

Irene Vonck

by Nesrin During

"I love, respect and understand clay," says Dutch artist Irene Vonck, which makes it possible for her to "do whatever I like and get away with it." Eliminating restrictions and conventions has enabled her to blaze her own path. The resulting sculptures are like moments of frozen energy.

Vonck was born in Dublin in 1952 to Dutch parents, and grew up in England. She attended Falmouth School of Art, a school with wonderful facilities for foundation courses, then Brighton Polytechnic, where the ceramics department was geared more toward industry and mold making. So she decided to go to Holland to study with Jan van de Vaart at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. His approach to clay was rational, clean and rigid, whereas Vonck was more inclined toward natural forms



"Untitled," 32 inches (81 centimeters) in length, handbuilt stoneware, bisque fired and sprayed with white slip, then fired to Cone 3 and painted.



Working in series allows Vonck to make specific decisions about form during all stages of making.

and instinctive acts. What developed was a spontaneous way of working backed by materials knowledge. Vonck doesn't want to master clay, but be a partner with it; she wants the clay to remain true to its essence.

She begins each piece with a very soft solid block of clay that has been pugmilled twice, cutting off facets with a wire to define the initial form. The wire-cutting stage is an art in itself—the way she holds the wire, taut or loose, horizontal or slanted, is like drawing. At this moment, eye for detail is very important, says Vonck. The cut lines are sharp, but the material is soft; it has weight and can stretch, sag, deform—in short, develop the qualities of clay that Vonck wants to show us.

She sometimes opens the cut clay blocks with her fist, scooping out the clay with her fingers, creating tension from within, while leaving the outside wall to do what it wants. She controls the process up to a point, but the clay has the freedom to react.

Though Vonck does do rough sketches of her ideas, the movement that occurs during the making process takes precedence. At



"Viaggio nella Memoria," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in height, handbuilt stoneware, bisque fired, then sprayed with slip, fired to Cone 3 and painted.



"Flowing," 28 inches (71 centimeters) in length, handbuilt stoneware, sprayed with slip after the bisque firing, then fired to Cone 3 and painted, by Irene Vonck, Den Haag, Netherlands.

that moment, she is directing her energy into the clay, losing herself in the working process. When she sees movement, vibrancy, life, she stops.

After the clay has set a little, Vonck sometimes turns it upside down on a pillow, so that she can interact with the flat bottom. More clay is scooped out to form a basin, like an eroded river bed. With her newest work, she is hollowing the faceted block only from the bottom.

She likes to work in series, making 20 to 25 pieces that relate to each other. At the beginning of the series, 1 out of every 2 or 3 pieces is rejected and goes back into the pugmill. The rest are dried very slowly, then bisqued at 800°C (1472°F). The low temperature enables her to refine the forms by sanding; it also

allows better absorption of the white slip that is sprayed on after the bisque firing. This spray of white slip is to give texture to the surfaces; it is fired to 1150°C (2102°F).

After the slip firing, Vonck finishes the pieces with paint. She used to work with body stains, but the strong colors she loves are difficult to achieve with stains. She loves "to dive into strong blues and reds."

Diving is just one of the experiences that influences Irene Vonck's work. She has done underwater diving in Curaçao, where she was enchanted by the soft, seductive forms of sea life; she has been fascinated by water-eroded basins found on mountain walks; she has fallen in love with the strong colors of Italy. Memories of these experiences inform her collaborations with the soft clay.