

Swanica Ligtenberg explores alternative glazing, kiln and firing, including burning horsehair

An artist's love affair with ceramics

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Ceramic artist Swanica Ligtenberg returned from her native Holland in early January with a new sense of purpose. She no longer felt an outsider in a family of goldsmiths and silversmiths, because in speaking with her uncle — still creatively active at age 91 — she realized that the roots of his and her grandfather's craft were also in her own.

"He works with metal, I work with clay. We both carve and etch into surfaces, and one of my teapots is inspired by one made by my grandfather in the Art Deco period of the 1920s. Just as the art of Kamakura-bori wood carving and lacquerware is handed down through the generations, I now have a real sense of heritage, as if I have come full circle."

There are circles on one of the three large plates that stand in the window of her living room in Kamakura. "Circles of Life" received a Judges' Commendation Award in the Mashiko Ceramics Competition of 2008, and was then exhibited in the Mashiko Museum of Ceramics Arts for two months.

"Life is continuous like a dance," she quotes from her blog recording the event. "By dancing together and turning in circles, you watch and balance your steps to find happiness and laughter together."

Ligtenberg was happy during a recent interview, despite atrocious weather. Although the gallery is closed, she was at home — one step into the showroom (once the guest room), up a few steps into her studio (formerly the dining room), and then up a few more to the bedroom, which now acts as a dual-purpose living space.

Yes, she admitted, she's lucky to have such an accommodating husband. But then he is out much of the time, and the room is airy and bright, with a wall of sliding glass doors that open onto a balcony to offer a fine view of Mount Fuji, and the Pacific Ocean across a rooftop or so.

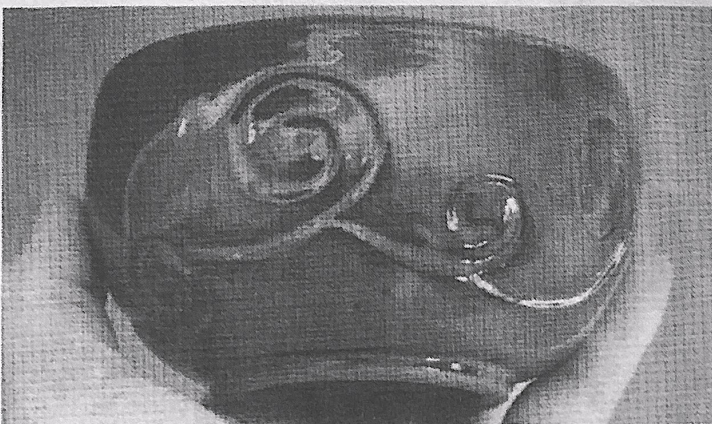
"We never feel cramped or hemmed in," said Ligtenberg, tall, warm and welcoming. "And we do have a home base in California. There in Los Altos we are between the mountains and the sea. My husband loves the sea. I'm more a forest person."

Preparing to head for Fukushima Prefecture for a wood firing at a friend's kiln, she had just taken possession of the first printing of her second book: "Kamakura Red: Ceramic Adventures in Japan II." The first, also described as a "brief autobiography," covers the years 2006 to 2008, after she first came to Japan.

Compiled from her blogs and beautifully illustrated with her own photographs, the books describe a love affair with ceramics, Japan and Kamakura, in that order. Most interestingly perhaps, they describe her creative process and progress in a culture where ceramics are regarded as near sacred.

An educator with a degree in psychology who then studied ceramics in Switzerland, Ligtenberg spent the next major phase of her life in the U.S. bringing up three sons.

"My husband first came to Japan on business. I tagged along and fell in love with the country. I told him there and then that when the boys were old enough, I'd be happy to move. Now he tells people he is here because of me."



Swanica Ligtenberg holds a plate titled "Circles of Life" at her studio in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture. Below is one of her ceramic works — a tea bowl featuring wave patterns. ANGELA JEFFS, COURTESY OF SWANICA LIGTENBERG

Having moved into their current house in Kamakura in January 2006, Ligtenberg began seeking out like-minded souls. She joined the Nippon Tougei Club in Tokyo's Hara Juku neighborhood, started making hand-pinched *chawan* (tea bowls), and became eligible to enter one of her "horsehair" pieces in their annual exhibition at the Mitsukoshi store. Now she exhibits in the Yufuku and First Light galleries in Tokyo.

Over the years, she had explored any number of alternative glazing, kiln and firing techniques. Especially intriguing was burning horsehair (mostly tail hair) on the hot surface of a ceramic piece, a technique traditional to the Pueblo Indians of the U.S. Southwest.

"You give direction to the hair. You can't touch the plate, because it is about 600 degrees. Then you have to let it go so it

will burn into the plate. If the wind blows, it will change the direction and it will curl and create irregular lines. I also burn feathers, and sugar and tissues for smoked effects. Then I spray with ferric chloride.

"Every pot has a different temperature and reacts in its own way, so the variations in color and design are subtle and really interesting," she continued. "By nature I'm a very precise person, so the freedom of the technique really helped open up my work and the way I see the world."

It is clear wherever you are in the house that Ligtenberg lives and breathes pottery and ceramic art. There is a distinction, she clarified: "Pottery is functional. If it's not functional, then it's art. To me it's all ceramic."

Her horsehair plates, vases, vessels and wall art range from the sturdy to egg-shell-fragile, and have experts and collectors raving. When it comes to her essentially practical range of "Kamakura Red," function is foremost in her mind: Will a teapot pour cleanly? Is a cup comfortable to hold? Does a piece do the job intended?

But it is the color that holds one's attention. A dark, vibrant red glaze that emulates the depth and beauty of Kamakura's famed wood-carved craft: lacquered Kamakura-bori.

"I would say the color symbolizes love, passion and strength. I'd been experimenting with it for a while, but living in Kamakura pushed me deep into research and refinement. Now the texture of the Kamakura-bori technique is also well integrated into my work; engraving is second nature to me."

Her Kamakura Red "Bamboo" Teapot proves she is on the right path. Spotted on her Facebook site, it has been accepted competitively for the 2010 2nd International Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary Teapot Art, Shanghai, China ("quite a mouthful," she laughs), which opened Wednesday. "At last I go to China!"

Other pieces mirror classic patterns, such as the wave with carved out areas made all the more thrilling by being glazed red on black, a characteristic of Kamakura-bori.

"Last year was wonderful," she recalled. "I had an exhibition of horsehair ware and Kamakura Red ware at the summer festival in Koyasan (Wakayama Prefecture). Then in November, there was another very happy exhibition in the Ginsu Gallery in Kamakura. There's a YouTube movie about it on my Web site."

Now she is busy preparing 150 pieces for a big show in November at the Toko Gallery in Mashiko, while at the same time launching classes to teach the full range of ceramic techniques, from throwing on a wheel to glazing.

"Swan Ceramics can take three students at a time in three-hour sessions," she explains, adding that her name Swanica signifies swan, or "hakucho" in Japanese. So saying, she glides off majestically to wash up our cups of licorice tea.

Swan Art Gallery, 5-8-23-5 Zaimokuza, Kamakura 248-0001 (Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., but best to phone first and make an appointment at 0467-62-1733 or 090-9828-7299). Web site: www.swan ceramics.com. E-mail: info@swan ceramics.com