

"As an artist, I work on an introspective basis...."

Interview with Stefanie Brehm by Katja Andreae

Stefanie Brehm describes her work as a penetration of materials. She focuses on forms and colours and less on messages of a political nature. Nevertheless, daily observations find their way into her work in a very personal manner, in the form of sound and action. Katja Andreae talked to her about her daily routine as an artist and mother of three children, her vision and passion for exploring materials.

Before studying at the Munich art academy, you trained as a ceramicist. Did you know then that you wanted to work as a visual artist later on?

When I started at the school of ceramics I had also considered applying to art colleges. However, I thought it made sense to gain a sound basis as part of a training course that would teach me the necessary skills and let me get to grips with the material. My attraction to art dates back to my school days. Once I'd finished my training, my clear aim was to study art.

How has your engagement with material developed since leaving the academy?

Well, of course I wanted to continue producing large-format ceramics as I'd done at the art academy, so I had to seek new work opportunities. Once the first major project started and a scholarship gave me the chance to study at the ceramic centre in the Netherlands, I was also able to hone my ceramic skills. Compared to general elementary training, you are delving into much more specific areas. Techniques of lesser interest are dropped automatically and you realise faster which artistic path you would like to follow. What's more, you learn things of inestimable value from the ceramic experts working at the centre.

You need a particular setting in which to produce your works. And you also have three children, which is another challenge. How do you organise your working day?

Since becoming self-employed and living in the country with my family, I tend to work more in blocks.

I use a studio near our home where I make my polyurethane pieces and do my painting. If I want to work with ceramics, I'm currently dependent on external facilities and studios, which is why residencies are very important to me.

Does having to produce your ceramic works elsewhere bother you?

No, I enjoy getting out and about, it gives me a fresh take on things. In the long term though, I plan to set up my own ceramics studio, which will make it easier to work continuously on the one hand, and on the other I like the idea of my children being able to experiment with

ceramics. Children don't tend to be welcome in conventional workplaces, but coming along to the studio occasionally is fine.

It still sounds a little as if you're juggling with work and family life.

Absolutely, though being a mother has always tended to be more of a help than a hindrance career-wise. I see them as two vocations that go hand in hand. When the children were very small, I sometimes only had a couple of hours a day for my art. It made me organise my work process a lot more efficiently. I knew that I had to get things done fast. Time pressure often blocks artists, but in my case, it always left me no choice but to get to the point. I have achieved a lot more in shorter stints than in longer work periods. Decisions about colours and forms had to be made much faster and so naturally they were a lot more intuitive. Ruminating on things for a long time sometimes distracts you away from your original instincts. In a way, time pressure acts as an impetus.

This year you are going to take up an artist-in-residency at Prösitz near Leipzig that is especially aimed at artists who are also mothers. Do you think that the art world is focusing more strongly on this, or is there still room for improvement?

The Prösitz artist estate is the only project I know of that caters so intensively for female artists by providing childcare for their children. Therefore, I would say that we could do with more initiatives of this nature. Unfortunately, many residencies aren't interested in this aspect at all.

In a way it's a double-edged sword, because the children have to be willing to leave their familiar surroundings for a longer period and the artist is exposed to a lot of mental pressure. However, I have heard about planned residencies in which scholarships are granted to home-based artists. The women artists have access to a fully-fledged mentorship programme, but they can continue to work from home and use the existing infrastructure. That would also work for me. As an artist with children you can't always go to places at the drop of a hat.

Your work always radiates materiality and plasticity. You combine your ceramic works with polyurethane, which is a rather unconventional material mix. How do you create correspondences between the two materials?

Ceramic has been one of my main materials since my training. However, the art academy and its many workshops gave me the chance to experiment with other materials.

Why I'm so attracted to plastic is probably because it is such a common feature of our lives. Plastic is everywhere and its surface qualities and appearance are often very appealing. You can imbue the material with an incredible intensity of colour. The natural brilliance of the plastic further enhances the vibrancy of the colours. Plastic offers a much wider and more extravagant range of colours that includes neon shades, which come out perfectly. You don't get this in ceramics, although even there, I tend to depart from traditional colours like blue, grey, brown and ochre or I combine them with different colours. Using a spray gun in a painterly sense is also atypical for ceramics. My approach to working with materials

therefore tends to be fairly unconventional. Although plastic is a much more modern material than ceramic with its very archaic air, both share a similar surface appearance.

