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There is no second chance,
it has to be right first time.

MARIA TEN KORTENAAR

*From a diary made of porcelain
filled with watermelons to
emotions*

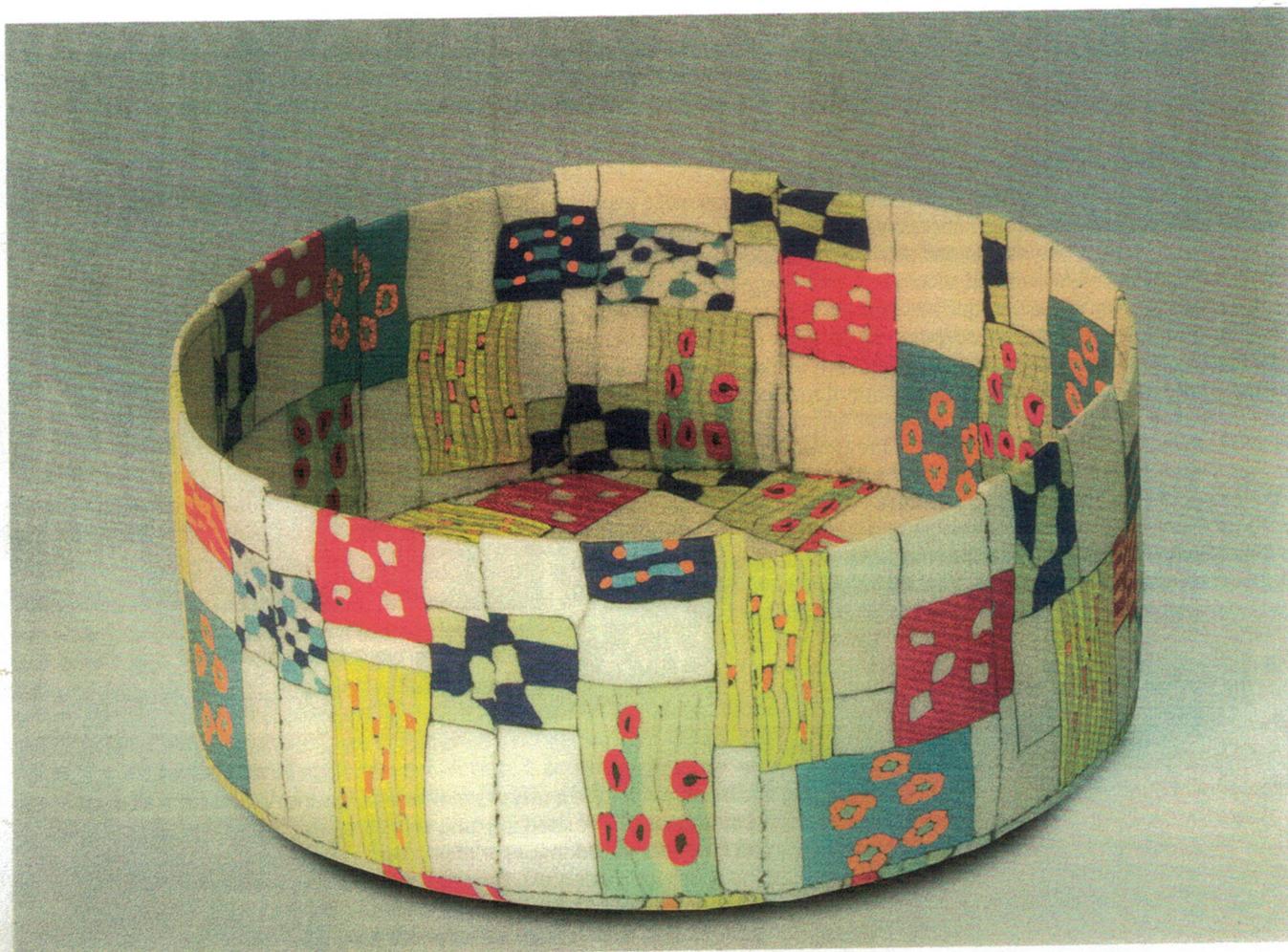
by Marjolein Blaauwbroe

Near the busy centre of Amsterdam, a sign hangs in typical Amsterdam street that does not go unnoticed to the attentive passerby. In delicate letters, it says: Maria ten Kortenaar Porselein. Steep steps lead down to her studio. It is a room that radiates the sense of a warm oasis of calm. The dusty smell betrays the fact that a ceramist works here. Showcases stand on both sides, filled with colourful, almost poetic pots. In the neighbouring cupboards, bowls

of pigments and packets of clay are neatly stacked. This is home port of the artist, Maria ten Kortenaar, who travels world with her porcelain.

