

# IRINA RAZUMOVSKAYA

Interview with Irina Razumosvkaya by **MONIKA GASS**



*Irina, you are one of the youngest professionals in the ceramics scene, born in 1990 in Leningrad, USSR. And you come from a very creative family -*

*Why did you decide to come to the UK and to do something with „CLAY“?*

*What kind of expectations did you have at that time?*

*And could you get what you had been looking for?*

My decision to come to the UK was a combination of several reasons, but the most prominent one was because I didn't want to stay in Russia after my first degree. I was bold enough at the age of 20 to realize that my dream was to be a ceramic artist without any distractions, and, unfortunately, I couldn't see such an opportunity in Russia. Although there is a great number of amazing ceramic artists there, I didn't know if anyone could be one full time and earn a living through art. The second reason (maybe a practical one), was that I graduated in 2014, which was a year when the political climate in Russia changed drastically and I didn't feel safe or comfortable back home. I was so heart-broken because of all the things that were happening and of what people were saying, that I decided that the best thing for me would be to move in a different place, at least for a short time.

*You came to UK with a very good and finished B.A. + M.A. qualification. Why did you want to re-do this in England?*

I would like to believe that I did quite well during my B.A. and M.A. in Russia. However, they were mostly skill based. I was trained as an academic drawer and sculptor. I could copy Meissen porcelains or Deruta Maiolica, but my art work always remained behind school doors. I would do my own projects in the studio that I used to rent or in school after hours and never presented it.

The reason for that was the school system. Every project in my ceramics class had a concrete assignment: animalistic vessel or self-portrait maiolica style etc. These were great for training purposes, to master techniques, but my own ideas were always about something else, just clay and form. However, I do think that this kind of education is very important, I consider it to be good manners in the ceramics field. I feel very honest in my profession and free, that my work is a result of a choice, of my aesthetic preference, not of my technical limitations.

During the 4th year of schooling in Russia, after having enough time as a humble student and to get some basic skills, I started applying for residencies as I was in love with ceramics and hungry for new techniques. During my school years, we only had 1000°C firings and no atmospheric kilns, so you can imagine how amazed I was with high firings and wood kilns. I remember very well my first residency in Japan at IWCAT. It was a memorable experience as, after seeing works by Japanese masters in the flesh and firing anagama kilns myself, I saw that a ceramic vessel could be a poetic, high-grade piece of art, I saw a new dimension of ceramic art. Many other residencies followed later where I had interesting experiences with clay.

I decided to go to the Royal College because I wanted to focus on developing my art work, to learn to speak about it. Doing residencies in different places was wonderful, but I felt like I needed a more immersive channel of expression.

I wouldn't say that I redid my degree, as it was a completely different experience.

*What was the most important influence from the Royal College of Art for you?*

The whole experience at the Royal College of Art changed my perception of ceramic art and brought me a new perspective.

It was a great experience overall simply to have

tutors, who were mostly very intelligent artists and sensitive people, speak to me about my work and try to make it move somewhere, provoke me, stimulate me. Frankly speaking, I don't see yet whether my work changed for the better, I guess that's something that I have to discover over a period of time.

The other important thing was the realistic approach of this course. Before the M.A. I would be doing experiences, jumping from project to project to my own liking, the topic of presenting or selling was never there, as there is no ceramic art scene in that sense in Russia. The competition was never a thing as no one was sharing bread, butter, fame or anything like that. You would just go to a show, see the same good faces, enjoy artworks and go home. Therefore, I never knew about galleries, photo shoots, e-mails and interviews, about the nitty-gritty of being a ceramic artist. I was very lucky to have all the help and advice of tutors and peers when things in my career started to happen, as it was very unexpected for me.

