

studio

Process and Perspectives in Clay

talk



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A STUDIO PRACTICE CENTERED ON BEAUTY

Lotte Westphael

I am a Danish ceramic artist and my medium is porcelain. My work is based on a personal immersion in a technique that unfolds in a graphic universe. I am inspired by textiles and work with proportionality in lines and color fields, deriving inspiration from Anni Albers and Agnes Martin, as well as my Nordic heritage.

I call my vessels *Syncopes*, a musical expression referring to a disturbance or interruption of the regular flow of rhythm. This concept of syncopation gives me artistic freedom for the irregularity that comes from the technique and the material.

The Studio

I moved into my studio four years ago. Before that, I made ceramics in my large living room and had a kiln in a small outbuilding,

but this setup was far from ideal. When I was planning my first solo exhibition, I needed more space. Now I rent a workspace in a converted farm building within walking distance of my home. There are two other artists at the same location working in clay and bronze. Occasionally, we give each other professional feedback.

I have my own heated room (323 square feet (30 m²)) with work tables, storage for clay, and a corner with shelves for finished pieces. Furthermore, I have an adjacent, unheated room (161 square feet (15 m²)) with water and my three kilns. I recently bought two new kilns, since leading up to exhibition deadlines I needed to be able to fire all of the kilns simultaneously. This is primarily because I have changed my firing ramp for the large, thin porcelain cylinders, which require a much slower firing and cooling.



“ I consider every new vessel as an answer to a question the previous piece has raised.”



1 Planning for new works in the studio, sketching, and using books as inspiration. Photo: Erik Balle. 2 Left to right: *Yellow Grid Gradient*, *Yellow Syncope Gradient*, *Little Yellow Syncope*, *Polyrhythm*, *Yellow Polyrhythm Gradient*, to 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, unglazed colored porcelain, slab built, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. Photo: Sylvain Deleu.

Since my ceramics are unglazed and I work with slab-building techniques, I do not need a lot of equipment. The most important tools I use are a knife, a ruler, and a rolling pin. To prepare the initial clay slab, I have a North Star slab roller. This rolls out the porcelain to slightly less than ¼ inch (5–6 mm) thick. I then roll it again manually with the rolling pin and use Plexiglas sheets to precisely determine the thickness of the slabs (3 mm).

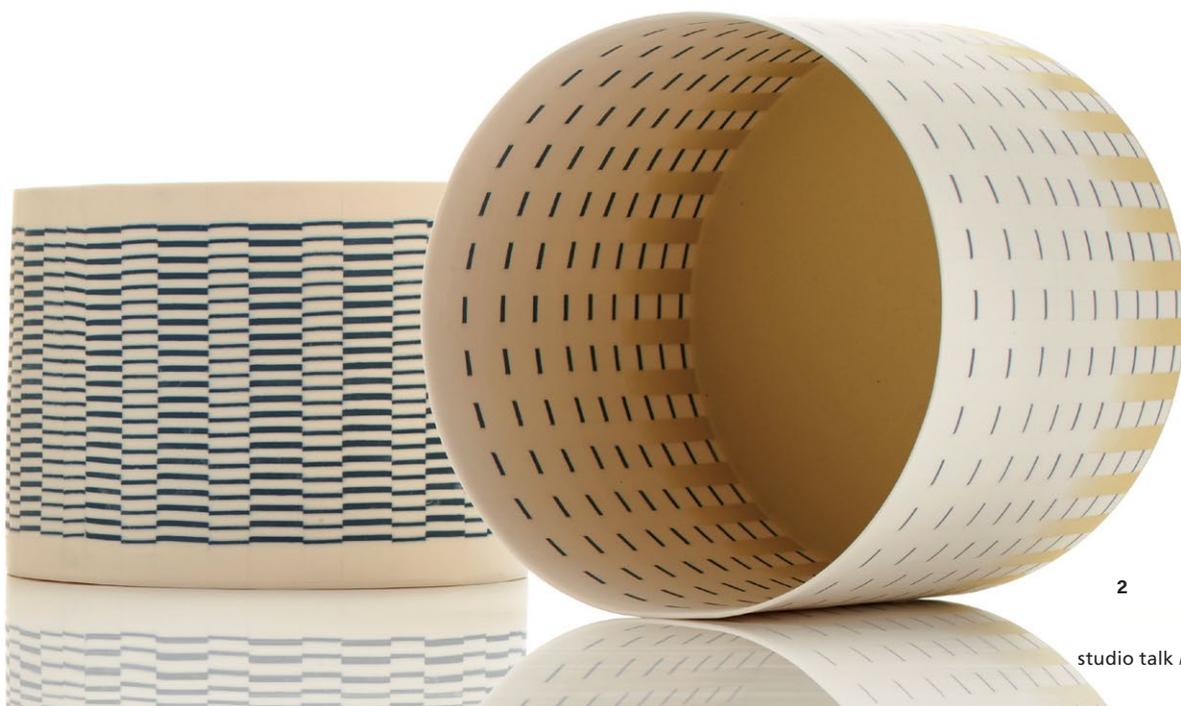
I have an electric height-adjustable work table. It is an advantage to be able to vary the height of the table during different stages of my process. This is especially the case when I form the slab into a cylinder as I need to see the vessel from different angles.