Obsessive

Maria ten Kortenaar began her career as a physiotherapist. But she wanted to use her creativity, so she trained as a goldsmith at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. She found the hours





Flowering Zucchini - 17 x 15 cm, 2015

"tinkering" in a structured sequence oppressive. "I wanted to work with my hands again, and I missed playing with colour." Clay provided the answer. Ten years later, she started working as a ceramist. "It was particularly the intuitive activity and the immediate contact with the material that granted me the freedom I was seeking". But Maria wouldn't be Maria if she didn't look for a bigger challenge. "I am obsessive about my work. I always want to surpass myself and to keep on experimenting."

On a journey to China, she encountered porcelain in 2005. In the West it does not necessarily come naturally to work with porcelain. "That is why it is such a marvellous challenge." She found her first subject in China too: "In Hong Kong, the countless neon lights took my breath away. I was impressed by their colours, the way they were constructed and how many of them there were."

After she had returned to the Netherlands, she did everything in her power to master the technique of working with porcelain. The play of colours that she had devoted herself to ten years before continued to play an important part, but the structured, perfectionist way of working came back into her life. With Hong Kong at the back of her mind, she started a new chapter in her life as an artist.

Thinking and Perfection

The main technique that Maria currently uses is known as *nerikomi* in Japan. This centuries-old Japanese tradition is still passed on from one generation to another. The basis is white porcelain clay, which feels like soft putty. The artist colours the clay with pigments. The fragile objects made by Maria are col-

oured all the way through, i.e. they do not have just a coloured coating. This way of working demands a total command of the material.

She made her first porcelain pieces in from wafer thin rectangles and squares that together formed a playful mosaic. Over the years, her work has become more colourful and more complex. She continued to set her self challenges. The interplay of lines made way for planes and her latest work consists of colourful flower patterns. To make these patterns, she has to be able to judge in advance how to stack up the layers of clay, press them together and cut them to get the result she wants. "There is no second chance. It has to be right first time."

Besides the execution, which has to be very precise, porcelain is a very rebellious material to handle. "It has a memory. If I press too hard, I can push it back into shape but the dent will reappear in the firing." Porcelain needs a delicate touch and love.

Colours Tell a Story

The unifying factor, or her trademark as Maria calls it herself, is the cylinder form. The majority of her works is reminiscent of vases. "It may happen that people sometimes put a flower in them, but I make them as art objects and not as functional pieces."

In the artist's opinion, the cylinder is a calm form. "If I made all kinds of complex architectural pieces, that would be too much of a good thing. The colours tell a story." Every pot or every series of pots symbolises something she has experienced or that has happened in her life. "I am really like a great big sponge. I soak up everything around me and put it into my work." It could be almost anything. Sometimes she is overwhelmed by the beauty of a watermelon, sometimes she is the protagonist herself. So for example, there was a time when she felt demands were being made of her from all sides. She expressed this emotion by placing an outstretched human figure around the whole circumference of a pot. Minimalistic but at the same time enthralling and recognisable. At the moment she is working on an almost abstract series about the Northern Lights, in which the bright green colour is key. All of her creations in sequence tell her life story, they are a kind of diary in porcelain.

