

# FABIENNE WITHOFS

An artist of balance  
and exploration

CÉDRIC PIECHOWSKI

Fabienne Withofs is an aligned and rigorous visual artist who embraces the world, seamlessly shifting between various genres, unfiltered, and consistently on a serene journey. Her sculptural work reflects a personality deeply committed to understanding reality through clay. She structures, deconstructs, and reconstructs it until pushing the balance of material and craft boundaries, all while maintaining an unrestricted discourse. With clay as her medium, she possesses a tool that mirrors her essence, capable of evoking emotions, prompting exploration, caricaturing, and captivating her audience. However, it is only when she presents her works alongside her drawings, paintings, engravings or jewellery that one can truly begin to fathom the depth of the universe that inspires her.

Her recent work unveils her artistic facets, amalgamating 40 years of research into an aesthetic that is both introspective and transgressive. For instance, she forges unusual connections by melding a canvas artwork with a ceramic piece to craft a mixed-media sculpture, or by enveloping a stoneware piece with paper.

She fosters surprise and, as always, renders the creative process transparent without regard for conventions. This career leitmotif manifests itself in various forms influenced by her impulses, encounters or travels.

*"What is artwork if not the establishment of a process that transcends our connection to the world?" - Fabienne Withofs, 2007*

In the early stages, spanning from 1984 to 1998, she delineated her techniques: graphic, characterized by dominant gestures and colours; and plastic, where sobriety envelops intimate themes, particularly Being Inhabited. These early works reflect her admiration for the Bauhaus and Cobra movements, alongside the unassuming style of Peter Voulkos, resonating with her subtle rebellious spirit. From Bauhaus, she has absorbed architectural lines and utili-



**Daily Life Bursting**, sculpture set, hand-shaped and thrown porcelain, 2020 ©FWithofs



**Estourbir or not estourbir**, stoneware and porcelain, 2023, 1) 38 x 60 x 25 cm, 2) 27 x 35 x 20 cm ©A.Vanderlinden

tarian aesthetics, while from Cobra, she has drawn upon the uninhibited energy of gesture and colour as well as the textual essence of Christian Dotremont's work where writing has its say. Through Peter Voulkos, she has nurtured an abstract intuition detached from technical prowess yet cultivated and polysemous, as well as generosity as a teacher.

*"My work is 'something in between', like a hyphen between words."* - Fabienne Withofs, 2022

Being Inhabited has evolved into a universal world view, delving into our connections with an enclosed, symbolic, and protective space like a sanctuary, shelter, nesting box, hut, tent made of skin or wall, or a clay house where each person constructs their own cathedral, with the resources at hand uniting and separating simultaneously. Its message is inherently intercultural, addressing the essential need for self and others in an imbalanced world marked by power dynamics across all societal levels. Within its cathedral lies a realm of hope and sacrifice.

Every aspect serves to enrich its artistic proposition, with notable instances including displays centred around wild kilns. At various junctures in her life, including with her students, she has constructed kilns from locally sourced materials, creating a metaphor for the hearth and recounting the narrative of the surrounding environment. Examples include those crafted in Brittany (2002), amidst the Arcelor Mittal metalworking plant in Liège (2007) in solidarity with the workers before its closure, and in collaboration with the Catholic University of Louvain for an experimental archaeology project on Merovingian kilns (2018).

This underscores the artist's intimate connection with nature, culture and structure, reminiscent of the influence of



**Anthropocene**, stoneware and porcelain, 2023, 50 x 75 x 22 cm ©A.Vanderlinden

Belgian ceramists Paul Moïse and Jacques Loly, who served as her mentors.

