



Personal Space 3
l 56 cm, w 40 cm, h 40 cm
photo - Ron Zijlstra

IRENE VONCK

NESRIN DURING

More than twenty years ago I wrote an article on Irene Vonck's work for Ceramics Monthly (USA); I called it Dialogue with Clay.

She had told me then, "I love, respect, and understand clay." I was much impressed with her work and her manner of working.

Twenty plus years later, both of us having spent a lifetime in clay, were once more talking about having a personal language and freedom, but also the technical and practical confines of working with clay.

Irene was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1952 to Dutch parents, and grew up in England. She studied at Falmouth School of Art, then Brighton Polytechnic, and finally at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.

All these very different institutions gave her something, but she realized that she had a strong will that pushed her to find her own path, a spontaneous, instinctive way of working, ignoring the restrictions, accepting and capturing the dynamism of the flow between the clay and her energy.

Irene begins her pieces with soft clay that has been pugmilled twice, this is in order to obtain and show the plasticity, the clayness, the essence of the material. She uses the Vingerling K123, fine grogged stoneware clay, or red terracotta stoneware, also finely grogged. Her pieces are easily 60 cm high, 70 cm long and weigh up to 35 or 40 kg.

She builds freely, using her hands, cuts with wires for sharp surfaces. The start is mostly vessel shapes. They have thick bases, and get thinner towards the top. All this building is done with very soft clay. The next step is Irene's newest way of working with clay, which was altogether unknown to me. She fabricates clay shards, that are mostly wire cut and hand shaped small pieces of the same clay. These are either in the wet, dry, in-between or even fired state. Irene throws these shards onto the still-soft forms that she has built. How wet they are, or how they are thrown, what angle, or from what distance; these shards hit the newly made soft clay forms, create the final shape of Irene's work. If the shards are dry, or half dry, they may rip the object they're thrown onto - or push the form off its balance, or dig into it.

Irene says, "The weight of the shards and the energy released determine the ultimate shape. The finished form is a result of the dynamics of personal expression, a collaboration of my energy and the clay that captures the moment".

Size, and firmness of shard has an impact on the form; the softer the



Personal Space 4
l 72 cm, w 50 cm, h 27 cm
photo - Ron Zijlstra



Work 2, unbisque in soft state

vessel shape the greater the distortion, the more the collapse. Irene discards many a piece at this stage.

When I interviewed her long ago, she was using her hands, fists, pulling and pushing the clay. But now she lets the soft clay and the shard interact to shape the clay. At this stage, many of these pieces land in the clay bucket. Once the shape is approved of, that's it, she doesn't add or subtract; at this state, her works expose the essence of clay: vulnerable, but also sensual. They are then dried very, very slowly. The main vessel forms differ in clay thickness, but shards also have to dry together with the wet vessels. There are quite often cracks at this stage.

Once thoroughly dry, they are bisque fired to 800-900°C; again very, very slowly. After this, Irene covers these works with a white sinter engobe. The engobe is sprayed onto the works, so a snow-like effect is obtained. She fires this to 1120-1140°C. If all has gone well and is up to Irene's standards, she then chooses a non-firing, brightly coloured painter's pigment to spray onto these works. The strong colours she loves are not possible with fired glazes. So Irene opted for spraying deep blues, bright reds, and more; this also saves

her from unpleasant, unforeseen kiln disasters!

This way she knows what she is going to have. Irene's work is in museum collections worldwide, including Japan, USA, Australia and of course in Europe.

She says, "My language with clay is highly personal, expressing feelings, and emotions".

I will add to this that they are moments of frozen energy.

Irene Vonck will be showing her new work in Kunst Rai in Amsterdam in March of the coming year.

NESRIN DURING

is a ceramist, and besides her practical and educational work, she writes for KLEI (NL), Ceramic Review (GB) and NEW CERAMICS (D).

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International exhibitions (selected): Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Boymans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam Museum Prinsessehof, Leeuwarden; Kunst Rai/Carla Koch, Amsterdam; Garth Clark New York, USA, Everson Museum, New York USA; Bode Museum, Berlin, Germany; Kestner Museum, Hannover, Germany; Jugend Gestaltet, München, Germany; National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan; Mostra Internazionale, Milano, Italy; International Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland; PMMK Museum, Oostende, Belgium; Gallery Aspects, London, GB; Barbican Arts Centre, London, GB; Marsden Gallery, London, GB.

International prizes: Bayerischer Staatspreis 2000, Germany, Gold Medal; Cheong-Ju Biennale Special Prize, South Korea

IRENE VONCK

Ruydaelkade 43
1072 AJ

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

irene@irenevonckceramics.com

<https://irenevonckceramics.com/>

