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emmanuel boos: The Poetics of Glaze Heidi McKenzie

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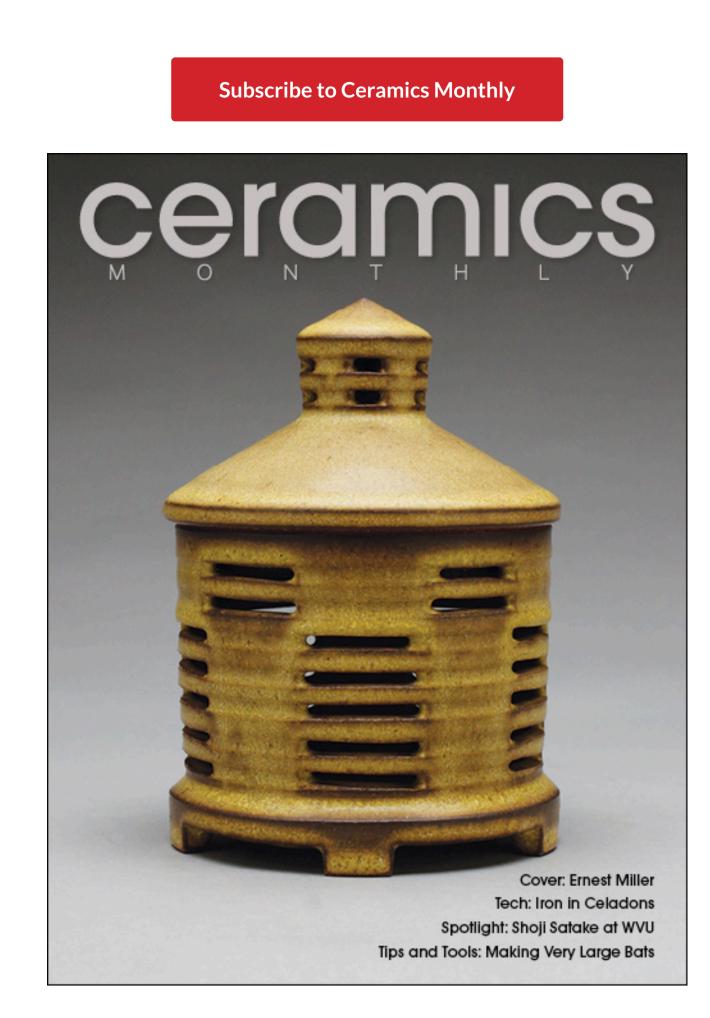
1 Terzett, 3¹/₂ in. (9 cm) in height (each cobble), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually fired in a gas kiln, balanced for installation, 2022. Photo: Sebastian Weindel.

I took the tram to Carouge, a municipality on the outskirts of Geneva, Switzerland, to explore its biennial ceramics festival, the Materia Prima-Ceramics, an Alchemical Art, that was timed to coincide with the International Academy of Ceramics' (IAC) 50th congress and 70th anniversary in Geneva, September 12–16, 2022. The Materia Prima is an initiative of the Bruckner Foundation for the Promotion of Ceramics, headquartered in Carouge, Switzerland.

Chance Encounter

As I wandered the cobblestoned streets, I chanced to peer into the vitrines of Peter Kammermann's interior architect studio where he displays a variety of finds from ancient Kelims to 19th-century furniture or Arts and Crafts fabrics and wallpapers, which he uses in his decoration projects. I was immediately drawn by the austere beauty of the ceramic works that held my gaze. I saw simple brick-like forms, a rainbow of pastels—seemingly celadons, abutted one against the other in a domino-like precarity, frozen in space and time. Spine was displayed simply on two large wooden benches. It has thirty-three porcelain bricks jacketed in various alchemies of ironbased glazes. I rapped on the door, as the artist was clearly inside setting up—I was a day early. When I mentioned my past contributions to *Ceramics Monthly*, emmanuel boos welcomed me graciously into the intimacy of his exhibition space.





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2 Duett, 85% in. (22 cm) in length (each brick), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually fired in a gas kiln, balanced for installation, 2022. Photo: Sebastian Weindel.

boos indulged me with stories about his process and his aesthetic theoretical frameworks, giving me an insider's glimpse of what I have now come to understand as one of the most sophisticated and well-researched methodologies of glazing on porcelain that I may ever have the great fortune to behold.