Educational travels have proved pivotal for Fabienne Withofs, marking a stylistic shift in 2004. During a symposium in Jingdezhen, China, she uncovered the potential of Jiangxi porcelain and its vibrant, high-temperature pigments. These are still not widespread in Europe, where a more subdued colour palette typically employing oxides is commonly used. This discovery was transformative, allowing her graphic and plastic practices to intertwine. Interactions with local potters reshaped her perception, technique, and expressive capabilities. She has revisited China





**Tribute to Alexander McQueen**, hand-shaped porcelain  
2016, 25 x 25 x 10 cm ©F.Withofs

**The King's Fools**, Bourgeois madness house, hand-shaped  
porcelain & paper, 2011, 32 x 26 x 26 cm ©F.Withofs



by Caroline Chen and Takeshi Yashuda, artists who established their training centre in a former factory in Jingdezhen; for the Changchun and Zibo Symposiums in the provinces of Jilin and Shandong, respectively (2016); and for an exhibition of her work at the Taoxichuan Fair in Jingdezhen (2018).

Furthermore, her journey in Japan since 1991 has proved to be profound, particularly at the Hikosen Workshop founded by Hiromi Itabashi near Tokyo. There, she has delved into Mingei, experiencing calligraphy and sumi-e - the Japanese art of ink painting - and immersing herself in concepts such as Wabi-Sabi and Ikigai. It wasn't until later, at the L'esprit Mingei au Japon. De l'artisanat populaire au Design exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris (2008), that she discovered its formal name. This aesthetic movement deeply resonates with her for its delicate balance of extremes – beauty and imperfection, or the humanity inherent in materials, both from the perspective of objects and their users, and the spaces they inhabit. Her commitment to Mingei principles binds her closely to this Anglo-Japanese Arts & Crafts vision.

*"Nothing remains fixed, neither in form nor in colour."*

- Fabienne Withofs, 2008

In her work *Pavilion*, which draws inspiration from the view she had in China from the workshop window, these elements carry great significance. The vivid red hue and bold lines impose a graphic quality onto the sculpted form, lending it a raw appearance. As Fabienne Withofs describes it, her work resides in the space between this and that. The object shapes the space, and vice versa, in a back-and-forth dynamic of intertwined signifieds and signifiers. The interplay of colours, volumes, and material effects creates a spontaneous emotional experience that blurs the line between functionality and sculpture.

Under the theme *Fools of the King* until 2018, to which *Pavilion* belongs, Fabienne Withofs expressed her critique of a contradictory world by confronting observers with respect. Her almost satirical works provoke reflections on societal issues, particularly on the self-perceived authority of all the kings and queens of injustice. With humour and mockery, she subverts social objects and removes everyday actions from their conventional contexts. She applies colours as she would defend values.

Profoundly influenced by Alexander McQueen's rebellious style, she was inspired to pay tribute to the fashion designer after visiting the Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (2015). This sparked the creation of a powerful and exceptionally figurative series starting from 2017.

References to the fashion performances of the English designer resonate with a shared, deeply conscious view of humanity's imperfections and the resilient strength of women. Except for provocation, both artists aim to unveil truths through subversion and a touch of anger. Their technical prowess serves as a tool to articulate the duplicity of the world.

*"Art undoubtedly embodies a certain dignity of humanity."*

- Fabienne Withofs, 2006

The family, friendship and social isolation imposed by Covid measures in 2021 had a profound impact on her, leading to a disruption of her sense of stability and identity. It prompted a reevaluation of her place in and connection to the world. She went back to the essentials: structure and clod of earth, reminiscent of childhood memories. As in her earlier work *Pavilion* (2004), she sought anchoring by gazing out of her workshop window, observing the landscape around her: the clods of ploughed earth in Hesbaye surrounding her home. This almost foetal retreat into a sense of security swiftly evolved into an exploration of structure's fragility. Using clods of earth, she shaped objects on the wheel only to deconstruct them through cutting after drying, then reconstructing them on the brink of collapse through collage before



firing, thus placing them in jeopardy. This series of approximately fifteen bowl sculptures, entitled *Daily Life Bursting*, serves as a poignant expression of the artist's enduring scars from the pandemic experience, prompting the viewer to question whether we are deceiving ourselves with comforting illusions. Despite the performative nature of her technique, Fabienne Withofs refrains from making it the subject of her creations, maintaining her signature approach. In a way, this two-year interlude liberated her from constraints she had previously embraced.

