

In Studio with Jürg C. Bächtold

Evelyne Schoenmann



Jürg, I'd like to start with your background, as I do with all my guests. In your youth, did you know you wanted to be a ceramist or did that come later?

Yes, it came much later although I did a lot of drawing and painting when I was young. Of course I didn't miss out the typical thumb pots when I was at school. I trained as a machine mechanic and then I worked in the aviation industry for many years. I came to ceramics about forty years ago. First as a hobby and then it finally took hold of me. In the first few years, I taught myself a lot. I had to learn the hard way because a lot went wrong. But I think I gained a lot of essential ex-

perience that way and I learned a lot. I built my first wheel myself, a kickwheel. And I also taught myself to throw. I was never able to peek over a potter's shoulder. But nevertheless, after many failures I managed to throw quite passable tableware and to sell it as well. For about ten years, I made wheel-thrown tableware, developed the glazes myself and even then I was firing in a gas kiln. After a time I decided to devote myself entirely to handbuilding and to art. At that time, I attended workshops and courses to acquire some basic knowledge.

Is there someone in the world of ceramics who encouraged you specially?

Who you learned the most from?

I attended workshops with a lot of well-known ceramic artists and I was able to learn a lot from them. I think it was Imre Schrammel who influenced my later work very strongly and he was a great role model for me. For many years I continued to learn new things from Imre. From him I learned to use sand to shape pieces with. Of course I never wanted to copy him and couldn't do it anyway. I had to find my own course and my own practices. So I searched and I experimented. My first successes were participating at the Faenza Biennale with three sand-formed pieces and with one piece at the Biennale in Vallauris.



On your website, there is an “artistic concern” that I would like to recommend to all our readers. Could you give us a brief summary of it here?

First and foremost I let emotions guide me and try to translate graspable things into forms that can be experienced in order to reach out emotionally to the viewer.

Since time immemorial, material has been in a state of constant transformation (metamorphosis). Everything is subjected to forces and counterforces and is thus exposed to ongoing change. Stones, rocks (anorganic) and living creatures (organic) materials are destroyed or transformed by erosion, death and under the influence of time (including the force of nature). They migrate to deeper strata; clay is formed, which contains all the information from earlier ages. The clay becomes a container (earth), a grave with the information of living and dead matter in which everything has always been contained, everything has been present. With the assistance of the other three elements, water, fire and air, I try to bring out hidden things from times long past and to make them visible. In doing so, alongside my innermost feelings, I allow my thoughts – for instance on the interaction with the social environment – flow into the play of forms. To me, the pathway, the genesis of a form is important, although I believe that in an artwork not everything can ever be addressed. Correspondingly, it should provide thought-provoking impulses, it should leave questions unanswered.

One of the things you write is, “Since time immemorial, material has been in a state of constant transformation (metamorphosis). Everything is subjected to forces and counterforces and is thus exposed to ongoing change.” Don’t you find it fascinating that we ceramists gather and use precisely these same forces to create artworks with them?

That is exactly what it is that fascinates me so much with the sand forming technique and which doesn’t let me go. I know it took millions of years for strata, geological faults and transformations (mountains, hills) to occur. With the sand technique, it happens much faster, often in a matter of seconds or minutes. I use force and counterforce to shape artworks. The fascinating thing is that these objects can only be made with this method. It is important for me to make objects that can only be made like this with clay and no other material. Truth to materials.

We are interested by your vocabulary of forms. To me, the word “archaic” springs to mind. Your artworks produce images of archaeological excavations for me, or of fossils. Am I perhaps completely wrong with these perceptions?



No, absolutely not. I usually try to combine the organic with the geometric. The sand forming technique also reinforces this sense of the archaic. I believe hardly anything else is possible. And my works are timeless, they are not subject to the tendencies of the mainstream.

Could you talk us through the process of "sand deforming"?

The sand has various functions. The most important one is probably that it stops the clay sticking together and it also supports the clay. So for example, hollow forms filled with sand behave like solid clay bodies when they are deformed. The original forms before the deformation are important. And I do find it fascinating to keep on inventing new forms. The only limitations are the ultimate size of the object. With large, heavy pieces, it is often hard to achieve the necessary pressure. This is when hydraulic presses are called for, like car jacks, for instance. To make one of my largest pieces, I needed a clay tube of approximately 25 cm diameter, around 250 cm in length and the walls with a thickness of 2 cm. The whole tube was filled with sand and twisted to form a spiral and then placed between two thick boards to form it into a cube. The result was an upright cubic spiral with the dimensions 37 x 37 x 48 cm. With the piece shown here, I first make the tubes, then I fill them with sand. Then the tubes are joined together. On what is to become the inner side, the joins are reinforced with thin coils of clay. Then I begin to deform. I beat the blanks with a lump of clay to get them into their final form. Then I cut the tubes open with a knife and remove the sand. This is a relatively time consuming process and the sand only runs out in some places, as you can see in the photo. The tubes have to be emptied fairly quickly because the clay shrinks and the tubes could split. The holes or slits created when I cut the tubes open are then thinned down with a suitable modelling tool to give the cut edges a natural appearance. After the first firing, the piece is treated with iron oxide and engobes. With this piece, I applied the engobes with a sponge in a number of thin layers. I usually use around three different colours. But I usually use a spray gun to apply several layers on top of each other. I fired this piece in a gas kiln to 1320°C.



You always share your vast knowledge generously in workshops, and now increasingly in online courses too. Could you tell us something about that?

I have always given courses and workshops all over Europe. I am now of an age when I would like to pass on all my knowledge and my experience. I don't think much of secrets, Imre Schrammel is a role model for me here too. As the long car drives to the various course venues have become too tiring now, I am trying out the new media. I have discovered the possibility to do this for myself in online courses. I am aware that many aspects of the 1:1 courses cannot be covered in this way because in particular the social dimension is missing. But the courses have the advantage that the tutorials can be viewed as often as necessary, they can be repeated until everything is clear to everyone, they have really understood it. I think that is a big advantage against 1:1 tuition and should be respected. When and where? This can be freely chosen too. And I believe that online courses are cheaper too. I try to deal with any further questions and problems in my Facebook group "Keramik online" as well as improving the social aspects among the participants.

Have you got any other plans for the future?

Yes, there are several. I would gradually like to deal with new subjects in online courses. And white gold has grabbed my imagination, this delicate and difficult material accommodates my gradually dwindling strength very well, until now I have tended to make quite large, heavy pieces. And I also hope to continue indulging my passion for a long time yet.

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is **Zsuzsa Füzesi, Switzerland.**

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