A Wonderland of Beauty

I was entranced. Admittedly, I am a minimalist by nature, and the simplicity of form, line, and decor speaks to my soul. With boos' work, I was in a wonderland of beauty without any frills or fanciness. The sheer power and strength of the work itself, multiples of bricks or cobblestones, in an array of celadons, tenmoku glazes, and persimmon glazes, stands on its own without the need for complex decorative motifs. boos has named the groupings of works using the German nomenclature according to the size of musical ensembles: Duett (2), Quartett (4), Septett (7), Dezett (10). *Terzett*, of midnight tenmoku gleaming tones, rests on a desk with absolute and decisive authority—as if it had been planted firmly there with intention and unabashed purpose. Other works, such as the off-white semi-matte Quartett, seem haphazard, an afterthought, all traces of the creative process erased. What struck me were the polarities or juxtapositions, visually in terms of tone and color, as well as the rhythms of multiples in monochrome palettes. *Duett*, in traditional celadon aqua blues, holds the tension of a calculated precarity. I found its essence wholly bewitching.



3 Left to right: Duett, Terzett, and Duett, to 85% in. (22 cm) in length (each brick), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually fired in a gas kiln, balanced for installation, 2022.

4 Dezett, 3¹/₂ in. (9 cm) in height (each cobble), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually fired in a gas kiln, balanced for installation, 2022.

Speaking with boos, I began to understand his fascination with tension and pitting opposites in ideas together: the brick and the cobblestone forms are themselves two of the most iconic foundational building blocks of Western civilization. Choosing to reproduce these forms in one of the most permanent, yet most fragile mediums, porcelain, is itself a commentary on the character and cleverness of the maker.

Intrigued, I returned to Canada and began my research.

Introduction and Experiences with Ceramics

boos was born in St. Etienne, France, and lives and works in Paris, France, and Mannheim, Germany. He was introduced to ceramics as a teen in 1984, when he was offered a scholarship to attend the Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine, US, where he was exposed to a wide range of artistic activities from still-life drawing to pottery. As with so many whose lives become inextricably entwined with clay, boos experienced an immediate affinity and attraction to the medium. He was hooked. Life has a way of fomenting our talents, and the multi-talented boos went on to achieve an MBA from ESSEC (École Supérieure des Sciences Économiques et Commerciales); pursue a career as an entrepreneur, and to work in international development, living, studying, and working in Burkina Faso, South Korea, China, Spain, and Germany.



By 2000, boos found his way into the studio of the French Ceramic Arts Master (Maître d'art) and Chevalier des Art et des Lettres honoree, Jean Girel. Notably, Girel was honored by the IAC at their 50th Congress in Geneva. Girel is best known for his thrown porcelain and unabashed experimentation with firing and glazing methodologies. One of the conditions of receiving the designation of Arts Master by the French state is to take on a three-year apprentice. Girel chose boos. The alchemy between master and apprentice proved volatile in the most productive and positive of ways.

Immediately after his apprenticeship, boos secured a summer residency at Alfred University, the pre-eminent ceramics educational institution in New York state. His career was firmly launched on an international stage when Philippe Jousse "discovered" boos, and gave him a platform to exhibit at Jousse Entreprise Gallery in Paris, France, in 2005. Between 2006 and 2011, boos carried out a fiveyear practice-led PhD at the Royal College of Art, London. His thesis, *The Poetics of Glaze: Ceramic Surface and the Perception of Depth*, afforded him the breadth to fully plumb his self-professed "interest in accidents and imprecision in material rendering."¹ In an attempt to condense five years of research, ideation, and applied ceramic practice, boos' research objectives may be summarized as an investigation into ceramic glaze's ability to create the impression or illusion of depth. boos notes that he is concerned with the coalescence of three elements: the practice of glaze, the literary poetic, and the transitional phenomenon. boos is deeply interested in "poetic tension"—he intends an expanded non-literal definition. boos qualifies his practice as "an attempt to re-enact and objectify the fusion between the self and the world."



6 Duett, 85/8 in. (22 cm) in length (each brick), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually gas fired, balanced for installation, 2022. Photo: Sebastian Weindel.

7 Terzett and Quartett, 3¹/₂ in. (9 cm) in height (each cobble), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually fired in a gas kiln, balanced for installation, 2022.

Play and unpredictability, failure and uncertainty, as well as the impossible, are central in his research. boos describes these possible outcomes, elaborating that "an essence of flux or a further element of play whose irresolution or unlikely balance can create yet another dimension of the poetic."

Dedicated to Ceramics

boos' voracious curiosity and hard-working tenacity have garnered him an international reputation in the field. He continues to be invited to international art fairs criss-crossing continents with his minimalist works. In 2016, he began his longstanding relationship as artist in residency at the pre-eminent Sèvres National Porcelain Manufacture (in the outskirts of Paris, France), which he completed in 2020. boos is currently located in Mannheim, Germany.

