

CERAMICS

By Iris Brendel

About my work:

I am not a sculptress, but a ceramics artist or ceramic pot artist.

At one time I struggled to learn to use the potter's wheel at the Academy for Applied Art; and to date I have remained in this profession on the whole.

My heads and sculptures largely draw their energy from whatever is being turned on the potter's wheel that gives it shape. Lately, moreover, the EMPTY SPACE has also become important to me, which typifies thrown thin-walled pottery, just like the relationship between several parallel walls, as seen in my "Prisons".

So I turn the majority of my basic shapes and then, making huge changes, put them together, what is technically known as "assembly". In addition I try to maintain the specific clay character for the "clay" material that can easily be made to look like papier-mâché, wood, stone or under circumstances like metal.

I know that in Vienna, where ceramics is so deeply discounted, it hardly has a price – *irrelevant cups* – how different it appears in Northern Germany, in Japan or in Anglo-Saxon countries! – almost only ceramics artists go to ceramics exhibitions: Firstly they have the necessary affinity, secondly they are inquisitive, how "She" or "He" has come to this exhibition.

In case there is anyone in the audience who is not a ceramics artist, here are a few words of introduction:

I mainly fire the items at 1060 degrees (majolica baking), so not very hot. If I were to venture into the fascinating field of stoneware or porcelain, I would have to pay the increased power tariff. The low temperature is perhaps less precious than the higher temperature, but enables a greater range of colour in glazes. And as you can see, I often like it to be colourful.

You will also notice that apart from "firing something" – and firing of fireclay grains under the finger nails – my approach to the "burning theme of our time" is kept within limits: for me there is no "stools for peace", no "vases for cultic acts", otherwise my "Weeper" would be named "Women's destiny" and "Woman in the meadow" would be named "The last blade of grass".

Anyone who is not a ceramics artist often does not know: the colour of a clay in its natural state or that of a glaze often has nothing to do with how the things look after firing. Grey clay can become red, brownish white, whitish yellow.

I mostly use red-firing clays, smooth or fire clay. The latter has greater resistance and raw surfaces.

Each clay that dries or goes through the fire becomes smaller, "shrinks". Depending on the clay, this shrinking varies between a few percent and 20%. The latter is always surprising, since when working you have to allow for the huge loss in size. In the baking the shrinking is in fits and starts – just like the way children grow. There are always critical jumps in temperature. Moisture and air are the natural "Nemeses" of each firing, as was evident to me again recently, when the ears of my first Dr Freud, behind which it was obviously not yet quite dry, were a disaster when they went through the firing oven.

About myself and my life:

Born in Berlin

1933-1951 Buenos Aires (Argentina), Teaching, Languages

From 1951 Vienna

Diploma at the Academy for Applied Art

Exhibitions in Vienna, Faenza, Cologne, New York, etc.

I grew up in Argentina, lived there between the ages of 3 and 21 and left the country when finally I would have been allowed to opt for Argentinian citizenship. Just days before the end of the Second World War – when it was quite certain who would win - Argentina had quickly declared war against Germany. Therefore, for years I had to apply for police permission if I wanted to travel on holiday during the summer, since I had been born in the “hostile foreign country”. Not once did I get this permission; only Nazis, who had fled from Germany in 1945 with a lot of money and had bought into the highest government agencies, were given this permission. Although it was known no later than the summer of 1945, when the dreadful photographs from the German concentration camps went round the World in the American magazine LIFE, what had happened to the Jews remaining in Germany.

At this time Peron governed Argentina, which at that time had the fourth highest standard of living in the World, and he was busy ruining the economy by means of extraordinarily popular measures. He nationalized the rail and telephone network that belonged to the English and due to five years of neglect caused by the war was in need of repair; later he took the electric power companies away from the English and the Italians, to the worker who until then had been criminally exploited, was now not only made aware of his office, he was no longer allowed to be released from private companies – unless paid horrendous severance pay - even if he was lazy, incapable or a thief. Peron founded or strengthened the unions, created thousands of jobs in the brand new state factories, which remained cheap, became hugely in deficit and never again functioned correctly.

Since then – it will be about 35 years ago – the unions fought with general strikes against every threat to their jobs and their power. They continued to triumph, and the country went to the dogs. At that time “Puchero” was the Sunday meal of the workers: a huge piece of cooked beef, surrounded by black pudding, sausages, carrots, corn on the cob, yams and pumpkin. Now there were hunger demonstrations and pillaging.

At that time the radio was a wonderful culture medium. There were two channels that belonged to the State, alongside a huge number of private ones that transmitted sound recordings of classical music the whole day long. So I grew up with the singing of Lotte Lehmann and Elisabeth Schumann, Mayr and Schlusnus, Toti dal Monte, Yvonne Printemps, Ninon Valain and Schaljapin, with Furtwängler, Toscanini and Bruno Walter. Peron passed a new law: now 50% of transmissions were to be Argentinian music – even here the beginning of the end! And the radio became politically channeled. In best Mussolini tradition, Peron’s speeches thundered through the airwaves.

Evita's tearful, effusive voice paraphrased Catholic prayers; instead of "Lamb of God" she put Peron's names in the appropriate places.

In the State middle schools a new type of teacher appeared, that was mostly incapable of speaking one sentence correctly. We learned all sorts of interesting things, while we imitated the inept language of our teachers.

The dictator was in full swing. Shouting bands of Peron supporters were transported in convoys of lorries from the provinces to the capital city. Evita held court weekly and gave away houses and sewing machines to selected poor people.