*You have decided to stay and to live in the UK - but now, with this BREXIT on the move - is there another place where you would love to stay for a while -*

Indeed, I was granted a talent residence permit in the UK, but I didn't jump into living in the UK this year because it happened somehow that I was accepted and invited to a number of residencies and also because I wanted to see what would happen in the UK... It is my dream: to travel the world, sell works and do ceramics, and this is what is happening to me at the moment. Frankly speaking, I am enjoying being a nomadic artist this year, even though I know it has to come to an end soon and I need to choose a place to settle.

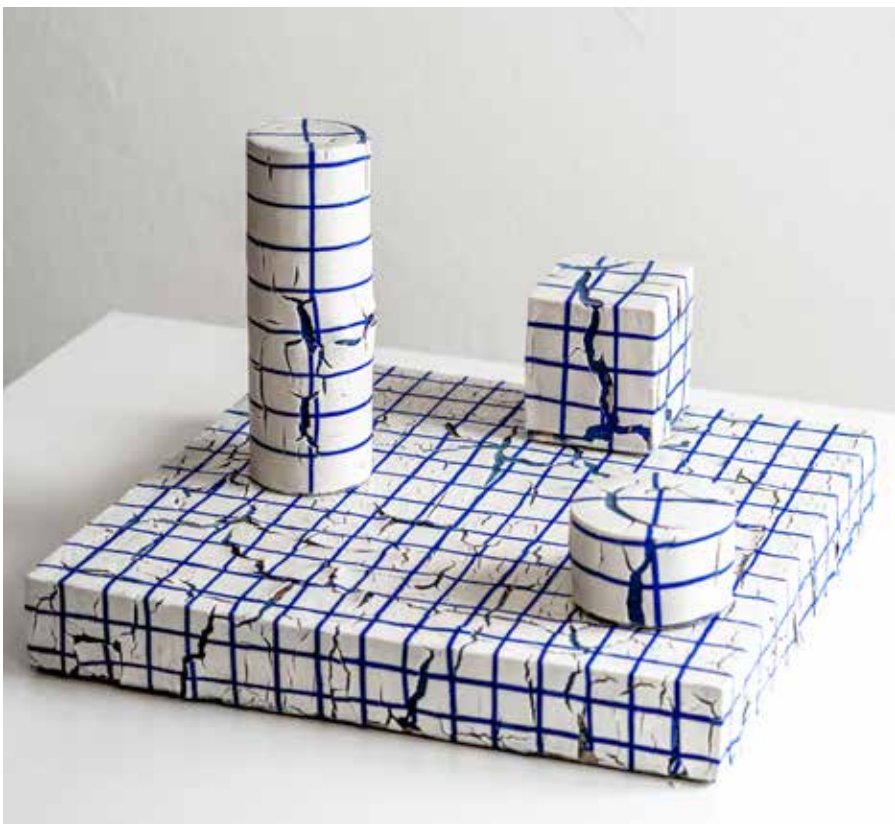
Regarding another place, I have thought of it and, in fact, I have received an Israeli passport as I am thinking I might move there as well. But we shall see, I am sure life has its own ways of surprising me.

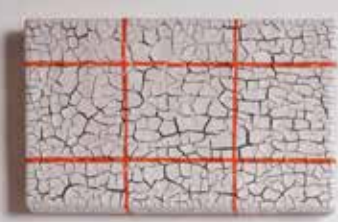
*You won the prize of the NASPA exhibition, Focus Vessel with a group of big bowls with a very beautiful inner life - in that time your work changed from casting groups and lines of pieces to this new style with a very special technically and aesthetically perfect inner life... And you gave a great lecture about your creativity and your ideas - did you ever think about teaching more than working directly with the material?*



Pre-surface cityscape, 2017, porcelain, stoneware, glazes, h 220 - 160 and 70 cm

Through the bars, 2017, porcelain, stoneware, glazes, 50 x 50 cm, h 30 cm





Pillar and the window, 2017, porcelain, stoneware, glazes  
h 70 cm, 45 x 27 x 7 cm

It is one of my dreams – to be able to teach one day. I was always a little bit remorseful that all those skills that I have learned in school and experiences that I saw during residencies and thoughts I had while seeing art over the years are somehow “buried” in me, as I am not using most of it when I work. I taught at Brighton University while at RCA as a part of my teaching practice and I loved it very much, as I have discovered that I take great pleasure in sharing things I know, so I hope I will start teaching somewhere one day.

