



Malterud: Circle 2013, earthenware, diam. 31 cm. Photo: Øystein Klakegg

## Interview [www.kaolin.org](http://www.kaolin.org) Nina Malterud October 2014

English version

### 1. How did you become a potter? What attracted you to ceramics?

In the late 1960s I went to a high school in Norway with a strong focus on aesthetics and creativity, and I was encouraged by some teachers there to continue in this direction. I was accepted in the ceramic class at the National College of Art and Craft in Oslo in 1971, the first time I applied. I was 20 years old then, thrilled by the air of crafts and art. The economy in Norway was booming, and I was not worried about taking an education which was not leading to a secure income. This is a bit strange to think back about now – that I did not really consider the economic aspects, just hoping for the best.

My enthusiasm dropped during the years at the college, where the attitudes to ceramics and aesthetics were still based on ideas from the 50s. The revolts of 1968 with new ideas for education and also about art had not yet reached the college. However, I enjoyed the company of some fellow students with whom I still have professional and personal contact. We were influenced by the making philosophy of Bernard Leach and Hamada and wanted to work like them, not at all critical about what we now see as rather romantic attitudes.

To have a break from the study I was working one year as assistant of the great potter Lisbet Dæhlin (1924-2012, born in Denmark but lived in Norway most of her career). Staying in her studio, my motivation for ceramics recovered. I set up my own studio in Oslo in 1975 and involved myself actively in the community of craft artists and the discourse of studio craft in Norway.

**2. Although the articles by Jorunn Veiteberg already cover the topic very well, for this interview I would like to hear in your own words how you feel about the relationship between Craft and Art and the role of functional ceramics. How do you view the distinction between Art and Craft, and between functional and non-functional craft? How does your own work fit into these categories?**

This is a complicated issue, and my attitudes are influenced by my journey from being a ceramic artist, to becoming a professor, then the rector of an academy of art and design, and then starting up as an artist again. I will go back through the recent history of craft art in Norway, from my experience:

In 1974 many makers broke out of the organization they up till then have had with industrial designers. They left the idea that craft artists should make prototypes for industry and beautiful everyday objects (Scandinavian design) and instead proclaimed studio craft as a field of art. The public policy for the arts was in a great change in these years and resulted among other things in a new and rather generous system of grants for artists, craft artists included. This position of the crafts constituted my professional environment when I started up in 1975, and I got strongly involved with the discourse of craft art during the following years. Our work still referred to pots and plates but the artistic expression was more important than utility function. The artistic turn for the crafts offered a distance to the commercial market, and opened up for developing a new discourse. However, at the same time we still held on to the Leach version of craft as a good thing, which fitted very well with the general mood of the 70s' back-to-the-earth philosophy. I was one of the initiators of the magazine *Kunsthåndverk* (English: *Craft Art*) in 1979 – a magazine still alive in 2014.

When I was appointed as professor in ceramics at Bergen National Academy of the Arts in 1994, I was confronted with contemporary fine art discourses which I knew little about from before. Much of it represented new thinking to me, and craft discourses as I knew them were not really up to this. I saw how contemporary art had a strong influence on the ceramic students' interests and priorities, and how they were not so interested in learning skills in the old way. I felt a bit displaced, but at the same time I found the academy environment dynamic and challenging. I also saw that interaction between different disciplines was positively encouraged and that new positions were potentially breaking down the strict divisions between fine art and craft art. I enjoyed the educational and research atmosphere. I was a professor for 8 years and later the rector of the whole academy for 8 years (2002-2010), responsible for both art and design departments. I became more familiar with fine art practices, both contemporary and recent history, and I got some more critical distance to the craft art. The ceramic department gradually developed towards a fine art identity which for instance included sculpture, installations and the use of found objects a material, and I considered this development to be a natural consequence of the inclusion of craft in the arts back in 1974.