I keep my studio clean and tidy, and always end my day by cleaning up, then the studio is nice to come to the next day.

Background

I was educated at Design School Kolding in Kolding, Denmark. This was a five-year education in ceramics and glass with a master's degree in applied arts. During my education, I encountered a lot of guest teachers. Their approaches to their own practices and to a variety of materials was very inspiring on both a professional and personal level. One of the artists was Takeshi Yasuda and his words, “You don't fail enough, I want you to fail more. . .” are still in my mind more than 25 years later. For me, it is important to follow an artistic idea and make something new.

Before I began taking classes in ceramics, I traveled to Asia and ended up staying in Japan for half a year. I subsequently returned for another half year during my studies. I consider this



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time in Japan as a formative journey. I was a studio apprentice at Kazu Nagayoshi's pottery in Kyushu. Every morning, he had a fixed routine in the studio: lighting the stove, putting the kettle on for tea, sweeping the floor, etc. Now, I have similar routines in the morning in my studio. I often walk through the forest to get to my studio, after going for a morning swim in a nearby lake (even in the winter). On this walk, my workday actually begins. Here I prepare myself for the day's tasks, and I often get new ideas while walking.

Inspiration

My work is interdisciplinary, in the intersection between textiles and ceramics, and my main interests are patterns, colors, and structures. I start working flat with slabs and then I transform the final pattern into a volumetric form. In my practice, I am primarily inspired by a textile universe. The Bauhaus-weavers Anni Albers and Gunta Stölzl, Japanese ikat, and my grandmother's weaving book are my inspiration.

