

Studio Visit: Ulrich Schumann, Berlin, Germany



Just the Facts

Clay

white stoneware

Primary forming methods

handbuilding and press molding using plaster molds

Primary firing temperature

1170°C (2138°F)

Favorite surface treatment

inlay and sprayed stencil designs with colored or black and white engobes

Favorite tools

I use my slab roller a lot, both for creating slabs and for enlarging surface decorations, but for a favorite tool it really has too many technical flaws and problems.

Studio

I work in a 80-square-meter studio in the Pankow section of Berlin. The studio is very close to the Pankow Schlosspark (palace grounds), and is also right next to the Panke Creek. The combination makes the studio feel as if it is located in nature. When the weather is nice, the outside area is useful for making large work.



My favorite aspect of the studio is the fact that I live directly across from it. My least favorite aspect is that if I work a lot, the space becomes smaller and smaller, because each piece I make has to dry for up to twelve weeks before it is fired. Tools and molds are stacked up until they reach the ceiling, and little actual workspace remains.

As my pieces are large scale, I have specific equipment to help make the work manageable. When moving the large greenware forms and molds, I use an overhead hoist and a forklift. I was able to finance the purchase of the forklift using a pension insurance fund that I received to help me reintegrate into my work life after recovering from a serious illness. I use the forklift to move and position the pieces in the kiln, and to set the plaster board they're sitting on onto firebricks. The transfer from the plaster bat to the kiln shelf takes place on sand. In the process, the grains of sand function like ball bearings. When building my work, very heavy slab-built pieces are first laid on a support structure matching the shape of the mold interior that has an attachment for a hook on the back so that the hoist can be used to lift it and position it in the outer mold. The interior support structure can be clamped to the outer mold wall, holding the clay slab sandwiched in place while it dries. When the piece is leather hard, the support structure is hooked to the hoist again, the slab and support are removed from the mold and laid onto boards. When the second half, still in the mold, is ready for joining, the hoist is used again to line up the pieces.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

I am actually trained as an engineer, and have worked for various companies. I'm self taught as a ceramist, and have worked for 25 years as a self-employed artist.

As a self-taught artist living in Germany, I'm not allowed to have apprentices at my studio. For larger projects, like for the "London Pots" project I am working on now for a firm that's renovating a historic swim hall, I consult colleagues (in this case two) as outside contractors.



Even while I was studying for my degree, I knew that I didn't want to be an engineer, and never did get invested into that career, despite early successes. There was still an unknown quantity, a feeling of curiosity in me, that had something to do with art and material. So I started to experiment with various materials in my free time.

Through a coincidence, I was introduced to Berlin ceramic artist Ute Greiner. From the first time I was in Ms. Greiner's studio, I knew that this was what I was looking for. The clay pieces in process, the workshop equipment, the techniques used to work with the clay, and the ambience impressed me so much that my way from that point forward was completely clear. I've followed this path for 27 years now.

In 1991, together with a close colleague, I founded an architectural ceramics firm called Golem Formzeigel for the production of ceramic elements for the care of and preservation of historical monuments. We delivered molded brick, terra cotta tile, and reliefs across Europe, and had up to 45 employees. I worked there until 2001. After my illness, I stepped down from that position. You could say that the illness provided a way back to life as a ceramic artist.

I spend between 40 and 50 hours per week in the studio. I like to start working very early in the morning, and I very rarely work in the evening. I don't have a job outside of my full-time studio work; however for about a year now, I've been working once a week with students at a high school on a large-scale sculpture for their schoolyard.

The project with the school developed out of financial need. While looking for ways to earn extra income, I learned from my colleagues that such projects existed, and called an acquaintance who worked as a high school art teacher. It so happened that the school was looking for artists who wanted to work with students. Unfortunately I had to complete the sculpture in my studio as the project deadline approached. The kids worked relatively slowly

on the project and often had to be motivated to press on. The installation at the school took place in June as part of a week-long project. Despite the difficulties in finishing the sculpture, I really enjoyed working with the students. It was a stimulating contrast to working alone in my studio. If it were possible, I'd definitely pursue further projects like this.



Body

Due to the demands of making work, I play sports, go jogging, and/or swim, several times a week to stay healthy and fit. I also go skiing once a year. I have health insurance and also make sure to have regular check-ups.

Mind

In addition to reading about art, I read newspapers and detective fiction (crime novels). In order to recharge creatively, I go to movies, the theater, and concerts a few times per month, finances permitting.

Despite my other interests, my ideas for my work very rarely come from outside influences. While I'm working on a piece, I often come up with new ideas for future pieces. I find it important nonetheless to be engaged with all types of fine arts.

I also feel that it is important to mention that art is not everything in life. For me, having a family and children is also important.

Marketing

The predominant percentage of my work is large-format ceramics. I only sell these in direct contact with customers that I find at art markets. The difficulty with this is that I have to load, transport, and unload pieces that are sometimes more than 200 kg (441 lb) in weight all around the country for these markets.

Up until now, I participated in about five markets per year. This January, I had a booth at a large garden show, and afterwards received a lot of inquiries. As a result, I'm trying to do only one art market this year. Looking back, I see that I can't make a living from pottery

markets alone. There were often market events with almost no sales, but with all of the associated costs.



As far as a breakdown of the ways in which I sell my work, 20% sells through retail outlets and 10% sells through gallery shows and representation. Commissions or orders for work represent 30% of my sales, while sales at markets account for 30%. Works purchased by collectors account for the last 10% of my sales.

I have found that it is a big problem to be the maker and marketer at the same time, because both jobs require full attention and a lot of time, but there's only enough time for one job. On the positive side, when doing both the creative and marketing sides of the job, you get to experience the reactions customers have to your work directly.

If I attended to the marketing and sales side of my business more, I wouldn't have time to make work. If I have too much finished work in the studio, I contact potential customers regarding their interest, send images of the work to them, and then if they like the available work, I load it all into the car and visit them.

My biggest success online came when a ceramics collector came across my booth at an art market. Before he bought anything, he went home and looked at my website. Afterward, he came back and bought several large pieces from me. Today, he is the owner of the most extensive and comprehensive collection of my work.

The largest disappointment or frustration I've had online is when I think from the perspective of a potential customer looking for ceramic work. Entering the usual search words, my website does not show up. It's a problem of visibility on the web; I'm working to fix this, though.

Most Valuable Lesson

It's important to be your own most demanding critic. I love my work, but critical analysis and examination is a precondition for further work.

www.schumann-keramik.de

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