

# In Studio with Ross De Wayne

Evelyne Schoenmann



**R**oss, you studied sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute. Can you tell us something about this time?

I applied to the sculpture department at SFAI in 1988, a private art school with lots of history. Parts of it are covered in original Diego Rivera frescos. Angela Davis was a guest professor during my first year, never a dull moment. SFAI has a well-established performance art department. I left the sculpture department my

first year and embraced performance. Performance art changes a person, it's a hard discipline to fake. I graduated from the performance department in 1993.

***And how did it come about that you now work with clay, that is, that you became a ceramist?***

American schools have a lot of toys. Metal shop, wood shop, auto shop, and good old high school ceramics. I started taking ceramic classes in junior high

school. The class room had everything, two kilns, pug mill, throwing wheels, clay, glaze. Totally normal class offered in every American high school. After high school was over, I didn't touch another piece of clay until 2006. In a nutshell I learned how to work with clay in high school and kept a lid on it until 2006.

***Who has encouraged you the most? From whom have you learned the most?***

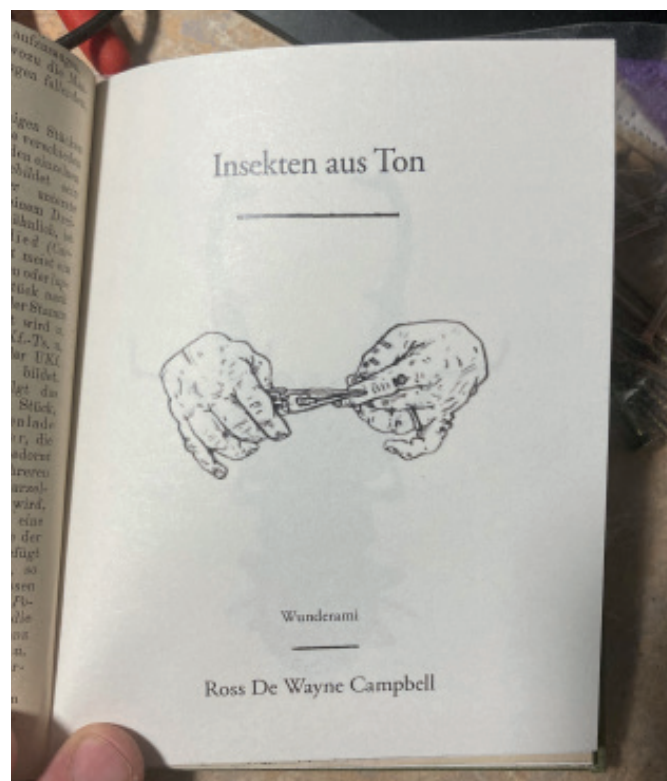
In 2006 I was at the Europamarkt in Aachen. A gold smith at the market had some clay rats on the stand as decoration. I didn't even get the artists name, just that they were made from some guy in Höhr-Grenzhausen. I was fascinated with the clay rat. Changed my mind about things made out of clay. A few years later I found out that Andreas Hinder was a well-known ceramic artist and we are now good friends. The rat changed everything. No clay rat, no clay insects. Production was another issue. The legs are a lot of work. They are thrown, sort of, and this allows for speed. Potters are masters at rationalization, you can only learn from them. When I have a technical issue, I always go to a potter, never a sculptor.

***In Oldenburg they call you "The Lord of the Flies..." - What does it mean to you to be considered a master in the production of filigree insects in ceramics?***

When I started making bugs, I didn't talk about it that much. A lot of people around me shook their head, said the idea was too morbid, that it would fail. Oldenburg gave me a big chance at the beginning of my journey, Oldenburg seen me evolve, was very supportive. It's only been 10 years or so since I started. The fly is a keystone subject in my work. Attending Oldenburg year after year keeps me going, that kind of support is actually an achievement. Affirmation is high on the need pyramid.