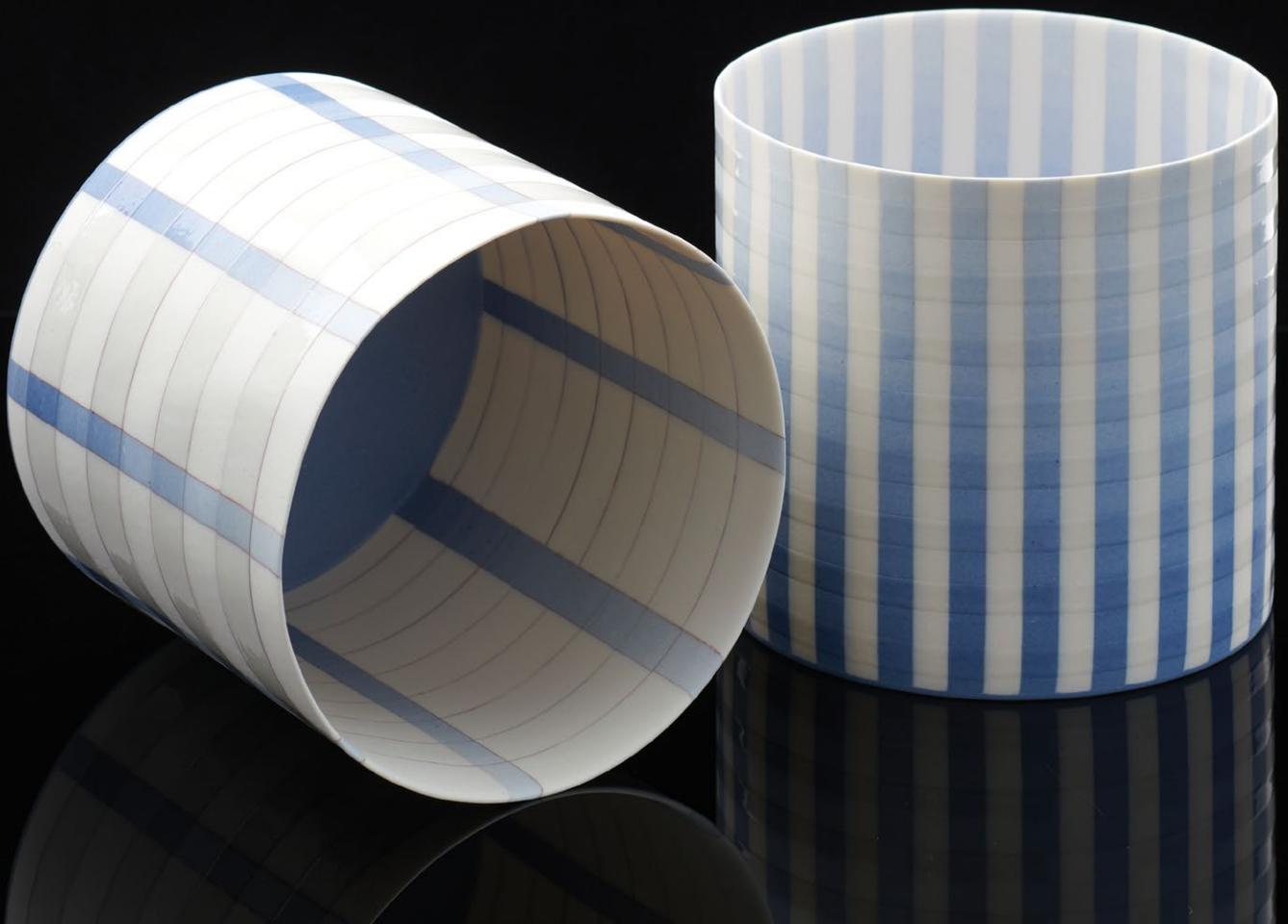
My artistic expression is new, while at the same time being part of a Danish studio pottery tradition. My first aesthetic experience of ceramics was with Alev Siesbye's bowls, which I saw in an exhibition when I was 16 or 17 years old. There was a simple white room where her ceramics were displayed. It looked as if all the bowls were floating on their tiny, tiny feet. I remember the feeling of my mind opening for this beauty, and I remember the simplicity. It was magical.

Beauty is absolutely essential for me in my life and in my works, and I have a constant awareness of patterns, contrasts, lines, and colors. With respect to beauty, I would like to quote Agnes Martin, who's a great inspiration for me: "Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in my eyes, it is in my mind."

A Question-and-Answer Approach

There is an element of excitement about making ceramics. That appeals to me, because I am challenged by the notion of how things might turn out and about how the finished piece will look.

3 Color samples and a pattern designed for a vessel. 4 Use a rolling pin and Plexiglas boards to make the thickness of the slabs very precise. 5 Unloading a kiln (there are three kilns total). 3–5 Photos: Erik Balle. 6 *Bluestriped Gradient Syncope I + II*, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, slab-built unglazed colored porcelain, glaze, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. 7 *Polyrhythm Gradient-Rouge*, 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, slab-built unglazed colored porcelain, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. 6, 7 Photos: Sylvain Deleu.



