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AN INTERVIEW WITH HÉLÈNE MORBU

Hélène Morbu is a ceramicist based in Nantes, France. In this interview, Hélène discusses the early influences behind her work, her personalised approach to texture, and her evolving exploration of colour and form in ceramics.

CG How have your studies in Reims and Paris, and your Saint Quentin upbringing, shaped your approach to ceramics?

HM Each visit to a city or a school has shaped my vision of art and ceramics. In St Quentin, the town of my childhood, with its Art Deco heritage, I was immersed in an architectural universe with pure and geometric lines, and great importance was given to the decorations of the facades. The texture and patterns created by the bricks or the decorations of stylised foliage and flowers sculpted in concrete became a part of my daily life.

At the Beaux-Arts in Reims I learned to think, develop concepts and design objects with meaning. This school also allowed me to enrich my design culture. As for Paris, the city represents for me the discovery of ceramic materials technically and aesthetically. My studies allowed me to learn how to work with clay, to master certain gestures and to approach the science of ceramics.

CG Can you share more on what sparked your interest in Art Deco and ancient pottery, and any other inspirations reflected in your ceramics?

HM Art Deco interests me because this movement draws its inspiration from the great ancient cities. There is something grandiose and timeless in this way of approaching architecture with almost classical rigour and symmetry. The lines are solemn and dynamic emphasising the decorations, the nature



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is stylised, as well as being geometrical, and so, this movement immerses me in somewhat magical worlds that are both ancient and futuristic.

The importance of decor and these pure lines is often found in my work. I am also inspired by nature. The observation of the plant and mineral world suggests movement and sparks ideas of volume. Over the years I became interested in textile work to enrich my palette of texture and colour.

CG I understand you make your own tools to craft your unique patterns in your ceramics. Can you explain what inspired this, and how you create the textures resembling textiles or basketry?

HM It all starts with play and chance, even if I am very rigorous in my work, you also have to let yourself be carried away sometimes, to try without a predefined idea. Just grab a piece of dirt and have fun. So one day I was playing with a tiler's comb that was lying around in the workshop and I started to create imprints in the clay. A very basic and simple gesture that I repeated in different ways and gradually a texture appeared. The result seemed interesting to me and all the work then consisted of developing this idea, designing your own tools to vary the textures.

What is quite magical is being able to transform



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the material with a simple gesture and project it into other universes according to the patterns and colours used. Certain textures are in fact very close to textiles and basketry. This sensation is possible because in addition to the relief created by the combs I use the colour of the stoneware and the enamel to create other patterns or matte and shiny contrasts which accentuate the idea of a braiding or a fabric.

CG Can you describe your process from concept to finished piece, and how you tackle challenges along the way?

HM The process differs depending on the project. Often I have a very precise idea and I begin by drawing the pieces and patterns. I then create the combs according to this drawing and so comes the mock-up stage. This step is essential because it allows me to visualise the final object but it also serves as training for me to memorise the outline and the rhythm. Everything should be self-evident when it comes to formatting. So I have to repeat my movements, a bit like choreography. What can also happen is ideas of shapes appear when I manipulate the clay and transform the original pattern of my piece design.

To encounter ceramic challenges, you must not be afraid to start again. It takes a lot of patience, observing, analysing, starting again, understanding and learning.

CG How do you blend geometric precision with organic forms in your designs, choosing distinctive smooth textures and rough lines for each creation?

HM Over the years and creations I have refined my gesture and my technique, trial and error have been essential. I have also created a sort of library of shapes, textures and colours. What I am looking for is a balance, a language of my own. I have a lot of samples lying around the workshop, I like to have them in front of me all the time and the game lies in assembling textures, shapes and colours to create a harmonious and unique piece. Each object must be beautiful, refined, precious and unique.

CG What influences your choice of colour palette and enamel technique, enhancing the contrast and relief in your work?

HM What influences my choice is the impression and sensation that I want to convey. The colours are sometimes very bright and contrasting to create very graphic works. Sometimes the enamel just adds shine and contrasts with the dullness of the clay, creating the impression of a shiny surface that sparkles with the light.

I recently created a collection of pieces with very round and organic shapes in shades of grey and white to highlight the shape. The colour and the use of a matte or satin enamel is in this case resembles a skin which emphasises the shape and captures the light in a very soft way.

CG What do you hope viewers experience when engaging with your ceramics, especially in terms of line and form, texture and visual impact?

HM I print the clay, transform it and transport it to other universes, creating objects with unexpected results.

Their surfaces takes on the appearance of textiles, reptile skin, lace,

basketwork or plants. I expect the viewer to question themselves, to be surprised and seduced by this material, to want to touch it, to admire its vibrations with the light, its play of colours or its sensuality. It is the physical reality of the object that takes on meaning and not its concept.

I would like my pieces to be timeless, the shapes are contemporary and at the same time very classic. The viewer should be touched not because this piece follows a movement or a fashion, but because it appears balanced and immutable.

CG How has recognition, like the awards from Ateliers d'Art de France, impacted your career and style?

HM This award brought me visibility and strengthened the interest of the public and galleries in my work. "The Creator" award allowed me to have great freedom in my work and to create larger-scale installations and pieces.

CG Looking ahead, do you see your work evolving in terms of themes and techniques?

HM Yes my work will evolve, I am constantly juggling different shaping techniques. At the moment I would like to make pieces on the potter's wheel, focusing more on volume. I started working in this direction last year with sets of spheres and tubes which fit together and reveal the structure of the object. With time I would like to explore my interest in enamel and do more research in this direction.



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16 Crawford Street, London W1H 1BS