in a ripe field of crops, I see beauty, others see a field of vegetables.” When he speaks of beauty, words often fail him. One feels the depth of his feelings and his closeness to nature. Wherever his gaze falls, he sees a new sculpture and already knows what it will look like when it is made in ceramics. And he has made many sculptures, thousands!

Tan Hongyu’s camera leads us into a room that is filled from floor to ceiling with Mestre’s paintings and ceramic works. Mestre is not always satisfied right away with his fired pieces. For him, the flames are the key element in a successful ceramic sculpture. Mestre wishes the kiln would obey him and not, as so often, follow its own laws or whims. Mestre’s long-standing assistant, Spanish ceramist Juan Ortí, also says of the maestro, “He is never satisfied. He often fires a piece as many as ten times before he finds what he is looking for.” Mestre and Ortí are a perfect match. Both love the quiet, the solitude, and often work together for hours without saying a word – two monks at work. In an emotional statement, Juan speaks into the camera: “Enric is like a father to me. For instance, I was never a good pupil. Until I met Enric. He turned my life on its head. It was a lightbulb moment and I studied ceramics with him.” For many years, Enric Mestre taught ceramics and generously passed on all his knowledge and skill.

And then there is his friend the donkey. Mestre admires the wisdom and tenacity of this animal: “The donkey knows exactly what it wants and goes its own way unwaveringly. I’m like that too!” Towards the end of the film, we see a proud Enric Mestre at the opening of Retrospectiva 0.1 in Onda, Spain. A beautiful exhibition, although unfortunately we only see a fraction of his works. In conclusion, another characteristic anecdote related by Juan Ortí. He recently said to Mestre, “Enric, you are 83 now, you don’t have to go on making big heavy sculptures any more.” But Mestre just carries on undeterred, making big sculptures, stubborn as his beloved donkey. “I think Enric needs two or three lives to translate all his ideas into ceramics.”

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From Mestre’s daily routine

photos - Professor Tan Hongyu

Enric Mestre (1936) is a ceramist and painter and lives and works in Alborai, Valencia province. He trained at the San Carlos de Valencia art school and the school of ceramics in Manises, his teachers including Alfonso Blat. Enric Mestre taught ceramics for many years. He has won many prizes with his ceramics and his works have been shown in numerous exhibitions worldwide. His work can be seen in public spaces (especially murals), in museums and collections in all parts of the world.

Tan Hongyu (1971, Foshan, Guangdong province, PR China) is a ceramist and professor in the ceramics department of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, China. She is also an award winning filmmaker with the subjects of Traditional Ceramic Techniques in China – socio-political realities among various groups of ceramists and their intangible cultural heritage, and film portraits of internationally renowned ceramic artists.

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