

# In studio with André von Martens

André von Martens' studio lies in an idyllic setting, far from the hustle and bustle of city life. He says of his black ware ceramics, "It is not easy to fire a ceramic body so that it is black through and through." In this interview, one of the things we ask him is what is required to achieve this effect in spite of the difficulties.

Evelyne Schoenmann

*Herr von Martens, I am fascinated by your studio. It looks as if you have an individual piece of equipment for each stage of production. Can you tell the readers something about your studio?*

I have constructed various pieces of equipment without which certain vessels could not be made. Gradually, various tools and machines have evolved to work on my vessels and to dry them. My appliances, tools and the firing technique have

*How did you come to be so fascinated with black ware?*

Unglazed ancient and prehistoric pots fascinated me as a child and through adolescence – corded ware or linear pottery for instance. Burnished and scored black ware from the Etruscan or Puebloan cultures seem to me to be finer and more mysterious. I like the forms of Celtic pots and Slavic pots for their simplicity. I feel porous black ware bodies are warmer in

studio. I cannot imagine working with a red, brown or black body. The wood-like grain on the surface of the pot depends on the quantity of the grog added and the gauge of the riddle screen.

The composition of the body affects how it can be thrown and burnished, how much it shrinks, its breaking strength and stability. It is relatively difficult to get all the properties in harmony. Like medicine, sometimes there are side effects.



always developed at the same time as my current plans and requirements for the vessels. The functional aspect is given. But at the same time these aids have to be aesthetic. But my black ware is not made as a result of these tools and facilities for making and firing. They are made intuitively with the appliances and tools in a kind of dialogue.

I spend a lot of time in my studio and the working environment is my home. A sense of order and clarity is important to me.

comparison to vitrified stoneware.

*What are the reasons why you prepare your clay yourself as well as the beeswax in which you "pickle" your pots after firing?*

There are various reasons why preparing clay yourself is sensible and necessary. My working body mainly consists of a mix of domestic clays as well as grog and mica. Iron rich clays which have shades of red, yellow and green are easier to fire black through and through. The colour of the body I work with is important when I am working in my stu-

I don't need to prepare the beeswax. I heat it to its maximum expansion at 200°C to soak the porous black ware after firing. The wax is self cleansing because any impurities adhere to the absorptive body, which is then wiped clean and "dried" with a cloth, but the pot must not be any cooler than approximately 170°C. The pots are then impermeable and have a warm, woody sound.

*When we spoke in Oldenburg, you said magic is important to you ...*

Magic, did I really put it like that? I find it very difficult to write about the aura or the presence of my pots. They often have something spiritual about them, and I find that important. A certain tension, which is not obtrusive. Sometimes you can sense something like a very quiet, fine, meditative sense of majesty in the vessels. These kinds of presence vary and of course they are highly subjective. I do not always succeed in creating this kind of tension. Sometimes the vessels are too perfect, they seem vain or not yet fully matured. In situations like these, the appropriate sensitivity was missing, or the timing or the joy in making. When I was making them, I did not manage to create harmony, or a dialogue; they were made exclusively with the head. To me such vessels are worthless.

*Now we are very eager to learn about your working methods, and especially about the kiln you built yourself.*

The black ware kilns and also my ves-

and is not flammable. The familiar historic firing techniques never completely satisfied me for years. The body usually did not turn black, or not black all the way through; sometimes it was silvery. If the colour turned out right, the body was either too fragile or too strongly vitrified – and even when the results were very good, there were always breakages.

Perhaps I can add something typical about myself: I am relatively patient and take as long as necessary for my work. In the process, I sometimes discover a possible improvement and then I have no peace until I have tried to put into practice what I think I have learned. This means there is always the chance of an improvement and I find myself in the process.

*The interesting tools you use: did you make them yourself?*

Only partly: the semi-precious stones I use, the cogwheels from clocks, the carbide blades, they have all come from

commercially available tools and machines do not meet my special requirements.

*Your signature includes a stylised bird, which has a different expression on every piece. Does the bird have a special meaning?*

The signature with the bird has a meaning. It is an abbreviated form of my name combined with the year of production and the bird, which represents me and shows my current state of mind in its expression. For me personally, the year of production is the most important aspect, to be able to determine the composition of the body and the firing technique at a later date.

*Can you tell us something about future projects?*

I would always like to have as much time for my ceramics as they need for their precise and thorough completion. You can find current projects on my website.



sels have developed over many years and have evolved from their predecessors. The kiln completed in 2015 is a development of the firing technique from 2011, which, as far as I know, only existed here. In this process, the vessels were placed in a kind of saggar with wood and paper and fired to their particular optimal temperature until maximum stability and easing of tension in the body are achieved. I call this kind of black firing "graphitisation". The residue after firing looks like charcoal but contains absolutely no energy

somewhere. They were adapted for my purposes or mounted. That is what happened when I built the two potter's wheels. One can be lowered automatically because I like to work standing up. The other one is big and powerful but it can be very finely controlled. The wheelhead is connected to the motor via a gearbox. The speed of rotation is controlled by a potentiometer with the frequency converter. I did not make the components, I merely assembled them in order to use them for my ceramics. Com-

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Evelyne Schoenmann will be conducting her next interview with **Gry Ringset (Norway)**.  
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