

In Studio with Pálma Babos

Pálma has been in love with porcelain since her college days. She implements her inventiveness in making a whole range of objects, from tea and mocha sets to wall and floor coverings and lamps or fruit bowls reminiscent of serpents. She also invented the OviArt system. Her collapsing buildings, which we feature here, are both fascinating and disturbing.

Evelyne Schoenmann

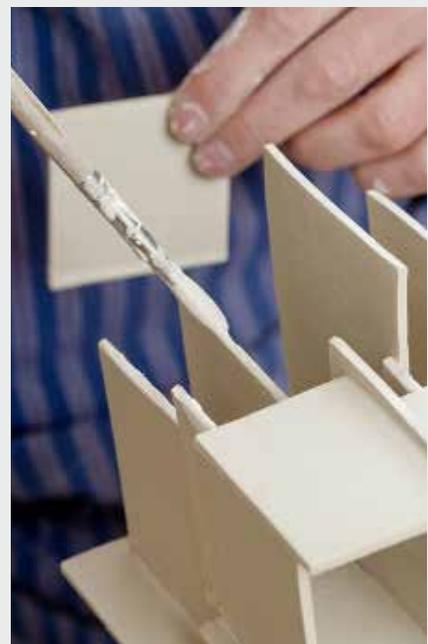
Pálma, for three years you were the artistic director of the Herend porcelain factory. How much did this experience influence your career as a ceramist?

Herend obviously had a great influence on my work as a ceramist. The connection to the porcelain factory had existed for a long time before I became artistic director. It started with summer courses when I was still a student. Then I was invited to design a set of tableware for the factory

lain version of the famous gömböc?

I was working for Herend when the world famous GÖMBÖC was born. It was discovered by two Hungarian mathematicians and is formed in accordance with a mathematical formula: a three-dimensional body which has just one stable and one unstable point of equilibrium. The form can be considered the result of a unique, special design process. As a designer, the object touched me deeply. Consequently,

efficient and functional system, is something I developed for nursery school and preschool. It is intended to train the children's sense of orientation within the school. The symbols made from 140 ceramic elements are colourful, attractive objects familiar to children. Accordingly they like to touch and stroke the symbols. Made of ceramic, they are suitable for printmaking as well as for textile printing and stencils.



when I was a designer. And later I worked for Herend as Head Artist. The high quality standards and the family atmosphere at the factory left a deep impression on me. But I had to redefine myself. I had to adapt to the Herend phenomenon. That was a great challenge because at that time Herend became a symbol of tradition. As I see it, their unique, sophisticated technology could be the link between making ceramics traditionally and contemporary design.

What can you tell us about the porce-

I offered Herend to produce a gömböc in porcelain and I designed a special decor for it: mathematical formulae that tell the story of the origin of the gömböc. These formulae have a similar effect to calligraphy: we cannot truly comprehend their precise significance but they fascinate us as achievements of civilisation.

One of your own inventions is OviArt, a system of signs. What does it represent?

"Ovi" is Hungarian and means nursery school. OviArt means art in the nursery school. The OviArt signage system, an

You are currently very much in the limelight because of your collapsing towers, for which you have won a number of prizes in competitions. They are reminiscent of bombed-out houses, collapsing tower blocks, even of Ground Zero. How did you come upon this particular form of expression?

The installation was part of my exhibition "Memories from the Future". The towers symbolise our excessive consumer society in a globalized world. This trend towards consumption is not sustainable, I am sure of that. The age we live in gives

me inspiration. I react to it in my work, confront it with our selves. I want to hold a mirror up to ourselves in this way. On the other hand, I do not want to destroy anything. The installation is intended rather as a warning cry.

In the pictures here we can see you making one of the collapsing buildings. Could you explain the steps, please?

My work is an ongoing dialogue with the subject. My working tool in this process is experimentation. In other words, through experimentation I can put my ideas into practice and in this way, the experiment becomes part of my sculptures. I do not need to decide between two alternatives, instead I work with random chance created by the experiment, and I integrate this in my objects. I normally plan my sculptures in advance, have a vision of the finished piece. But since there is a lot of randomness involved, for in-

the lower part of the sculpture. The higher I build, the thinner the tablets I use. Depending on the idea I have for the collapse, I break the inner equilibrium while I am building. So maybe I will fit more tablets on one side than on the other. This makes one side heavier than the other. At the same time, I build the lighter side more strongly and the heavier side with less stability. Thus I influence gravity during the firing. It takes me two to three days to build one tower. During this time I have to keep the state of dampness or dryness in a stable balance. Building a tower requires absolute concentration, skill and sensitivity. When the tower is finished, I leave it to dry thoroughly before I fire it to 980°C. Then I use a spray gun to apply the transparent glaze. The towers – still standing upright – are then put back in the kiln. Depending on the structure and how I plan the collapse of the tower, I place spacers in the kiln. The temperature for the glaze fir-

Yes, this stay influenced me deeply. But it is not the case that it has changed my work. I was working on my architectural system when I was invited to Seto. In the SETO Ceramics and Glass Art Centre, everything centres on ceramics and porcelain, so it is the perfect place for me. I was entering what was a completely new culture to me. But nonetheless – and in retrospect this was a significant experience for me – I discovered parallels there: the profound, human, universal sense of togetherness produced by the shared stimulus of working with porcelain every day. This connects people, like a bridge joining continents, culture, politics and social structures, generations and history.

And what are your next projects going to be?

I recently started to work in two dimensions: I am going to design pictures in porcelain.



photos - András Bozsó

stance through the heat of the fire, I never know what to expect after the firing. Chance and me create sculptures together. I start the work process by pouring porcelain casting slip on a plaster batt. After it has dried to leather hard, I cut it into tablets. Perfect tablets of even thickness are very important here. Afterwards, I construct my building with the aid of a special porcelain slip to join them with. In the firing, this slip is transformed into a glaze that holds everything together. This is why the edges have to be joined and finished perfectly. I use thicker tablets for

ing is 1380°C. At this high temperature, the porcelain shrinks, moves, softens and melts, and this process makes the towers collapse in the foreseen places. During the subsequent cooling, the porcelain towers turn snow white, they harden and become static.

You were recently invited to take part in an artist in residence programme in SETO, Japan. We know that you were very enthusiastic about your stay there. Is it possible to see something of this in your work now?

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Simcha Even-Chen, Israel.

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