I started on my present body of work in 2011 when I had not made something for ten years. The rector job caused a break, but I think I also needed that pause to reposition myself. As an artist I did return to craft art. I have now deliberately developed my devotion to functional objects, which have such a rich tradition in the history of mankind. I hang on to the rich history of functional objects, but

utility qualities are not prioritized in my work. I will defend the instability and blurriness of the position of these objects and their right to be called art. I am still ambivalent to craft as a specific field of artistic practice. However, the presence of the field of craft art in Norway means support to exhibitions, promotion options nationally and internationally, and – not least – grants. I benefit from this and I am grateful.

**3. Do you prefer your work to be displayed in a gallery or used in someone's home? Ideally, how would your ceramics influence people?**

I stick my ambitions to the making and showing part, and leave open the works' fate after that. Exhibitions are important as public arenas for viewing and discussion. A private owner can have a very intimate relationship with an object, as I know from my own home, filled as it is with all sorts of artefacts collected over the years. So I am happy when a private person is buying a piece. To be selected for a museum collection is an honor, even if the work may be stored in a cupboard, but still probably to be viewed by more people than at home. Norway does not have a strong history in ceramics such as China, Japan and Korea, and there are few private collectors and in general little knowledge about the field's rich history.

**4. Your work often seems like a painting. Do you view your clay forms as blank canvases, or are they something more? Do you view yourself as making a painting, or just decorating? Is there any difference between the two?**

Since 2011 I have worked with flat forms with a tiny shivering rim, which makes the form a sort of basin or dish, not a tile. The clay form is an object in itself, not a canvas. However, the object comes alive and achieves its artistic value through layers of glazing and firings. The basin can be filled with layers and layers of glaze without the glaze running off the form. The glazing part of the process may be compared with painting – but with very different means. I aim for surprises from the process, but not very loud statements. The process makes specifically use of ceramic media.

**5. Can you tell us a little about the inspiration for your work? Have you been influenced by any Art or Craft movements, artists, historical periods, or natural phenomena?**

Inspiration sounds easy. I don't think the word inspiration sufficiently can cover the complexity of inputs for an artistic process. But there are influences, sources and disturbances.

I am not imitating nature, but in a way the clay and glazes themselves constitute new nature through the firing processes.

I am drawn to various sorts of folk art through the world and through the ages, for their brave and direct forms. I am also attracted to many visual artists from about 1900 till now for all the new and bold approaches. Many of them have different reasons for making and different expressions from mine, such as William Kentridge or Louise Bourgeois (especially her drawings and textile work). Matisse's Cut-outs at Tate Modern in London this summer was a great experience. I had not seen them for years and somehow in my memory reduced them to being too decorative. However, I now found them surprisingly intense.

I also spend time on literature, sound art, film and animation, but not in a systematic way, more following my nose. I sometimes envy intensely those who make art without kilos of physical material.

**6. You seem to have a very large palette of ceramic techniques and materials, and the combinations result in beautiful surfaces. How do you approach each new work? Do you make tests for each idea or combination of colors, or do you work mostly by intuition? Do you prefer very controlled conditions or would you rather be surprised when you open the kiln? If the latter, do you lose a lot of work in the process?**

I base my present work on glazes bought straight from the dealer and use them in various combinations on top of each other. I experiment with the glazes in the range of state of powder to thin milk, and I certainly avoid standards of fluidity and other practical advices. I fire and refire in a small toploader kiln, often up to ten times or even 20. I see the pieces as too "raw" until they have been through this process some times. From tests and from experiences I continue on intuition. I do not note precise descriptions for each piece, and cannot exactly repeat a result, but trace some of the ingredients. I seldom give up a piece, but give it a new try. But I am strict in the final selection.

**7. Often the surfaces of your work would be categorized by traditional ceramicists as mistakes. For instance, sometimes the slips and glazes on your Dishes crack or melt in uncontrolled ways. Is there such thing as a "mistake" in your work? How do you decide what is beautiful?**

Cracks and pinholes are so welcome. It is the very theme in my present work to find an unexpected beauty and to include and build on marks from the processes. This attitude does not fit in with very strict norms of utility. I try to let the glazes work for themselves, draw and paint, and continue until I think I have accomplished some intensity, depth and strangeness in each object.

More info: [www.ninamalterud.no](http://www.ninamalterud.no)