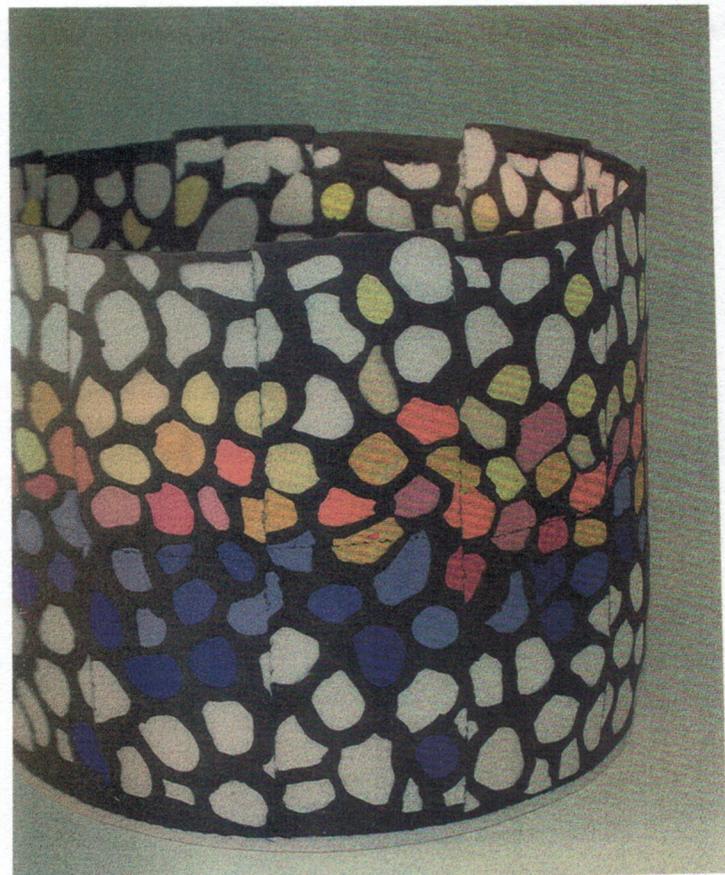
Porcelain Plays an Important Role

Maria ten Kortenaar soon realised that she would have to take a detour to the Far East to become established with her porcelain diary pages. "In Europe, there are occasional exhibitions that focus on porcelain but in Asia the possibilities are limitless. Porcelain plays an important role there." The use of porcelain has a centuries-old tradition. Also, the porcelain is whiter there, the colours are brighter and there is more technical knowledge in Asia.

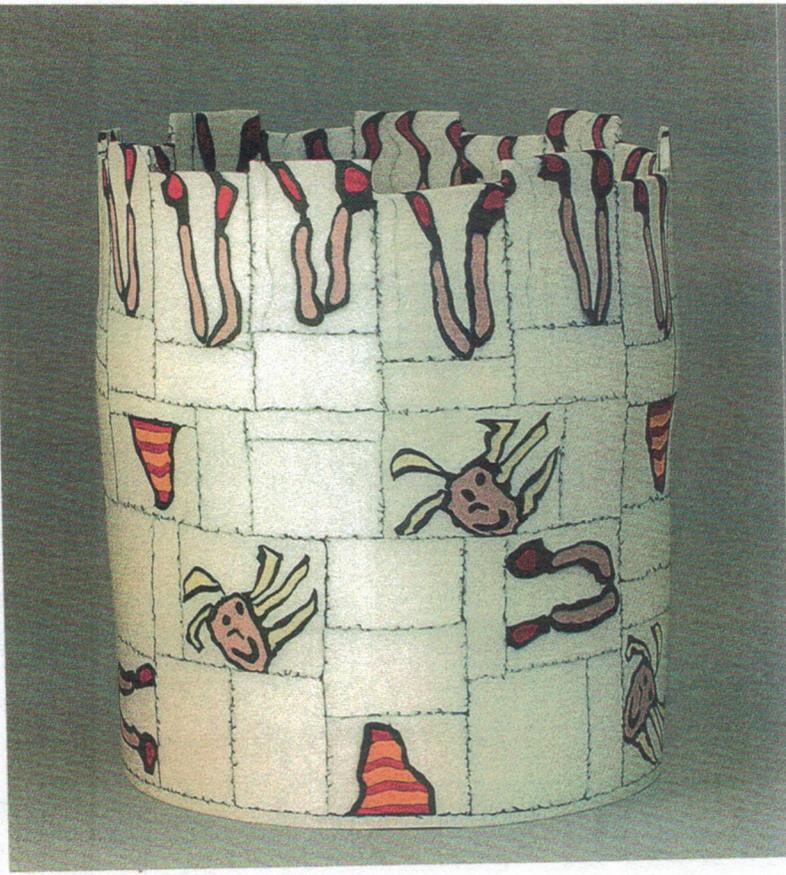
In 2009, she won the special prize at the 5th World Ceramics Biennale in Korea. After that she was a finalist in various ceramics biennials all over the world. Her work can be seen in solo exhibitions in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, but also in the USA, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France.

