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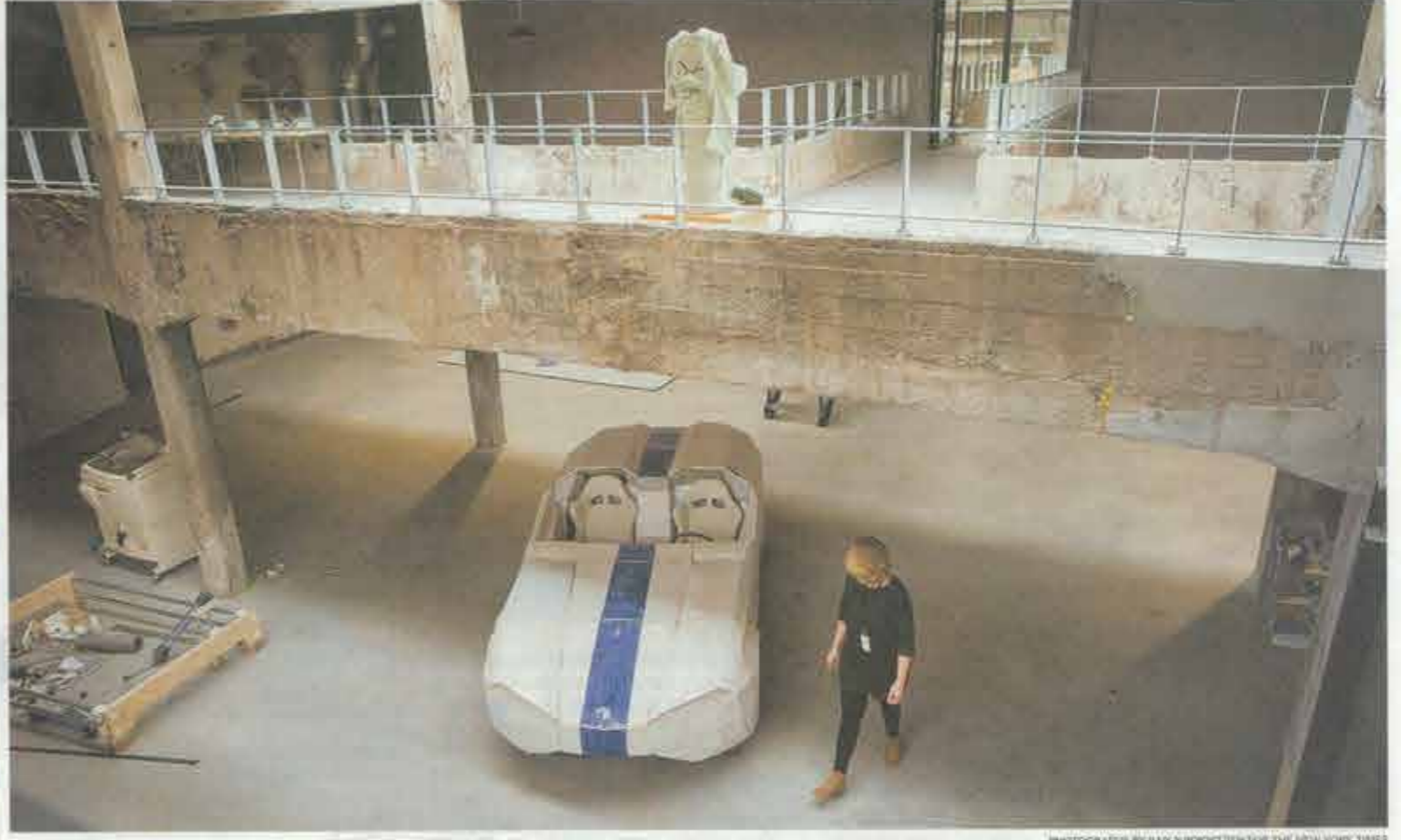
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Craftsmanship

A Cut Above



All fired up
Near right, Tim Belliveau at the European Ceramic Workcenter. Far right, "Dante GT ceramic," by Filip Jonkers. Below, Paula Colchero and her ceramic home cheesemakers.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA SHOOTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Playing with clay

The European Ceramic Workcenter is known for giving artists a crash course in ceramics, then telling them to think big

OISTERWIJK, THE NETHERLANDS

BY DIANE DANIEL

In his airy studio at the European Ceramic Workcenter, Tim Belliveau, a glass artist from Canada, toyed with digital color renderings of the ceramic polygon sculptures he envisioned. Later, after building a cardboard model of one, he would cut slabs of clay, scaling up the prototype.

"I'm going as big as I can, about three feet, which will take about two and a half weeks to dry, another week to fire and another week to glaze," Mr. Belliveau said. "I'm trying to mix the digital aesthetic with rough materials."

If Mr. Belliveau sounds like he knows his way around clay, he will be the first to say otherwise. Like almost three-quarters of the artists, designers and architects who vie for three-month residencies at the center, about 70 miles southeast of Amsterdam, he is new to the medium.

"It's a crazy crash course in ceramics, plus everyone is working on an insane scale," said Mr. Belliveau, who also specializes in 3-D printing. "In my first two weeks here, I think I've done about a year's worth of work."

After he arrived in early January, the five ceramics experts on staff taught him basic techniques, and from there he experimented. "The staff seems more excited about surprises than tradition," Mr. Belliveau said. "They say 'yes' to pretty much everything, which I love."

Trial and error is a driving force behind the nonprofit institution, commonly called EKWC, for Europees Keramisch Werkcentrum. It was founded in 1969 to provide a group of ceramists with kiln facilities, and has since gained an international reputation.

"If the artist's proposed project doesn't seem doable, then we're interested," said Ranti Tjan, the center director, whose black wingtips perpetually carry a layer of clay dust. "Our mission is to not only promote ceramics, but to constantly be researching the process."

"Everything we do is open source — that's the agreement with the artist," he said, explaining that techniques and formulas, such as glaze recipes, are available for the asking.

The center draws as many as 300 applicants a year for its approximately 60 slots, a number that grew from 45 in 2015 when it moved to a former leather factory here, from a small facility in the provincial capital 's-Hertogenbosch (commonly known as Den Bosch), about 14 miles away. The cost to participants, including room and board, is about 20,000 euros (\$21,160) — usually paid through grants from foundations, museums and galleries as well as crowdfunding. They also spend about €2,000 on materials and kiln-firing costs.

The almost 54,000 square feet of space is divided into working and living areas, including 16 studios of about 430 square feet each, private dormlike

rooms with baths, and a homey shared kitchen, dining and lounge area. The largest room houses 10 massive kilns. The center also has a library, 3-D printing area, clay room, molding and glazing areas, a wood shop and informal gallery spaces.

Garth Clark, a ceramics expert and international dealer, said the center had been the world's most important workshop for contemporary ceramics since its inception.

"The workshop actively reaches out to artists outside the clay community, and as a result it has played a role in bridging the gulf between the fine arts and ceramics," he said from his home in Santa Fe, N.M. "Many artists have had epiphanies there, being free to explore, experiment and work in large scale."

Mr. Clark said that Akio Takamori, a popular Japanese-American sculptor who died in January, was "a good example, transitioning from the vessel to figurative sculpture on one of his visits, a shift that had a huge impact on his career."

The center's relocation was part of a fundamental shift in its operations, brought on by a funding crisis, said Mr. Tjan, who arrived in 2010 after holding museum positions in the Dutch cities of Gouda and Utrecht.

(Mr. Tjan rebranded the center as Sundaymorning@ekwc but the EKWC label still is used most commonly.)

In 2013, after decades of support, the Dutch government eliminated the center's subsidy, as well as that of other arts funding. (Some of that support was unexpectedly restored this year.)

"I knew things needed to change drastically," Mr. Tjan said. "We had 22 people, and I had to make the decision to let 14 of them go. From there, I knew we needed sources of revenue and more stakeholders."

The center, which had operated somewhat like an ivory tower, Mr. Tjan said, opened to schools, private businesses and the public. It now holds programs for schoolchildren, does research and development for businesses, gives public tours and holds open studio days, called test cases. (The next one is April 30.) Mr. Tjan said it would soon offer master workshops to graduate students.

Mr. Tjan, who has led the bulk of the 90-minute tours himself, often up to four times a week, is training students from a nearby university to be docents.

"I don't want our tours to be like art history or criticism, so we're using chemistry students to lead them," he said. "We're not like a museum. We can show you how things are made."

"We want people to think about the quality of clay and ceramics and think about that in their own lives," he said. "What about the bricks and tiles of your house, the plates you eat from? We want people to appreciate the difference between handmade and mass production."

During tours, visitors are led through the kiln and workshop areas, where they may see residents working. They are able to peek into one artist studio, but not the living quarters.

The gallery spaces display some of the work that has been created here: ceramic musical jewelry from Christie Wright and Arjen Noordeman; a clay kimono from Karen LaMonte, whose glass dresses are in several museum collections around the world; and the most improbable project of all, Filip Jonker's "Dante GT ceramic," a 1985 Pontiac Fiero with a frame that's been covered with a ceramic body.

And, yes, it still runs.

A recent alumna is Jessica Harrison, a contemporary British artist based in Scotland, known for her sly manipulations of mass-produced porce-

lain figurines. She attended in 2015 and is expected to return for a second residency this year.

"It massively changed my work," Ms. Harrison said from her studio in Edinburgh. "I had only worked with found ceramics and didn't have any technical experience. It was a perfect ceramic playground where failure isn't discouraged, and whatever you want to try, there's someone there to help you."

At the center, Ms. Harrison built her own pieces inspired by existing

figurines and vessels. "With raw clay, it's much more kind of performative, where you can see movement and gesture," she said. "Looking at my before and after work, you'd think a different person did it."

Ms. Harrison is scheduled to show EKWC-influenced work in June at the Jerwood Makers Open in London, a commissioning opportunity for emerging artists.

She noted that the center continues to support artists after their residencies are completed. "Ranti, the director, seems to remember everybody and he knows everybody," she said. "He has this kind of roster of artists in his head and always puts names forward."

Mr. Belliveau is to show his polygon sculptures this year at Concordia University in Montreal. First, though, he has to ship his work home to Canada.

"I've been using a computer model to prepack the crate," he said. "I thought I'd use the smallest crate, but now I've gone to the biggest."

Done yet?
Jo Syen (right) checks a colleague's work in a kiln at the European Ceramic Workcenter.



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