

# In studio with Alvin Tan Teck Heng

Evelyne Schoenmann

*Alvin, congratulations on the new studio. This is a huge, modern and very well-equipped room. A dream for every ceramist to work here. And I know you DO let people work with you...*

Thank you, Evelyne. I am very fortunate as I had the opportunity to observe many ceramists' studio before I got this

*ly rural place.... You told me you can't fire the dragon kiln anymore. Why, and where are you woodfiring your pieces now?*

I spent many years in my old studio, which also houses the longest dragon kiln in Singapore. In the past, Singapore had more than 38 dragon kilns. Due to the invention of plastics and depletion of

We were very poor after the second world war. Lack of resources forces us to prioritize our goals in life. My siblings won awards and their works are collected by museums and yet they were unwilling to venture into something that is uncertain. Instead, they went into business with my Dad's lead. I am very fortunate because being the second youngest in the fam-



one done. My friends and I have a dream, we want to help to keep the spirit of clay alive and to introduce South East Asian clay artists to the world and vice versa. One way is to invite clay artists to work in residency programmes and showcase their work in my gallery. I work hand in hand with Boxplot Initiative, run by Mark Valenzuela and Anna O'Laughlin, who will be the main curators for all projects. We had our first programme during your visit to Singapore, with Filipinos and Singaporean artists.

*I also like your "old" studio, which is in the open, beside a dragon kiln, in a love-*

*resources, these dragon kilns could not survive the onslaughts of time. Only two dragon kilns are left and will face the ultimate fate of all other dragon kilns, they will be demolished in time to come. For wood firing, I usually fire my work in The Philippines with Jon Pettyjohn or Pablo K. Capati III, with Mark Valenzuela in Australia and with Shozo Michikawa in Japan.*

*Coming from a family with lots of siblings who also have artistry in their blood, you are the only one of them who works 100% as an artist. Are you the most daring one?*

ily, I have never faced difficulties as they did and hence, I didn't think twice when I decided to become a full-time artist giving up my business venture fifteen years ago.

*Can you talk about your installation, Building an Empire? I know it tells a life story...*

Building an Empire is about the migration of my family and is an installation of one thousand rice bowls, which were shown in Singapore and in Australia. The different colours signify different generations: red for my grandfather, who had to migrate from a mountainous village

in Fujian, China to Singapore to be able to feed his family. Orange for my father's generation, who already lived in British colonized Singapore from a young age. Yellow for my own generation, which was born in Singapore but still was proud of the Chinese heritage in their blood. White for the youngest generation, which lives in the USA and doesn't speak Chinese anymore. Although the colours of the bowls change due to the external cultural influences, we can never ever change the fact that we are Chinese and hence a rice bowl will always be a rice bowl, be it Red, Orange, Yellow or White.

In order to give a 3-dimensional effect, I carve only on one side so that the lines seem to overlap. After the initial line, I continue to tilt my tools towards a lesser angle, so that the initial line is the deepest one. I repeat this sequence until the whole pot is finished. Sometimes I use the corrugated side of my tool to create texture on the surface. For electric firings, I ensure the surface is as flat as possible. In woodfiring, I usually texture the surface, so that the rougher surface would be able to catch more wood ash and hence the result is more interesting. I do not use any glaze for my wood firing. For this demonstration, I used stoneware clay and, after bisque, I will fire this pot in an anagama kiln.

Singing Bowl and I now enjoy helping others as the sound helped me when I needed it the most. What I carve today has much to do with that sound: I translate sound into something visible.

*What are your thoughts about the future?*

You know, there is a biased view of clay as an art form. Is it material? Is it a concept? Is it an expression? To me clay is everything. With this new studio, we want to create a mutual understanding, bonding, awareness and dialogue between artists across different disciplines, across different borders.



*We just spent a lovely morning in your studio, throwing and carving a 42 cm high vase. Would you explain your carving technique to our readers, please?*

After throwing the pot I leave it to dry till soft leather hard. When I start to draw, I let my emotions take over. The first line is always the most difficult because that first line determines the whole complexion of the pot. If it doesn't feel right, I erase and redraw until it gets the right feel.

Subsequent lines become easier as I have the first line as an anchor. Using the tool as shown in the photos, I carve using the edge of the tool to create the outline.

*Can we talk about the Himalayan Singing Bowls and what they mean for your ceramics work?*

I got a tennis elbow two years into becoming a full-time clay artist. Refusing to opt for surgery, I tried seeking alternate healing, to no avail, so I decided to give up. I sold everything and put a full stop to my short-lived career. I went to Nepal to seek peace and while walking around the grand stupa I heard the sound of the Himalayan Singing Bowls. I was so taken by this beautiful healing sound that I wanted to learn how to use them. My teacher Hans De Back from the Netherlands taught me the finer details of the

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Heide Nonnenmacher** (Germany)

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