Learning by Doing

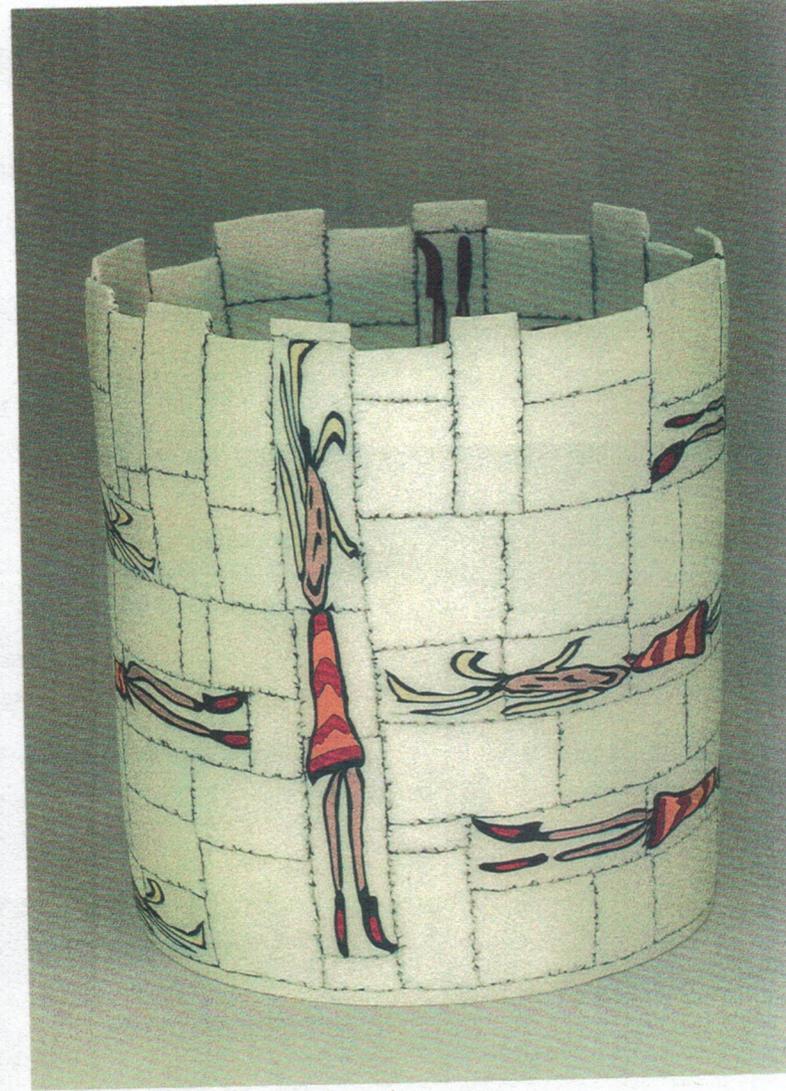
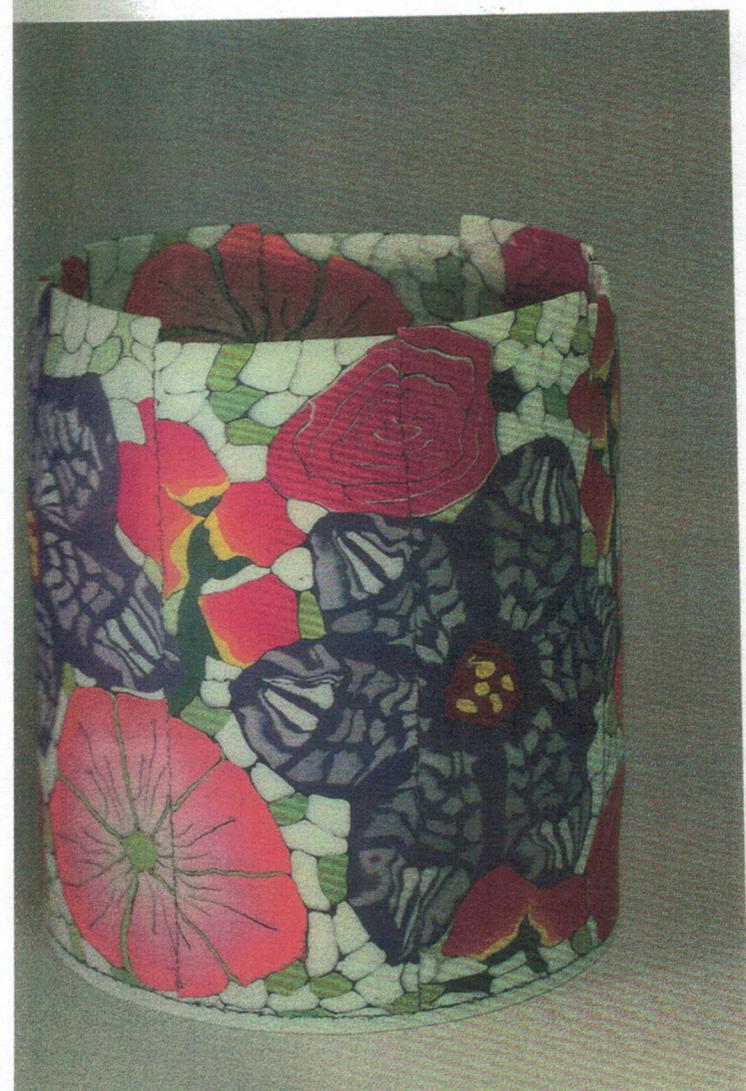
To maintain contact with the East, Maria ten Kortenaar often works as an artist in residence in a studio in Jingdezhen in China. "I work together with other artists and we all seek the