*"At the moment of creation, it's important not to overthink; everything we need is already within us."*  
- Fabienne Withofs, 2024

The *Anthropocene* has become the central theme of her research, reflecting a heightened awareness of responsibility and a sense of commitment. It serves as a resonant chamber for philosophical contemplation, where the artist's concerns materialize into tangible form, inviting honest reflection on our actions. Through works like *Estourbir or not Estourbir?* and influenced by three decades of immersion in Eastern philosophies, the artist explores systemic entanglement at its peak.

The French verb *estourbir*, derived from the German word "sterben", is unique to the eastern region of Belgium, linguistically influenced by its German-speaking neighbour. Initially signifying death, it extends to imply disappearance, reflecting contemporary concerns about the loss of biodiversity due to human activity. Fabienne Withofs' depiction of organic landscapes, rendered without boundaries and in a state of perpetual flux, symbolizes the evolving natural world.

By transcending definitions, she embraces presence. *"The object exists even in the dark."*

- Fabienne Withofs, 2009

#### Cédric Piechowski

Art Historian specializing in the study of European ceramics. Website: [direct.me/cedricpiechowski](https://direct.me/cedricpiechowski)

Drawing on paper, 2003, 40 x 50 cm ©FWithofs



**Be Inhabited, Temple 1**, hand-shaped and slab stoneware & fabrics  
2005, 40 x 32 x 32 cm ©F.Withofs

**Fabienne Withofs** is a Belgian artist who studied at the École Supérieure des Arts Saint-Luc in Liège (1981-1984). She then taught three-dimensional ceramics there for two years (1991-1993) before joining the faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts in Namur (1998-2022). Throughout her journey, she has continuously expanded her skill set, delving into various techniques such as calligraphy, sumie, blown glass, engraving, paper making, and jewellery making. In 1994, she made her debut exhibition appearance at the Dialogo Galerij (Dialogue Gallery) in Ostend, exhibiting alongside ceramicists Vincent Beague and Jacques Loly. Since 1998, Fabienne has found stability in Belgium, contributing significantly to the ceramic art scene. In 2001, she cofounded the Terra Incognita association with Paul Moises, Vincent Beague, Jacques Loly, Maurice Lenaif, and Noëlle Mariciaux, marking the beginning of her deep and continuous involvement in promoting Belgian ceramics. Over the years, she has been a member of various organizations, including BeCraft in the early 2000s and the Atelier Jacques Loly association in 2010. Fabienne has actively organized collective wood firings and workshops, collaborating with ceramicists such as Dalloun from France and Peter Callas from the United States. In 2021, she co-founded ArtBol Asbl, which brings together Belgian ceramists around the aesthetic qualities of tableware. Additionally, she has been a member of the International Academy of Ceramics since 2022.

Her works are featured in private collections across Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia, Japan and beyond. They can also be found in public collections worldwide, including the Museum of Fine Arts and Ceramics in Verviers and the Palais des Princes-Évêques in Liège (Belgium), La Piscine in Roubaix (France), the Keramikmuseum Westerwald (Germany), the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza (Italy), the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils (Latvia), and several museums in China, including the Sanbao Museum, Taoxichuan Museum in Jingdezhen, and Zibo Ceramics Museum.

#### **FABIENNE WITHOFS**

Ceramic Visual Artist  
Location: Liège, Belgium  
[fabienne.withofs@gmail.com](mailto:fabienne.withofs@gmail.com)  
AIC member  
BeCraft member  
ArtBol administrateur  
[www.fabiennewithofs.net](http://www.fabiennewithofs.net)  
[www.facebook.com/fabienne.withofs/](https://www.facebook.com/fabienne.withofs/)  
[www.instagram.com/fabiennewithofs/?hl=fr](https://www.instagram.com/fabiennewithofs/?hl=fr)

