

KATRIN KÖNIG

CERAMICS AND THE RULES OF LIFE



Plate - ø 30 cm, porcelain, partly glazed

By
NANNE
OP 'T ENDE

Katrin König is not your everyday potter. Yes, she has been throwing tableware for thirty years and she sells her craft at pottery markets around Germany, Austria, The Netherlands and Italy but she also worked in ceramic factories, set up an educational centre for ceramics in Bolivia and is currently advising artists and designers at the ceramics residency sundaymorning@ekwc. To Katrin, clay is a way of life – and what a life it is!

Katrin was born in Crimmitschau in 1967. Growing up in the former German Democratic Republic influenced her life in many ways. “I take after my father, who has a bit of a rebellious streak. He knew it would be no use trying to get me into university and the best future he envisioned for me was that of a craftswoman with my own practice. By the age of fourteen, I tried out various crafts to see which one might suit me best, working with wood, steel, glass... Eventually I chose ceramics; I fell in love with the material.”

She had just finished her master proof – a set of tableware, executed to perfection – when the Wall came down and everything changed. “Tableware was popular in the GDR: you could send it to relatives in

the West to thank them for their packages with real coffee and chocolate. From one day to the next, that was all over. It was not so easy to make a living as a potter anymore. For me there was still a lot to be learned, I wanted to expand my knowledge. My husband and I had some friends in The Netherlands and we decided to try our luck there.”

The transition from a repressive regime to a liberal democracy was surprisingly easy. “Working in ceramics had reshaped my outlook on life: clay has its own rules, its possibilities and limitations. You simply can’t throw a vase without centring the clay. It never occurred to me to see it as a limiting material though: I just learned

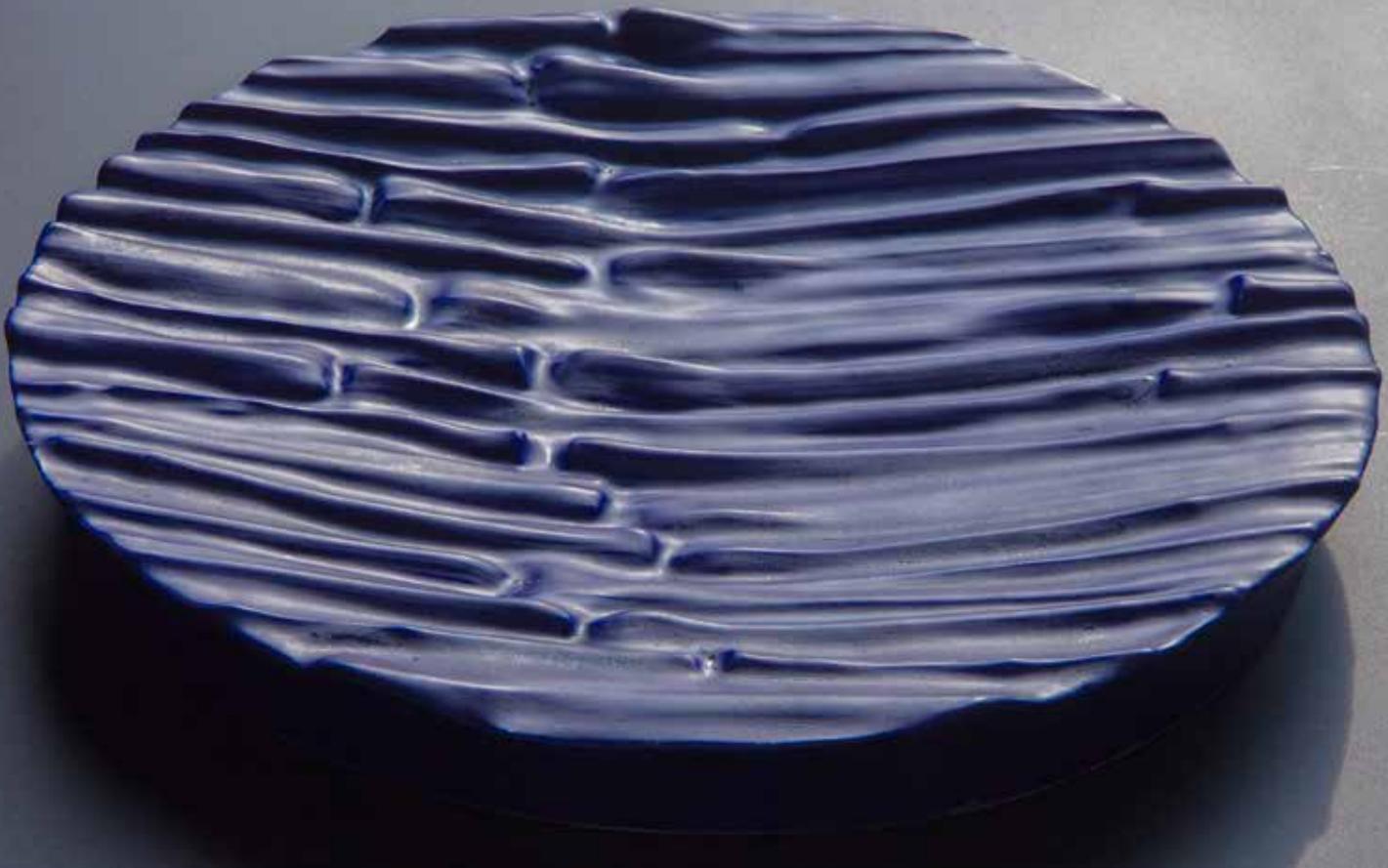


Plate - ø 58 cm, Terra Sigillata

to work with it. And that became my attitude in general: move with the flow, focus on what you can achieve within the given circumstances.”