*Your “handwriting”, your way of working with clay or porcelain changes and varies often. Can you explain your inner idea, your message?*

I would like to start with the time when I fell in love with clay and why I am still enjoying working with it. When I was about 5 or 6 years old I attended art history courses at the Hermitage Museum, and being a lively child I was easily bored and distracted in those neo-Baroque interiors, observing endless portraits of the members of the Romanov family. However, I remember to this day this strange feeling I got once when we had a class in the Neolithic section, while observing shards of ancient pots from Caucasus region. I immediately felt the direct connection to the makers of that era. And what struck me was the union between artists making, the form of the pot and the clay’s behaviour in the firing: how I could see the pinched technique with finger prints and marks and at the same time the shadows from the firing, the colour of clay. I reckon this very simple and obvious aspect of beauty fascinates me the most and I see it over and over in the surrounding world.

Regarding the literary part of my message and my idea, I would say that I am trying to avoid it. Since a very young

Barkskin vessels, 2017, porcelain, stoneware, glazes, h 30, 25 and 25 cm



age I have thought that books that have a direct meaning and a clear moral are boring, I never liked any art piece that has an end to its understanding. However, I always enjoyed to endlessly read between the lines. I always thought that ceramic art has a huge potential for this indirect meaning for me, as a lot can be said just through the material language. I always thought that for me ceramics is more similar to poetry rather than prose.

Right now I work a lot with the images of ageing, dilapidation, static architectural shapes, visions of landscapes, with ideas of restraint and freedom. I certainly take inspiration from some personal experiences that I find moving, but I cannot force my viewer to experience it the same way by giving a direct explanation, that's why I like to leave the interpretation of my works open as it is the same way I like to experience art.

*How can you change the forms, the surface, structure, technique of making and the colours of your pieces and still keep your style, so that we always know this is a real new "Irina" piece*

If that happens I don't plan it deliberately. I assume I have some innate feeling of proportion and composition, my own aesthetic preferences and colour choices, so maybe those aspects form the similarity between different projects.

*For me your work shows your bright intellect as well as your love for "earthiness", the haptic and visual power clay offers.*

*- Where do you find the balance for this?*

*- And do you look for this balance or are you on your way to "unbalanced" work?*

It's really kind of you to say that. I really don't intend to strike a balance between intellect and earthiness. In fact on the contrary, I believe that being earthy is part of being intellectual because being aware of it makes one grounded and helps you focus on the artwork I want to create. I am more driven by my experiences, travel and the vocational aspects of my life which have inspired me to create this work and I believe doing it impromptu is the best way to express myself rather than to intend to balance or unbalance things. In my opinion, it must be as free flowing as possible and the interpretation is left to the viewer.

*You travel a lot, doing different exhibitions, refining your work continuously.*

*What are your plans for the future - what new projects can we look forward to from Irina?*

I am very lucky and grateful these days as I have a lot planned. Right now I am staying in the Bruckner Foundation in Geneva, where I am



antistructure, 2018, porcelain, stoneware, glazes, 32 x 26 x 12 cm

working on a piece for the Faenza competition exhibition that will happen this summer. Also I am working on my solo show that will take place in Milan in the Officine Saffi Gallery, planning for the new work I will do during my residency in China this May and a few more things.

While working I am always finding my language, I don't feel settled in my making or style yet, and I quite enjoy it. The projects I am working on now are getting closer to the topic of archeology and visual memories for me. Just as in my vessels I am trying to evoke this warm feeling I have when I see a beautiful pot from the ancient times that doesn't have a clear purpose but takes the viewer to some other unknown place and time. With my new work I aim to trigger the feeling of another worldliness one has when coming across an ancient ruin in an unexpected place.

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