You plan to add a new dimension to your work with glass. What inspired you to choose this material?

From the outset, glass and ceramic are closely related since glaze is basically glass. Detaching the outer skin of the ceramic to let it stand in its own right fascinates me. Polyurethanes also have a glassy look. Observers often mistake plastic for glass. This alone prompted me to think about working with the material. I don't mean to replace polyurethane with glass, but see glass as an additional material. I'm very open anyway to the idea of extending my repertoire of materials in the future. My focus is always on the forms and colours that penetrate the materials in an individual way.

As you say yourself, colours play a key role in your work. Do they have a specific role, are they the product of a drive for perfection, a matter of chance or sheer intuition?

I see colours as particles that convey something and have their own vibes, so I work very intuitively with them. When I'm focusing on a column, first of all I try to sense how high it is and how it feels to the touch, especially in terms of volume. Then I try to work out what manner of colouring would suit it, like lots of small details or broad swathes. That's usually how I first approach the process. Only then do I decide on a definite interplay of colours that I think works for the column or poly piece. How, and in which quantities, I apply the colours and which technique I use are small steps taken one at a time. I select the colour and think about how far it should go and how dynamic the action should be, and then it just happens.

Applying the glaze is not without risk. How many attempts do you have?

Sometimes it's a one-shot affair, although you can still react up to a certain point. I can't spray on hundreds of layers because the glaze would just run off, but I can check some processes. If I realise that I've overdone it, I do something about it right away. And that's how the game goes until I think I've got it right.

At the moment it seems as if artists are bent on adding political messages to their works. You don't appear to embrace this trend at all. How would you classify your works?

I always make a point of leaving my works open to interpretation, which doesn't mean that I'm apolitical, quite the contrary. I take a deep interest in what is going on in the world, but I don't feel an urge to draw attention to these happenings in my art. I want the observer to be able to feel something of me by looking at my works. Of course, they can't determine what I think about this topic or the other, but maybe they can identify a certain fundamental mood or attitude that I would like to convey. I'm not obsessed with reading external things into my works, my inspiration comes from within. This is maybe also reflected in the

centricity of my works, the concentration on mass and form. Amid the complexity of information and messages I always try to create harmony and not to let myself be distracted. What matters is how I (can) exercise a positive influence on the world and not so much about what everyone else does.

That's a refreshing approach. How is it reflected in your work?

By not always calling a spade a spade all the time. I'm aware of all the serious issues that affect our lives, including how we are manipulated in all possible directions of our being. At the same time, I know that I can only help change things for the better if I build up a new vision, rather than just criticising the old system. New visions are always positive visions, I'm not into visualising or elaborating horror scenarios. That is maybe why my works always seem cheerful and exude positive vibes. Colour always has something positive about it. My work aims to take observers beyond the status quo and current events and offer alternatives to those of them who can relate to my pieces.

As an observer you always wonder where artists find their inspiration. Is it an on-going process for you or do you have flashes of inspiration that you carry over into your work?

I continuously draw inspiration from everything around me. In the town or country, it makes no difference in terms of colour. But it's not as if I consciously seek colours. I have an inner sense of the sound of colours that I like. The sound changes from day to day and plays when I'm standing in front of my work. I also enjoy being alone in the studio because I like to get into a particular rhythm or mood with music or my own singing and dancing. Dancing and singing are two elements that often preface my work.

That's a nice thought, you dancing around in your studio.

Yes, syncing up my body has become a ritual. It doesn't have to be dancing, physical exercises, that make me so aware of myself that I want to express it in the colours and the medium I'm working with, work as well. My best ideas come to me when I feel light and elated. Freeing yourself from overly intellectual musings in order to focus on movement and dynamic action and express them in form and colour is a magical experience.