

In Studio with Reinhard Keitel

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

Reinhard, you originally trained as a bricklayer and then studied to become a constructional engineer. How did you come to be involved in ceramics?

I grew up in what used to be the GDR and attended class 9 – 12 of a secondary school that besides the customary school leaving examinations (“Abitur”) also included vocational training. As a bricklayer with my Abitur, I then logically went on to study constructional engineering. After I graduated, I worked as a constructional engineer for several years. An artist friend gave me the chance to try my hand at throwing on the wheel and working sculpturally. My passion was born! Through my training, I was familiar with the plasticity of clay and with many of the basic ceramic materials. Even when I was at school and as an apprentice, I was fascinated by the technique at that time of firing bricks and roof tiles in large ring kilns and porcelain in coal fired round kilns. Literally from one day to the next, I quit my well-paid job as an engineer and swapped it for the adventure of a potter's life. I was initially self-taught but then did a proper potter's apprenticeship, qualified as a master craftsman and later on I studied the creative side of things.

You live in a famous region. For me the word Weimar conjures up not only Goethe and Schiller but also the Bauhaus – the merging of art and craft was entirely new at that time. Does this influence your work?

Initially I was guided by Bauhaus forms. Especially with regard to my vessel ceramics. I could see them virtually outside my door at the Bauhaus Museum. As a student and then a young constructional engineer I simply couldn't overlook the Bauhaus. It was absolutely essential to explore that. I found the idea and the aim of the Bauhaus of bringing art and craft together to form a new unit really exciting and it shaped and influenced my work and whole approach. Actually it still does today. ...



Have you got any role models from that time?

The ceramic workshops with the leading figures Otto Lindig, Theodor Bogler and Gerhard Marcks formed a major part of the Bauhaus but there wasn't a real role model for me in the shape of one person from that period. At least not with regard to the craft of pottery and working in the ceramic genre. The sculptural vessel forms of Otto Lindig did initially inspire me and challenged me to try out and emulate this vocabulary of forms. But above all though it was the great masters like Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer and Johannes Itten whose work and creative philosophies were an example to me and that was where I looked for creative orientation. It was the SPIRIT of the Bauhaus that guided me as a ceramist. Walter Gropius expressed this spirit in these words: "A defining originality of the Bauhaus is the idea of artists and craftsmen working together and the associated willingness to experiment".

In 2019 you made a fire sculpture for the centennial of the Bauhaus. Tell us something about that ...

For the founding of the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919, that is to say for the centennial, the opening of the newly built Bauhaus Museum was planned as a part of the official celebrations. For this occasion, the city of Weimar had commissioned me to accompany the opening of the new Museum with a fire sculpture performance. Of course I felt this commission was a great accolade for me. It wasn't a problem to put on a fiery performance, people already knew me for that. But creating a sculpture appropriate to the Bauhaus and to present its birth from fire in full public view and under the critical gaze of a large number of Bauhaus aficionados was a special challenge. There is no typical "BAUHAUS SCULPTURE" or a recognisable Bauhaus style in that sense. There was



sisted of two pieces and weighed 250 kg – it was hoisted onto a mobile kiln base by a crane and enclosed in prefabricated kiln-wall elements. Long before I had developed the kiln system with Rohde, the kiln makers. It was fuelled with gas and we stoked it with wood at the end of the firing. The firing lasted 14 hours. All day, in front of the audience and into the evening until it got dark. The whole town was on its feet celebrating the Bauhaus centennial and the opening of the Bauhaus Museum. Our performance and the fiery unveiling in front of about 1,000 spectators was a fantastic success. Very much in the spirit of the Bauhaus. The sculpture got its name: *Reminiszenz Bauhaus*.



The piece shown here is a sculpture too. Talk us through the technical process of the knot.

I made the required cylinders or clay tube with an external diameter of 12 cm from an extruder with the help of a potter friend. For this, I had a special die made. The challenge was to bend the hollow, still soft clay tubes to the required radii without them creasing or even breaking. I used various aids and techniques. One was to fill a clay tube with a mixture of quartz sand and sawdust. That was not perfect. In the end, stuffing it with newspaper proved to be best. Joining the bent pieces together to form a knot was manual work and required the three-dimensional thought process. The great unknown was then how the clay forms that had been distorted to such an extreme degree would behave when drying and in the firing. But as you can see, it all went well. No cracking or warping. My list of drafts includes more knots because I think they are exciting sculptural forms.

You are fascinated by fire, aren't you? What does working on and with a fire sculpture mean to you?

Yes, I have been fascinated by firing ceramics in open flame right from the start and it has become a burning passion. My first kiln was woodfired after a design by Bernard Leach. I am excited by doing the final stage of making a ceramic sculpture before everyone's eyes. Like a raku demonstration. But on a completely different scale and to a very high standard of aesthetic enter-

little guidance. The Bauhaus was an educational institution and not style or stylistic era. Thus it would have been presumptuous of me to believe I would be able to recognisably create a sculpture in "Bauhaus style". So not an easy task for me. I had nine months to prepare. In the end, and after a large number of drafts, I decided to use the three geometric basic forms of circle, triangle and square and, with the primary colours red, blue and yellow, in three dimensions and to place them on a structured plinth like a bust 2.5 metres in height. And for this, I not only had to keep

the appearance of the future sculpture in mind but also how it would look as a fire sculpture.

French ceramist Ariane Croisseux helped me with the execution. We knew each other from working together at international ceramics symposiums and workshops in Turkey, Thailand, China, Taiwan and France. We built the sculpture together here in my studio. We had five weeks left for the drying process. Then we were ready, 7 April 2019. After we had transported the unfired piece safely to the forecourt of the new museum – it con-



To give the work of the group of friends and the symposium a broader, supportive base, I initiated setting up the Römhild Ceramics Foundation in 2013 and I was its chair until 2018.

What are your plans for the future?

There are plenty of ideas on my to-do list about making sculptures and vessel ceramics. And fire sculptures too of course. I would like to tick off the points on this list over the next few years. Last year, I built a new woodfired kiln. I use it with the open flames to create the surfaces of my pieces at temperatures of above 1300°C. For me this is always a new challenge and an exciting experiment. Sometimes I have the feeling that I am only at the beginning or I am back at the beginning again. That motivates me and makes me curious to test my own limits. So it's a "never ending story".

tainment. To be able to join in experiencing the creative effects of the fire is an unrepeatable original at every moment.

Now I would like to come on to the Römhild Symposiums. For many years, you played a leading part in that, didn't you?

In order to revive the Römhild International Ceramics Symposium, which had been established from 1975 – 1993, a society of supporters was formed with the same name. I was a founder member and a member of the committee. Under

the motto of Phoenix from the Ashes, the IXth International Ceramics Symposium restarted in 2008 after a 15-year break. As a committee member, I contributed my experience in the technical management. From 2010 – 2016, I took over running the group as the chairman. With the organisation of the IXth Symposium in 2011 and Xth Symposium in 2015, I tried with my management team to set new standards and placed new emphasis to put Römhild back in the centre of national and international attention as a ceramics town. I think we succeeded.

Reinhard Keitel

Obergrunstedterstraße 2
99428 Weimar / Germany
www.ceramic-online.de | info@ceramic-online.de
Instagram: [reinhard_keitel_ceramics](https://www.instagram.com/reinhard_keitel_ceramics)

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview partner is
Paula Bastiaansen, The Netherlands.

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is an AIC / IAC member and lives and works in Basel, Switzerland.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch