

In Studio with Jane Jermyn

Evelyne Schoenmann

*J*ane, "The long tale of clay" is one of your videos about clay, which has been used as means of creative expression for over 30,000 years. What is YOUR story with clay?

My story began when I was about 17 and saw a guy throwing on a wheel and was immediately intrigued as to how it was done. It took nearly another 30 years before I finally found out. Another life intervened, one with an artist husband and 4 children in a cottage in rural Ireland. When that phase came to an end I took myself off and began studying, first general craft, then a pottery throwing course, a ceramics BA course and finally gaining an MA in ceramics in my late 50s. Since then I have travelled extensively, nearly always to do with my ceramics journey.

Which stage in your career has had the greatest impact on you professionally?

There have been a couple of events that had a fairly big impact on my career. The first was when I applied to Ceramica Multiplex in Croatia in 2005, the first time my work was accepted in an international exhibition. I received a travel grant from the Irish Arts Council to attend the exhibition and conference in Varazdin, as well as a workshop on the Island of Tres. That trip led to symposia in Estonia, Poland and Belarus amongst others. Nearly all my travels have been linked to a previous event – a web of connections. The other major event was being invited to take part in the 1st International Ceramics Festival in Sasama, Japan, where I met up with Indian ceramic artist Adil Writer in person, we'd been communicating by email for some time on matters related to ceramics and travel. Adil was instrumental in bringing a num-

ber of international ceramic artists to an exhibition, Ceramics Conclave, in the Habitat Centre, New Delhi in 2014. Thus began another chapter in my ceramics

adventure – I have been to India 4 times since, exhibiting and leading workshops around the country and participating in a symposium at Art Ichol in 2017.





You work in your studio in Ireland, but give also workshops in half the world, and visit residencies, symposia, and exhibitions in the other half. Quite a passion for ceramics...

My passion for ceramics is matched by a passion for travel, meeting people and experiencing other cultures. It has been a delight to me that I have been able to combine the two in a way that I never expected when I began this stage of my life. I have been able to visit all sorts of places and in a way that is far more interesting than just being a tourist. From Cuba to Siberia, Japan and South Korea, South Africa, India and much of Europe, I have experienced many different cultures and ways of living, always with the strong bond of our mutual love of clay – we are a universal tribe speaking different dialects of the same language. Working with clay is such an elemental pursuit – we work with the most basic material – clay, from the earth, which, along with water, air and fire, is transformed by us into objects of use and beauty and has been done so for over 30,000 years.

If I am not mistaken you came upon the surface finish called Obvara during one of those residencies?

I took part in symposia in Boleslawiec in Poland in 2007 & 2008 and met a Belarusian ceramic artist there, she suggested I take part in one in Belarus. Getting there involved visas and complicated flights. I was awarded a travel bursary from Ceramics Ireland, which covered the cost of getting there. Minsk is a strange city – wide streets and vast buildings. Much of it had been rebuilt after the “Great Patriotic War” (WW2) and it looks very much like what I imagine an Eastern Block city looked like during the Cold War. It was also extremely clean. We met up with other participants from Russia and travelled by train to Bobruisk. The symposium was in the middle of the woods, beside a lake, resulting in hundreds of mosquitos. I was incredibly impressed to see the work that was produced by many of the artists there in such simple conditions. The kilns were very basic with no kiln shelves – the work was more or less tumble stacked over a grille which supported the work over the fire at the base. After bisque-firing we either raku-fired the pieces or used Obvara which apparently means scalded in Russian. As soon as I saw this technique I



was fascinated – I loved the instantaneous result, similar to a negative developing. At the time there was very little about Obvara on the internet and it was hard to get any information about its history. It does seem to have originated in Eastern Europe and has been around for about 600 years, but who dropped a hot pot into fermented liquid first, is lost in the mists of time.

When I shared some images of my Obvara pieces on Facebook, people started asking about the technique, so I decided to start the “Obvara firing technique” group on Facebook. This has grown into a community of over 3500 and helped save this nearly lost tradition and spread it to all corners of the world. I have led workshops in Obvara all over India and in Malta, South Africa, South Korea, Croatia, Slovenia, Australia, Turkey, Spain and Ireland.

The geological and organic forms of your works are, so to speak, predestined for Obvara. Do you make them with this special surface treatment in mind?

Not all my work is suitable for Obvara and I don't use this technique exclusively. When I do plan to use Obvara, I make work suitable for the technique. I find a smooth surface works best and raised lines or dots help add contrast. Those areas seem to resist the effects of the mixture. I sometimes burnish the pieces. The clay needs to be resistant to thermal shock – similar to raku clay, though it has worked well with a porcelain clay in South Korea. I sometimes soak the bisque-fired pieces in an iron sulphate solution overnight, let them dry and then Obvara-fire them, this gives the work a lovely warm orange colour. Obvara suits organic forms, particularly rounded forms, rather than slab forms. If you are unhappy with the results, you can always re-fire your pieces, it burns off at around 700°C.

We would love you to guide us through the technical process of your piece, the firing, and of course the exciting Obvara procedure.

All my work is hand-built. The piece in the images is inspired by an illustration by Ernst Haeckel. I enjoy the challenge of working out how to make the forms. This one is coiled with added raised areas. I bisque fire the work to 1000°C. After cooling I heat the work in a raku-type kiln to around 750-





800°C. The pieces can be stacked on top of each other in the kiln as no glaze is used. You just need to make sure you can grip the pieces easily and securely with the tongs. The pieces are taken from the kiln and dipped into the fermented liquid and then quickly into cold water – this stops the mixture from “cooking” onto the work. It can get very dark if not dunked into the cold water quickly enough.

Would you reveal the Obvara mixture for our readers?

1kg plain flour
1 packet instant yeast (7g)
1 tablespoon of sugar
10 litres of warm water

Mix the yeast, flour and sugar together and blend in the warm water, mix well to remove any lumps, cover and keep in a warm place for 2-3 days, stirring every now and then.



My last question is always about the future of my guests. If you had three wishes, what would they be?

A decent sized studio, a wood-fired kiln and at the other end of the firing spectrum, time to really experiment and explore the possibilities of Obvara, which is probably the most achievable and realistic wish!

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Evelyne Schoenmann's
next interview partner is
Jürg Bächtold, Switzerland

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist, writer and curator. She is an AIC/IAC member, and lives and works in Basel.
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