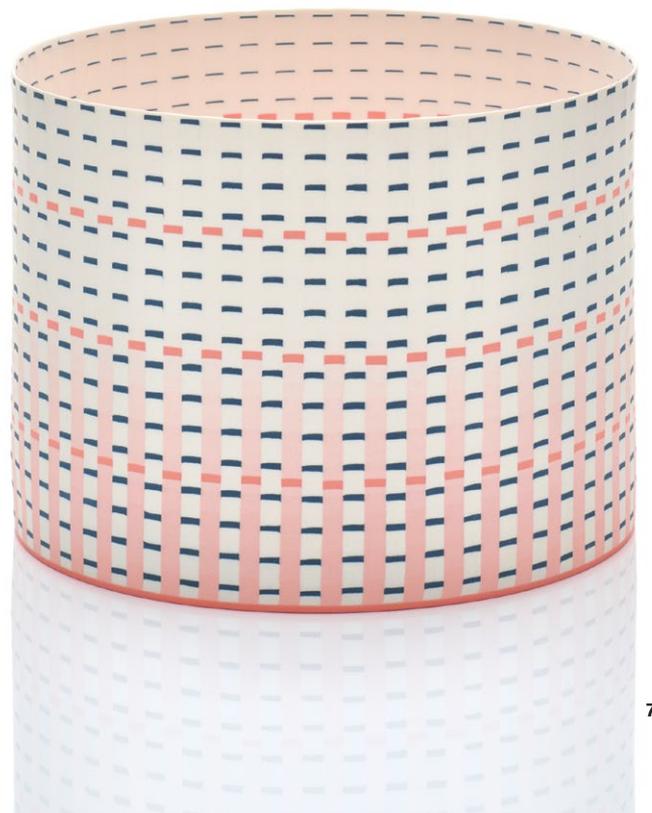
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You have to work through all the processes and stages in ceramics before the final result reveals itself after the firing.

It is in my DNA to systematize and try different variations within the same theme. Therefore, I consider every new vessel as an answer to a question the previous piece has raised. If all my works were placed chronologically in a row, there would be a clear reference to this approach. I make sketches, but when transferring them into a vessel, I always make slight changes (for example, in the rhythm of how the templates are assembled). Making a vessel involves a lot of advance planning. The colors in the unfired porcelain are very different from the finished colors. It is especially difficult to see the difference in the pastels, and it is important to have a kind of master plan. I have small paper tags with the numbers of the colors written on them and keep them lying on the clay through the whole process, otherwise I lose track.

One can say that my vessels are a result of detailed planning and subsequent improvisation. When I am in the middle of working with the porcelain, I get inspired and encouraged by the process to make something other than what I had planned.

Inspiration comes from a variety of inputs. When I saw my vessels in sunlight, I saw that the quality of color completely changed. From this, I carried out a lot of tests of very soft colors that had almost no pigment. I thought it was interesting to make vessels where the color appears almost white until a light was shining through, revealing the hues and vibrancy of the colors.



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The sunlight activated my vessels and I seized on this discovery to develop the pieces further.