***Your beetles, dragonflies and flies look deceptively similar to the originals, just bigger. How do you achieve this stunning resemblance? Do you study the insects before you start working?***

I know almost nothing about insects and I keep it that way. I enjoy the information deprivation. The cosmos of the insect is huge, nature, media, literature. They sting, save the world, we save them, we poison them, they don't have it easy. I look at photos of bugs, a lot of drawings, then I put the material away. I make everything from memory. After I finish something, I compare it to the original and remake it until I am happy with my interpretation, the point where the object becomes my work. All mine, and it will always be mine, even after I sell it. I simply don't own it anymore.







*Would you please guide us through the technical process of the "Haselnusskäfer" you made for our interview?*

I begin with the colorful outer parts of the insect, the visible layers that protect the wings, torso, and the head. I use silikon press forms. I insert small hoops of stainless-steel wire into each part before it dries and bisque fire them to 900°C. The exposed wire allows me to connect the pieces together at a later time. I use two small 12-liter kilns that hold six insects in various stages. The next step is free forming the inner body of the insect, the part of the insect beneath the colorful parts. When the inner body of the insect is finished, I press the bisqued pieces into the soft clay. This is when the insect takes on form and precise placement of the bisqued parts essential. The insect is mounted on a reusable stand that follows the piece until it is finished. At this stage I have half an insect, the next step are the legs. I must work very quick at this point and get the legs into the body before it dries. The legs are formed from thin stainless-steel wire. Clay is applied to the wire in sections. The clay is rolled onto the wire like on a throwing wheel. Moving the wire back and forth, my fingers roll the clay onto the wire in the shape of a cone. The rolling action mimics throwing a pot, tightly forming the clay to the wire. When the legs are finished, I stick them into the body of the insect and bisque the assembled insect one more time at 900°C. The assembled and bisqued insect can now be colored and glazed. The legs can even be bent into a more realistic shape. I air brush colored slips and transparent glaze to create the surface. After the color is applied, it goes into the kiln again at 1080°C. After the glaze firing the insect is handled one last time. I spray the piece with black slip and clean the majority of it away with clear water, revealing the glazed sections of the insect. My goal is a strong contrast between dark and bright color, similar to raku.

*The Corona situation still prevents marketers like you from showing their works to a wide audience. How do you deal with this situation?*

It's been one year since the markets went dark and it is always a surprise to hear from other potters how things are





going. I had a good run in 2020 considering the circumstances: Corona test points at the border, giving workshops behind glass. Sales were better than expected and I managed to do 6 markets and 3 workshops under Corona guidelines. Unfortunately, 2021 is following a different path. Workshops are simply not happening this year and most of the markets have been cancelled with no alternative date. Last year there was actually a lot of optimism. This year none. Now it is time to think outside of the box. The idea of attending a market with 80,000 people is very unrealistic. Maybe 2023? Virtual shows are nonsense. We need to regroup in smaller numbers, smaller private shows with less people. That is my plan for 21, small events.

***Do you have other sales channels besides the markets?***

It's a mixed calculation - markets, workshops, and internet - and always has been. Visiting people at their homes is also a great way to sell work. Before I drive to a market, I always call as many customers as possible and ask them if they are interested in seeing some work. The worse they can say is no. Two or three appointments is plenty. 100% of every house visit is a sale, but not every phone call. Return customer are golden. Instagram has suddenly become a lot better for sales, but that could just be a Covid trend.

***What are your plans and wishes for the future?***

My plan for the last three years now is how to attract younger customers, Millennials, or Generation Y. They buy differently and usually need a push start before they do. When they finally do buy something, they are good customers. But nothing like their mom and dad, filling the house with lots and lots of ceramics. Millennials have a limit.

**Ross De Wayne Campbell**  
Pfarrstrasse 134  
D-10317 Berlin / Germany  
Tel. +49 176 48 25 07 48  
[ross@keramikberlin.eu](mailto:ross@keramikberlin.eu)

Evelyne Schoenmann's  
next interview partner is  
**Martha Pachón Rodríguez,**  
Colombia and Italy.

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist,  
writer and curator. She is an AIC/IAC  
member, and lives and works in Basel.  
[www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch](http://www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch)