

In Studio with Maria ten Kortenaar

Evelyne Schoenmann



Maria, originally you trained as a silver and goldsmith. Would you tell us a bit about your biography and how you came to work with clay?

I went to art school in the eighties and after some years making jewellery, I felt an increasing desire to work with colour. So I tried clay. Clay gave me the opportunity to work with colour, and the nature of this material allowed me to form it freely, that made me happy. These days I work exclusively with porcelain because of the brightness of the colours in porcelain.

Are you still using similar techniques that you worked with as a goldsmith?

My previous study as a goldsmith ac-

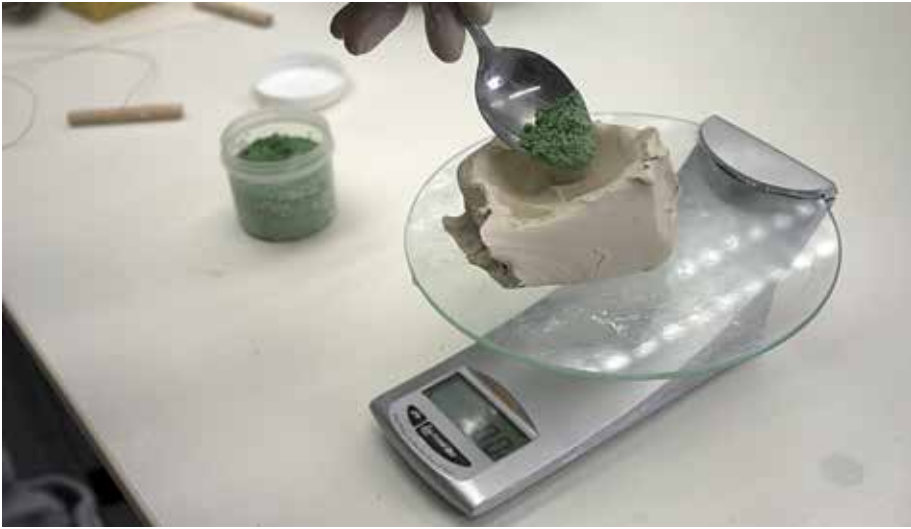
customed me to a precise way of working and putting many tiny pieces together to create an object, as I'm an autodidact for ceramics I invented the way I work myself so I guess it is a bit like goldsmithing.

My last guest was a neriage artist, you work with the neriage technique. What is the difference between the two techniques?

I think neriage is about throwing, to be honest, I'm not sure about that. People say that my work is neriage, I'm not always sure about that too. Sometimes I create pieces just by sticking little slabs together. I simply work the way I like and need for what I want to make. When I started working with inlaid porcelain, I never heard about neriage. But anyway, I know that what I do is not neriage.

When I look at your art, I am reminded of stained-glass windows in churches, or also of something else completely: the flickering neon lights in Asian towns. What inspires you to these most colourful works?

That's good news, you discovered the secret behind the way I work! I started making pieces this way and have been working with porcelain since 2005. I visited Hong Kong that summer, the city so amazing and different from Amsterdam, where I live. Back in the Netherlands, I decided that Hong Kong was destined to become my first project in porcelain. I wanted to try to epitomize Hong Kong in porcelain, with all those tall buildings and all those coloured neon lights. I decided I had to use porcelain because of the brightness of colours in this material.



Using little bits of coloured porcelain and piecing them together with white pieces, almost as if I was making jewellery again, using black porcelain slip as lines that act as borders in between the horizontal and vertical strips of coloured and white porcelain. I succeeded and so I encased the impression that Hong Kong made upon me into porcelain. Now that I had discovered porcelain, which allows me to express that which I perceive, feel and experience in daily life, I never stopped working with it. An installation of seven "Hong Kong" cylinders together titled Metropolis is part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu, Japan.

The list of your exhibitions and award winnings is long. What do you think people like best looking at your art pieces and technique?

I guess the reason why people like my work so much is recognition. There are simple themes in my work, it is all about my life, about happiness, about sunsets, rainy days, nights with shooting stars, love stories, flowers, travel around the world, stained glass windows. I'm not exceptional, so I guess people recognize their own feelings, their own life in my works which in turn will make the impression of the object upon them stronger. Although people always ask me how I create a piece, I don't think the technique is why they admire my works, it's all about the atmosphere.

As we can see in the picture series here, you add rectangle after rectangle to build the walls of the cylinder. Please guide us through the making process of your pieces.

In this series I'll show you how I create a "Green-Eyed Monsters" piece. These pieces refer to Shakespeare's green-eyed monster, which means jealousy. First, I chose the colours that I want to use for this piece and mix them through the porcelain mass. I create blocks with different graduations of a colour. To create such a block, I cut what for this occasion is a green and a white block

diagonally, the two halves of green on top of each other, the same too with the white parts and put them opposite of each other together as I show here. You can already see where I'm going to slice them. I cut the block made up like this in slices, where in each part is an amount of green and an amount of white, from much green to less white and opposite. I mix the little particles and lay them in the right order. I stack these parts one on top of the next to create a block from light to darker green. I do that several times with different colours of green, and I cut them for this piece in triangle shaped strips. From different triangles, and a little triangle of black in the middle, I compose a "green eye" block. I made different "green eyes" this way and I cut slices from these eyes to create a slab. To form the bottom of the piece I place the different slices of "green eyes" on a cotton sheet, fill some holes with little red parts or with parts from a block with black stripes.

I measure the size I need to build the wall. Constructing the wall is the same procedure, but now I make a rectangular slab. I cut this slab in little squares, because I built my piece from little squares, that gives me the opportunity to disturb the pattern just a hint, to draw in the attention of the viewer, this uneasiness catches the eye. That's why in my works the rim is always uneven. With these squares I build my pieces, row by row just like a brick wall. I fix the squares to the bottom with black porcelain slip. After the first row on the bottom comes the next one on top of the first row, and when I create a higher piece there will be more rows.

When the piece has been built it looks ugly, because of the black porcelain slip is everywhere, not only in the seams between the squares. So, I have to clean the surface, I do that with aluminium scrapers when the piece is leather dry. The whole process up to here takes about one week. Afterwards the piece has to dry very slowly, it easily gets ruptures in this part of the process and also during firing, that's why I only fire once at 1250° Celsius in my electric kiln. And here it is, my Green-Eyed Monsters!





The walls of your cylinders are extremely thin. I wonder: why don't they collapse in the porcelain high fire?

To be honest, sometimes they do collapse. Everyone who works with porcelain knows that sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. The material is not very easy and you have to work with it for years to get it the way you want it, but even then the result is not always what you hoped for.

At the moment the world is off its hinges. It's April 2020 now and we are in the middle of the Corona crisis. Exhibitions had to be cancelled, conferences and workshops to be postponed. Do you have, despite the uncertain times, ideas and hopes for the future of ceramics?

We have hard times now, all over the world. And indeed, everything had to be cancelled because of the corona virus. For me it means that all my shows and congresses for this year have been cancelled. I'm not sure but I still hope to go to Taiwan in October for my work is in the Biennale. Of course, I do have hope for the future, making art doesn't depend on viruses, shows or selling. It is an inner drive, for me, I need to work, I'm not happy if I don't work. I think there is always hope as long as people like to cheer up each other, and artists can do that by posting art on social media these days. Of course, I hope to show my work in public when there comes a better time for all of us. But my agenda is empty now and I work every day. In the meantime, you can take a look at my webpage, I hope I can make you feel happy for a moment.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Velimir Vukicevic, Serbia**. Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is a member of the AIC/ IAC and lives and works in Basel. www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch