

In Studio with Simcha Even-Chen

Simcha is multi-talented: she is a ceramist and a scientist, she judges competitions and gives workshops, she exhibits periodically and she is also a mother and grandmother. Is that why she makes Balance in Motion so effortlessly?

Evelyne Schoenmann

Simcha, like many other ceramists, you only found your way to ceramics after first pursuing a different career. You were a scientist and you used to work in parallel in both professional fields. How did you manage to bring science and art together?

Parallel to my postdoctoral position at the Hebrew University Medical School in Jerusalem, I started to attend evening classes to learn more about the craft of ceramics. But back then, I would never have imagined that ceramics would one day be my second career, even my principle occupation. Working in both worlds for years was becoming increasingly difficult though. It was hard work: science all day and ceramics in the evenings and at week-

a place where three monotheistic religions have met for over a thousand years?

The fact that I live in a geographical nucleus of three monotheistic religions has no influence on my work whatsoever. My pieces are autonomous objects that are independent of history. They are not functional, serve no practical purpose; you can merely look at them attentively and ponder on the solution to the problem of space, form and aesthetics.

The viewer, is burning to touch your works, to trace the outline with their finger. How did you develop the fascinating forms of your sculptures? Is there something in common between form and harmony?

I have always been fascinated by the

2. Tension between intentional and random pattern
3. Ordered and amorphous patterns
4. Mobile and rigid
5. Planned and unforeseeable

Each of these themes produces different degrees of balance.

In 2011, I began to do Pilates exercises, a physical fitness system about mobility and the flow of energy in the body. From this point, I began to add the element of movement to the already present balance of my objects. This represented the birth of a number of more open, extensive movements that are more in flux, and it enabled me to extend the diversity of pictorial forms. My intentional departure from pre-existing approaches to forming opened the



ends. But at that time, I was not prepared to give up either. Eighteen months ago, the Hebrew University offered me the opportunity to run a new biotech start-up. This was very flattering, of course. But it would have meant giving up ceramics entirely. So I decided to follow my heart, to quit my job at the University after 22 years and to devote myself entirely to ceramics.

How strongly does the geographical nucleus where you live influence your work –

harmony of the connections between precise architectural elements with complex surface treatments and colour. It is possible to produce perfect objects that are both aesthetically appealing and intellectually stimulating. From 2006 – 2010, most of my works had a closed, cubic form. In time, they developed a softer, more sculptural exterior. All of my work deals with the theme of tension and balance on various levels:

1. Physical balance

door to an abundance of dynamic, floating configurations.

Rigid, level planes are rare in your work. Everything is in flux, is balanced, full of energy. You can sense a rhythm, like in a song. When you start a new work, do you already have a concept of what the sculpture should finally look like or do you allow spontaneous intuitions surprise you?

Since 2011, I have been working on

the relationship between “free” three-dimensional space and open, twisted two-dimensional geometric surface: in this way, I give the piece a visual meaning without limiting its movement. The sculptures sound out the possibilities and limits of the material and its natural properties. They go to the point where clay threatens to collapse. They thus pose the fundamental question of where and how the chosen structure needs to be supported to protect the object as a whole from falling or collapsing. This collapse of the structure that threatens throughout the making process is subsequently, inevitably still visible in the finished object. Most of my works consist of several individual objects. Generally, I have an idea of what the finished piece should look like when I start work. But because of the way I form my objects, I can only really see what the composition of the finished object will look like after the bisque firing. It may happen that I alter my original idea while I am working. I can play with my works like with Lego: by creating new combinations of the individual components, I can create entirely new works.

tube-shaped and can be bent to the desired shape. To create uplift, I support individual areas with sponges. I then brush on three coats of slip in the same clay (the grog has been sieved out) and wait until the slip is dry. Then I burnish the piece with a spoon. After burnishing, I leave it until it is leatherhard and spray on three thin coats of terra sigillata. The piece is bisque fired to 1,000°C. Up to this point, the piece has always been lying on its side. Only after the first firing can I stand it upright and test the balance. If everything is to my satisfaction, I can begin to plan the design. In our example, I have chosen a grid pattern for the inside. The outside is to be black. With a pencil and graph paper, I now draw a grid on the inside of the bisque fired object and stick 0.5 mm black masking tape on the lines. The exterior is then completely covered with wider masking tape. The whole sculpture is then covered with a protective coating. This creates a “gap” between the clay and the glaze that is to be applied afterwards and prevents the clay combining with the glaze. Finally, I apply a coat of raku glaze. When it is dry, I carefully remove

crackle patterns form on the surface. After cooling I peel off the glaze, wash off the protective layer and leave the object to dry thoroughly. Finally, I apply a thin layer of wax to make a smooth surface.

The black-white-grey colour scheme of your works predominates and is very intense. Are you planning to stick with this scheme or will we see coloured objects in future?

The black-white-grey colour scheme comes from the naked raku technique and allows me to implement my ideas best. To introduce other colours here would distract the viewer from the main idea, I believe. So to answer your question: No, I see no reason to introduce colour. But that does not mean I will not use colour for other new projects.

What are your plans for the future?

Monika Gass from Keramikmuseum Westerwald has invited me to arrange a solo exhibition in spring 2016. This is the most significant project to date. Next year, I will be travelling to Turkey and to Latvia for a symposia. Another symposium on raku is planned for 2016 in Arizona, where I will be giving workshops.



In the photos, we see you working on the piece: “Balance in Motion”. Could you explain the individual steps?

This sculpture was made originally from one slab of clay. I used a mixture of stoneware and porcelain for it. I first smooth the surface of the slab, which is around 150 cm in length, and then I cut it to the length I want. After that I roll the slab on a cylinder covered with paper, which is then carefully removed after a suitably drying time. The slab is now

all the black masking tape from the sculpture. The areas without glaze thus created will turn black in the post firing reduction. The firing then takes place in a raku kiln to 980°C. When the desired temperature has been reached, I take the red-hot object from the kiln and place it in a smoke chamber to carbonise; it is filled with hardwood sawdust. Now the areas without glaze and the cracks that I wanted to develop turn black deep into the clay body. This is how the irregular,

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