

Clay between two Nations

Exhibition with the Nanyang Clay Group Singapore and guests from Switzerland

EVELYNE SCHOENMANN

Singapore – one's thoughts automatically turn to the all-year tropical climate, the breathtaking architecture and the skilfully orchestrated harbour, Marina Bay, not to mention the huge range of food! Visitors find open-sided, roofed cookshops on every corner, inviting food courts known as Hawker Centres, where they can indulge in a leisurely feast. This hospitable island and city state in southeast Asia with its friendly, multicultural population, rapidly developed into a global centre for commerce and finance after separating from Malaysia in 1965, thereby becoming one of the most affluent nations on earth.



Opening address by the Swiss ambassador H. E. Fabrice Filliez

Exhibition poster



Culturally speaking, Singapore is a multifaceted mix of cultures, traditions, religions and passions. One of these passions is the craft of ceramics. Accordingly, the Museum of Asian Civilisations and the Peranakan Museum house exquisite artefacts from Singapore's volatile history. The ceramists' association, the Nanyang Clay Group is completely at home in the present. "Nanyang", a Chinese term that was frequently used in Singapore for South China or "South Sea", is the homeland of a large section of the originally Chinese inhabitants of Singapore.

This group was founded in 2005 by the three ceramists, Alvin Tan Teck Heng, Soh Keng Thiam and Oh Chai Hoo. The groups principle aim is to raise awareness of ceramics as an art form in their own country, to support its members by helping them to broaden their horizons with regard to knowledge and skills, and to arrange biennials to acquaint the general public with progress, new ideas and technical innovations.

In the light, spacious Drama Centre of the National Library, a light-flooded building by architect Ken Yeang, the Nanyang Group found a suitable venue to exhibit

the works of its 27 members. For their 7th exhibition, in November 2018, my friend Alvin Tan Teck Heng, current president of the Nanyang Clay Group, invited me to participate together with three other Swiss ceramists from Switzerland, the guest nation at the biennial.

His reasoning for inviting international guests to participate in the Nanyang Group's exhibition immediately convinced me: "We would like to start initiating exchange programmes. For instance, we invite an other country as a guest and hope that they then reciprocate. In this way we can not only draw the world's attention to clay as a medium but we can also introduce and support various cultures, skills and techniques to awaken the passion for ceramics at home and abroad. We very much hope to continue this still-young tradition and to invite one or two countries to take part in a joint exhibition in Singapore every two years."

Without pausing for thought, I immediately accepted. As I was responsible for selecting the ceramists from Switzerland who were to participate, a cross section from various techniques on the joint theme of "East-West" was important



Longevity by Ong Kok Peng

to me as a homage to the host nation: Angela Burkhardt-Guallini is one of the few ceramists in the West who have devoted themselves to the age-old, originally Japanese *neriage* technique, finding her own stylistic idiom at the highest level. André Fasolin, internationally known through his slogan, "Melting Switzerland", makes his own clay and glazes himself, exclusively using Swiss materials, creating teabowls known as *chawan* used in the Asian tea ceremony.

Mireille Vetterli fires her works in saggars, which are familiar in East and West. As for me, I showed my latest series of incense burners, for which I drew inspiration from an extended trip to Asia.

The Swiss ambassador to Singapore, His Excellency Mister Fabrice Filliez, was kind enough to come to the opening ceremony of the biennial as guest of honour. The participants would like to express their heartfelt thanks for this and for his keen interest in the exhibits.

As a gift to our hosts, the Swiss delegation had engaged alpenhorn player Marcel Baerenfaller. The opening ceremony was very festive; after brief opening addresses from the president of the Nanyang Clay Group

Alvin Tan Teck Heng and the head of the Swiss delegation, Evelyne Schoenmann, the Swiss ambassador to Singapore Fabrice Filliez officially declared the exhibition open with a humorous speech. The numerous visitors that evening had a lot of fun with the alpenhorn. Marcel Baerenfaller kindly allowed braver visitors to try blowing it. The most successful one was a little kid, who managed to conjure delightfully pure sounds from the long instrument.

On a tour of the exhibition, I was particularly enthusiastic about the unconventional forms and the high quality of the work by the Nanyang Clay Group, for instance the ceramic poetry, created with endless patience, such as the lotus flowers or seashells, which remind us of our own fragility. Then there were handbuilding techniques unknown in the West, or experiments with glazes and transparency, or again and again the visible inspiration from lush tropical natural surroundings.

Immediately and spontaneously, questioning and answering between East and West, West and East sprang up, as well as buying and selling and a lively exchange of ideas. The exhibition was attractive and it was a success for all the participants – a highlight in everyone's exhibition diary for 2018! Of course there are already promising ideas for an exhibition in Switzerland together with our ceramic colleagues from Singapore.

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Vases by Alvin Tan Teck Heng

Torrent by Tan Chia Chuen



Group photo of the exhibitors with the Swiss ambassador holding an alpenhorn