Houses for fallen women were built and exhibited – but the "women" were not allowed to use them, since that would have lessened their photographic appeal. The oh so exclusive high society showered the powers with invitation. Everything and everyone could be bought. Factories that did not pay bribes put it into words best of all: *We have lost the ethics of stealing*. Evita's brother, Juan Duarte, rose to become the most successful profiteer in the country. Nevertheless people would complain openly. There was no police terror – that came later. The Cardinal sat on all official occasions next to the low décolleté Evita, whose jewellery collection had grown to an immeasurable level.

The following year, when I was already living in poor, small, provincial four-powers Vienna, Evita died miserably from cancer. From her sick bed, with her last strength she had sobbed with the glory of Peron over the airways. Peron had fallen out with the Church, which was to cost him his power. Juan Duarte threw himself out of the window of his tower block.

Austria at that time was a cheap country with old tradition and was therefore chosen by North and South Americans as a favourite country of study for their offspring. Rents and study fees, even if they were three times the rate for natives, were low; only the post, telephone and tram costs were then about ten times those in Argentina.

The Argentinian population originates – roughly speaking – about half from Spain and Italy. The Indian component is indeed apparent – belles of the village are called "Chinitas", i.e., small Chinese girls – but negligible. There are no blacks de facto. The great Indian cultures have scarcely touched the country.

The colonial time has left behind some very beautiful buildings; remains of earlier grandeur can be admired in the North in particular. But whoever wishes to admire the great ruins of the Mayas and Aztecs, or the cream of colonial architecture (the Austrian baroque under palms and bananas), must travel to Mexico and Peru, to Bolivia and Brazil. Not that there would be nothing to see: Argentina is a multifaceted, large and interesting country, which stretches from the sub-tropics to the antarctic Tierra del Fuego.

The Buenos Aires of my childhood and youth was extraordinarily large, lively and flat. An enormous harbour, large parks with giant trees with hanging air roots, a lot of traffic, wide streets, lined with blue flowering Jacarandas.

At that time four – today eight or perhaps even twelve – million inhabitants, a rich broad middle class, the best food of all the world, the most beautiful opera house, the most famous, international seasons, actors, singers, tennis players...

In Europe war was raging, in Argentina opulence ruled.

The architecture: faceless tower blocks replaced the Mussolini style, the offshoots of art nouveau and above all the houses that were reminiscent of Paris, the ideal of every educated Argentine before 1945.

The siesta was observed, above all in the heat of summer. People ate late in the evening, actually at nine and not at eleven as in Spain. People learned foreign languages, were broadminded and hospitable. They had exquisite manners, although the language of the city is extremely colourful. In spite of this Argentina did not absorb the new immigrants, as did North America its non-natives at that time, which today is no longer the case and has been for a while. The middle Europeans were in fact despised, but they were good enough for work – and work was guaranteed for everyone in the constitution. Admittedly the non-native academics had it extremely hard. They had to repeat all their examinations at Argentinian universities, which posed insolvable problems to older immigrants. Foreign surgeons often did operations in the name of native doctors, for a lump sum.

Whoever had been or was defined as a newcomer, it did not matter; in New Zealand and Australia it ought to be different. So it was very hard for Jewish immigrants, particularly for any that were not orthodox and drew their inner strength from religion, from a world that violated their descent, to come into another world that they despised because they were not born there.

Therefore they strived with all their energy to rise and become born and bred Argentinians, as they had expressly tried once before to be German. An ambition that could not be successful due to language reasons – even though the Spanish language is so easy compared with German. They switched to English and tried just as unsuccessfully to act as if they were British, since England was a world power and monarchy, which had a magic attraction for the Jews battling with feelings of inferiority. But that did not count for much in Argentina, since the British were resented for the economic hegemony and likewise the occupancy of the Falkland Isles.

In private contempt was paid back with contempt: *they work like Europeans, but if you scrape a little away, they are only painted monkeys*. This was written by a German diplomat on a card that was made public and caused scandal.

“Cackling geese” my mother called the Argentinian women when they arrived and greeted each other, shrieking and giving each other air kisses. Wasp waists, sausage legs, infinitely well groomed and elegant, talking about the four big “Cs” (Cooking, Church, Children and Clothes) and servants. The men: so worldly wise, so bright, so cynical, so charming, so ambiguous, so witty, so through and through inscrutable.

A main reason for the helplessness of the newcomers before the constitution of Argentina, I believe lies in the fact that the word NO exists but is never used. Although the local dialects almost crack in front of peculiarity, in front of creative swear words, although dozens of fabulous comics know how to bring to light the local minds, there seems to exist a taboo on a direct NO, that its use would epitomise the obscene. So there is only: *yes, of course, naturally, sure, first thing tomorrow*. In this way every promise is worthless, every programme in planning is already unachievable. What cannot be improvised, will not be done.

After 40 years in ever increasingly successful Austria, did I become Austrian? I had the grace to escape to Argentina from Hitler, to Vienna from the Argentinian military dictator that had taken charge with the left terror, the terrible political murders and the economic misery. I am a citizen of a nation, in which more and more talents are continually emerging, in relation to its size, from a centre of culture. Is it the endemic jealousy that keeps me at a distance?

I was never able to feel I was a born and bred Argentinian. But thanks to the fact that I grew up there I am a lot more Argentinian than I will ever be Austrian. We have no word that corresponds to 'negritude'; but should there be a 'south Ameritude' then perhaps it incorporates things I do, together with my admiration for the archaic and naïve, what I am: a mixture of two worlds – perhaps a secret quest for the roots that I never missed.