After several years of working in ceramic workshops in The Netherlands and in Höhr-Grenzhausen, Katrin had a chance to work in South America. “In 1996, I got a job with an aid organisation to set up a ceramics educational centre in the rural areas of Bolivia. It was very challenging: poverty, coca, corruption... and that macho culture! As a woman, I was not supposed to order equipment; what do women know of machinery, right? Just to get things done, I learned to play along. Wear high heels, smile a lot.”

Designing the building, fitting out the workshops and writing the curriculum was just one part of the job. “I was constantly visiting factories and small businesses to see what skills would actually help students find a job. That was the most interesting part: these encounters and discussions. The indigenous cultures are very traditional, it is not about why you would do things a certain way or why you would do them differently. Things just are the way they are. In some villages that were strongly influenced from the Spanish ceramics tradition,



every new kiln had a large crucifix on the outside. Not because people wanted divine blessing for their firing or anything: to them the crucifix was an essential structural element without which the kiln couldn't function."

After nearly four years, she returned to Germany. "I was pregnant and it was time to move on. I thought I'd try my luck selling handmade tableware at the pottery markets. Throwing tableware, driving from one market to the next, I gradually figured out what shapes and decorations people like best. Cute cats clearly beat giraffes. For fifteen years, it paid the bills but after my husband's death, in 2014, I knew I couldn't go on like this. Last year, I started to experiment with perishable items. Flowers, fish, beans, any vegetable in the fridge. And that was it: no more cats for me.

It was a big risk though – I was making all these cups and dishes, vases and objects but would people actually buy them? That's something else I learned from working with clay: you have to accept that something might not work. And then you find out why it failed and you try again..."

The new work has a self-evident quality that belies the laborious making process. "For the wall objects, I start with impressions of vegetables or seafood in clay, which I use to create disc-shaped plaster press moulds for fine stoneware clay or porcelain, mixed with flax, paper or molochite.

I press the clay in two layers, with mosquito netting fabric in between for support. The disc goes on a wheel so I can throw the sides and when the work is dry enough, it can be flipped between two wooden boards. Then, I gently press the top into shape; the rest is a matter of careful drying and firing them on shrinkage plates. Temperatures range from 1080°C for terra sigillata to 1280°C for porcelain. Some pieces are fired multiple times for additional glazing, to create more depth or variety. But when you see the finished piece, I want it to look natural,

as if there was no effort in creating them. Plates with all their shades of white, white pieces on a white wall"

Since May, Katrin has been working some hours a week as an advisor at sundaymorning@ekwc, the ceramic residency in The Netherlands. "It's a special place. Many of the artists and designers that come there have little or no experience in ceramics. You can tell a lot from the way they handle the clay.

Things like patience, concentration, the ability to learn from observation, to correct yourself in the middle of a process; it's all apparent after fifteen minutes. How independent people are, if they like to experiment, if they are organised or chaotic – that's what I like so much about clay: it's honest. Maybe the sundaymorning@ekwc could be the place for passing along knowledge to the next generation. There are quite a few people who devoted their life's work to certain techniques or glazes; that kind of expertise should be passed on. I would love to work with them, just to learn."

Katrin is passionate about passing on the ceramic tradition. "Pottery is one of the oldest crafts known to man, it's a cultural heritage that stretches back more than 20,000 years. We can learn so much from working with clay and it's very rewarding. Last year, I was at a primary school for a workshop and we discussed ceramics as a career choice. I told the children you wouldn't get rich as a potter, but you could have a good life. After the workshop was over, this little girl approached me, eight years old. 'I gave it some thought,' she said, 'and a good life seems fine to me. I think I'll become a ceramist.'"

NANNE OP 'T ENDE

writes and translates texts for artists and art institutions. He is an artist and curator and wrote two books on political developments in Sudan and Somalia. He lives and works in Tilburg, The Netherlands.

opposite -
Plate - ø 46 cm
 stoneware, glazed

right -
Plate - ø 58 cm
 stained body,
 different glaze layers



Katrin König qualified as a professional ceramist in the former GDR, she gaining a qualification as a master craftswoman in 1990. After the fall of the wall she worked for a number of years in potteries in the Netherlands and Höhr-Grenzhausen until she was sent to Bolivia by the relief organization CIM in 1996 to set up a training centre for ceramics in Cochabamba, Bolivia. From 1999, she has sold hand thrown dishes at ceramics markets in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Italy. From 2015, she has mainly concentrated on developing her new ceramic works and beside this she is an advisor at sundaymorning@ekwc in Oisterwijk, The Netherlands.



1985



1988



1999



2015

KATRIN KÖNIG
 Viller 101
 47574 Goch-Hommersum
 Germany
 Tel. +49 2827 925889
 + 49 176 20022450
info@katrinkoenig.eu
www.katrinkoenig.eu