Bernard Bachelier, president of the French Ceramic Collectors Society, credits boos as an influential revolutionary voice through his work and study of porcelain, having dedicated his soul, heart, and hand to his work.²



8 Spine, 85% in. (22 cm) in length (each brick), slip-cast and altered porcelain, tea-dust glaze, individually gas fired, balanced for installation, 2022.

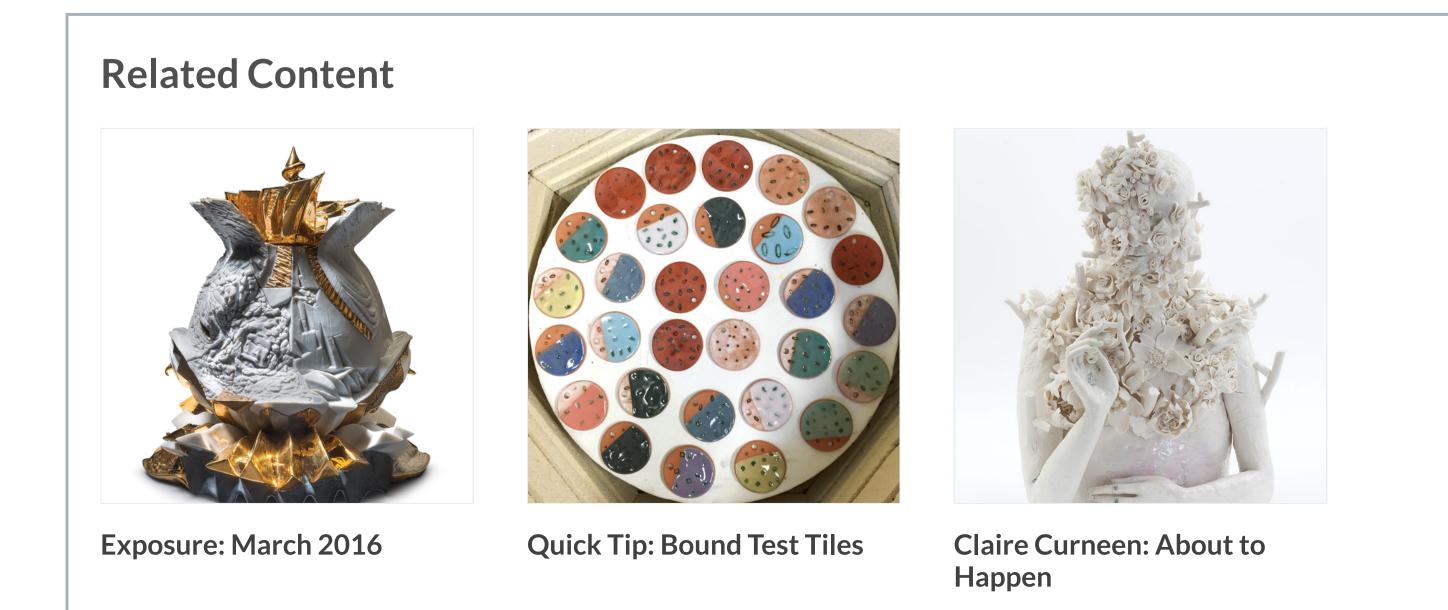
My window into the life and work of emmanuel boos began in Carouge, Switzerland. boos' impact within the international ceramics community clearly resonated with many: boos was awarded the first Michelle Dethurens prize for his exhibition in Carouge. The Ariana Ceramic Museum in Geneva (which hosted the IAC's members' and thematic exhibitions, and which houses their administration) acquired one of boos' brick sculptures, Duett. I believe that this artist's work is only just beginning to garner the international recognition that it deserves. Notably, this past March, 2023, boos was awarded the Artist of the Fair award at Collect 2023, held at Somerset House in London where his work was shown by the English gallerist Joanna Bird. He works with Peter Kammermann in Geneva and his main dealer is the gallery Jousse Entreprise in Paris. The question is, which gallery in the US will be wise enough to snap up this rising star?

the author Heidi McKenzie is an artist, author, and curator living in Toronto, Canada. Learn more at www.heidimckenzie.ca.

1 All quotes by emmanuel boos as cited in his Research Statement, (English version), 2011 unless otherwise stated.

2 Bernard Bachelier, Président, Club des Collectionneurs de Céramique, "emmanuel boos, praticien, théoricien et poète de la céramique." (English translation by the author).

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