Bliss - 18 x 18 cm, 2013. Shanghai Pot Art Museum, China
Flowerbomb - 13 x 15 cm, 2016



Confusion - 15 x 12 cm, 2014
Under Pressuer - 15x12cm, 2014 Shanghai Pot Art Museum, China





Private Investigations - 11 x 12 cm, 2012

NERIKOMI:

The technique that Maria ten Kortenaar is called nerikome or also inlaid porcelain. She uses pieces of white and coloured porcelain in various ways and combines them to form a unit. Sometimes she follows the Japanese tradition but she usually uses a technique she has developed herself.

Maria's description:

*You're on the outside,
Looking inside,
what do you see?
Reflections and emotions,
that's probably me.*

Maria ten Kortenaar

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stimulus of the creativity there is there. When I return home, I have always collected a great deal of inspiration." In spite of the great recognition that has been accorded to her work abroad and the many opportunities that present themselves there, Amsterdam remains her home base as an artist.

"The cultural gap is too great to settle down there," explains Maria. One example is something that happened that still makes her laugh out loud. A few years ago, she was giving a master class in Hong Kong which focused on her working method and which was attended by forty Chinese people. "I had collected some material and I thought I would explain a few things and then we would get down to work. After all, in the Netherlands we had been taught that you learn how to do something by doing it." It seems that people think differently about that in China. The students took out their notebooks and studiously took notes. For hours on end, and occasionally someone asked a question.

Meditative Flow

In spite of the many long journeys during which Maria ten Kortenaar gives lectures and workshops and actively expands her network, she sees herself as a soloist. Cut off from the outside world, she immerses herself in her work in her studio with music playing quietly in the background. From time to time she has a cup of coffee or goes for a walk in town. "When I have prepared all the ingredients such as the different coloured pieces of clay, I work without any interruptions because porcelain requires great precision." The time consuming work process permits an almost meditative flow and creates a sense of calm. "If I couldn't do art any more, I would become restless. It permits me to express everything that I have experienced."

MARJOLEIN BLAAUWBROEK

lives in Amsterdam and is an art historian, copywriter and photographer. She sees herself as a bridge between the creative artist and the inquisitive art lover and connoisseur.

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MARIA TEN KORTENAAR

trained as a goldsmith at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam (1985). In 1995 she began to work with clay as she wanted to work more with colour and to be freer. She has worked exclusively with coloured porcelain since 2005.

In 2008, she was a finalist at the Taiwan Biennale and in 2009 she won the special prize at the 5th World Ceramics Biennale in Korea. At the 6th World Ceramics Biennale in 2011, her work was displayed at a special exhibition dedicated to inlay in ceramics. In 2014, she received an honourable mention for her piece Metropolis at the Mino Ceramics Festival in Japan. In 2015, she was the only European finalist at the Americas Clayfest in California. In 2016, The Vallauris Biennale is on the programme (Musée Magnelli, 2 July – 31 October 2016), where she will be giving a masterclass. In addition, the exhibition Céramique Botanique at the Museum de Tienschuur in Tegelen, NL, is on the agenda (27 May – 25 September 2016). The ceramic artist's work is represented in the collections of various museums worldwide. She works regularly at the Sanbao Ceramic Art Center in Jingdizhen as an artist in residence.

