

Elizabeth Degenszejn: Handbuilding with Porcelain

Betty Ng

Elizabeth Degenszejn handbuilt porcelain sculptures for her recent graduation show. They were all based on the form of a square. You can find out more about Elizabeth and her work at www.elizabethdegenszejn.com.

We are very grateful to Elizabeth for sharing her knowledge and experience with us. This is what she has told us.

Why do you choose porcelain to deliver the narratives of your artwork?

I chose to work with porcelain because its pure colour and smooth texture allowed me to focus on the beauty of form without being distracted by the surprises and effects that impurities have on clay. These qualities of porcelain also enabled me to be more effective in expressing fluidity.

What types of porcelain clay do you use and why?

I am currently working with white porcelain paper clay as it has enough structure to start building from very thin slabs and to twist and turn them, which otherwise would easily tear. It can also be dampened and brought back to a workable texture without cracking, even after it has dried to a certain degree. This is an important quality for my work because I use a wet sponge to create the curves. Plain porcelain would not withstand this process of adding moisture back without cracking or collapsing (I have tried it!). Paper clay can be dry in some areas and damp in adjoining ones with a reasonable resistance to cracks. I don't make my own paper clay because there are good options available.

I have also chosen to work with Onyx Black Porcelain™ from Potclays as it has a beautiful uniform and unique black tone which is neutral and contrasts with the white colour. This clay however has no paper content, which imposes limits to the form and the extent in which it can be twisted. I have not yet experimented with adding paper to the Onyx Black Porcelain although that is a possibility I do consider. I haven't yet tested it as I am still experiencing the limitations of the clay as is. I am testing different colours currently but am focusing more on developing and testing forms. Coincidentally, I am now playing with joining these two clays together, so I still have no experience to share. Because both colours have the

same body (porcelain), I would anticipate they should shrink at the same rate, therefore I would not expect too many surprises, unless the stains impact the shrinkage rate in ways I am not yet familiar with.



What challenges do you have to overcome with working with porcelain? What boundaries, if any, do you need to push? How do you go about them?

Porcelain requires you to trust your skills, be confident and above all, patient. There is an emotional challenge to overcome in addition to the technical one that needs to be mastered! I am not there yet but am also learning. On the emotional side, when the piece collapses or cracks, and it does many times, I need to breath and tell myself to persist and not give up. In the end, this conversation always pays off either because I was successful or because I learnt from my mistakes. The important lesson is not to give up!

On the technical side, handbuilding with porcelain implies having to constantly manage and control the drying process. It is important to spray with just enough water,