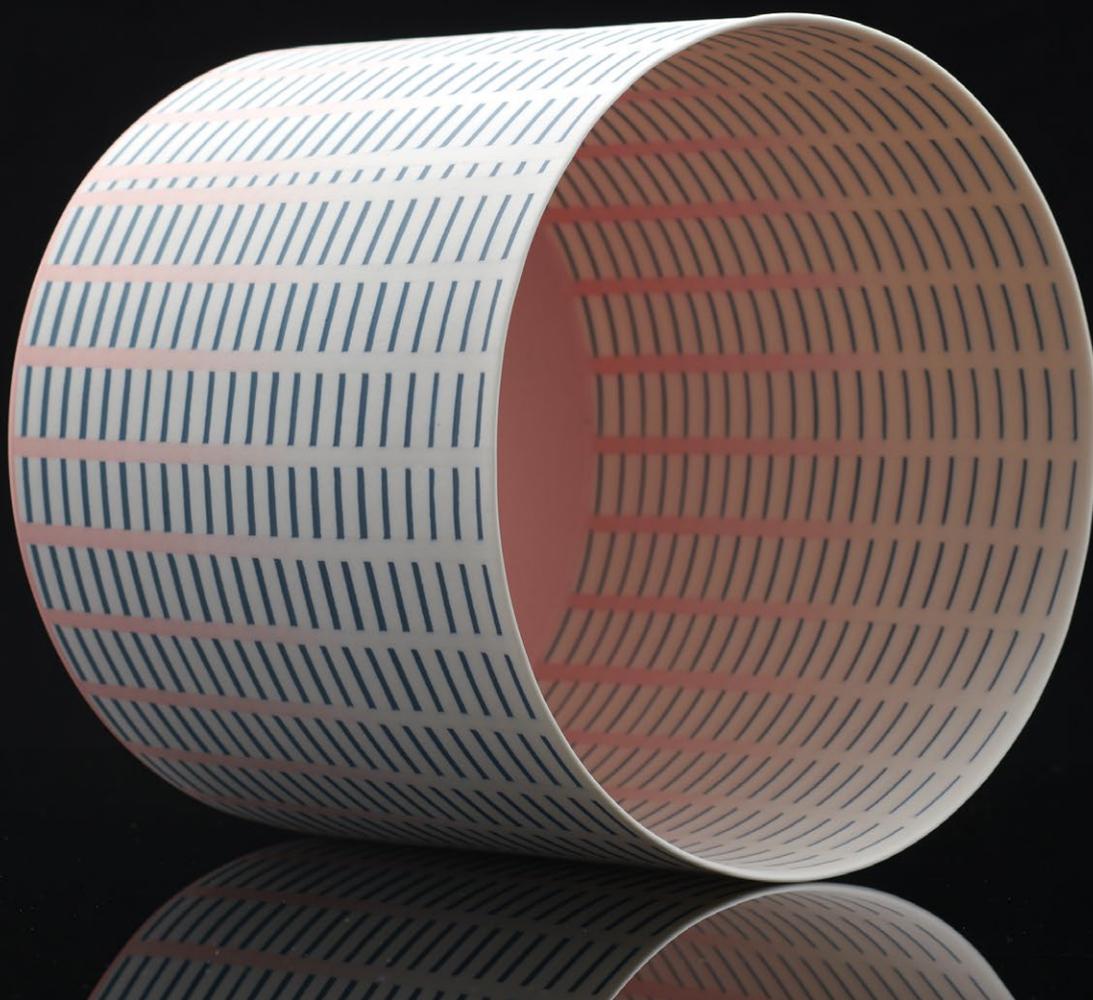
I use the cylindrical form as a three-dimensional canvas for my patterns. Working with these patterns and the color combinations captivates me so much so that I don't feel the urge to explore other shapes. Technically, I go right to the limit—and fail! I work with different techniques: slab building, the Japanese mishima technique, and cutting and rejoining porcelain strips. My technique is like patchwork. The work with the *Syncopes* is very demanding. It takes a month to make 1–2 pieces, and the drying period is another month. Due to the thinness and all of the joints, approximately 25–30% of the pieces crack in the process.

I have been close to giving up making the *Syncopes* several times because of this demanding and time-consuming process. But when I open the kiln and have a successful firing that sometimes exceeds my expectations, I am encouraged to continue.

Marketing

Earlier in my career as a ceramic artist, I used to make utilitarian items and porcelain jewelry, which I sold at craft fairs and in museum shops. As my artistic expression has become clearer and the

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8 *Blue Grid Gradient I*, 9 in. (23 cm) in diameter, slab-built unglazed colored porcelain, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. **9** *Blushing Polyrythm*, 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter, slab-built unglazed colored porcelain, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. **10** The plastic containers on the shelves in her studio keep all the different colors of porcelain separated. **11** Lotte Westphael at the door to her studio in a converted farm building. **10, 11** Photos: Erik Balle. **12** Lotte Westphael with *Polyrythm Gradient-Bluegrey*, 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, slab-built unglazed colored porcelain, fired to 2264°F (1240°C) in oxidation. **8, 9, 12** Photos: Sylvain Deleu.



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technique I use to create the vessels has improved, my *Synopes* have also become better. Now, I exclusively make unique pieces for exhibitions and sell my work through galleries.

I have a calendar with deadlines for applications and am systematic about this. My collaboration with a professional photographer has also been a good investment to present my work in the best way possible. I like my visual communication to match the level of the galleries I work with. My own communication about my work is conducted on Instagram. I consider this platform both as an invitation for interested parties to follow my practice in my studio and as a showcase for finished *Synopes*.

In the last several years, I have applied to biennales, and in the US I have exhibited in *Fahrenheit 2018* at the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) in California. I am represented by Plinth Gallery in Denver, Colorado, and Galerie Maria Wettergren in Paris, France. With the latter, I have exhibited at Design Miami-Basel in Switzerland, among other places. This autumn I am very excited to have been accepted for KICB 2021, the Korean International Ceramic Biennale, which will take place October 1–November 28, 2021, at the Gyeonggi Museum of Contemporary Ceramic Art in Gyeonggi, South Korea.

To learn more, follow Lotte Westphael on Instagram @lottewestphael.