



Ann Van Hoey

Article by Noel Montrucchio

WHEN MEETING BELGIAN CERAMICS ARTIST AND designer Ann Van Hoey for the first time, it is difficult to know which is more impressive. Is it her existing body of work or the woman herself? Her work speaks for itself; lucidly and articulately and in a constantly rising crescendo. The woman, however, seems a paradox; proud and confident yet with an almost apologetic humility. She seems fully aware of what she has already achieved yet quietly wonders if there is still enough time left to reach the kind of artistic perfection she is searching for.

Van Hoey is rapidly establishing herself in her new career as a ceramics artist and designer. She is arguably one of the pre-eminent emerging ceramists of the 21st century. Many would say that 'established' is a more accurate word given the number of international prizes and the acclaim she has accumulated. But one must consider that it has, after all, been only five years since she first felt emboldened enough to put herself forward as a professional ceramist and her initial efforts up for public scrutiny. Many artists, maybe even most, only achieve the kind of recognition she has already experienced after a long and torturous journey.

Perhaps what is most surprising is that success as an artist and a designer has happened at all. Van Hoey graduated from the University of Antwerp in 1979 with a Masters Degree in Applied Economic Sciences with minors in Mathematics and Industrial Engineering. In what seems a bit of a strange fit to her visitor, she tells him that immediately after graduation she went to work as an independent furniture saleswoman. Hardly a common

starting point for an artist in any medium but then there has been the odd precedent here and there. Classical music for example had its avant-garde musical genius in Charles Ives, a successful insurance salesman and executive so why not an innovative ceramics sculptor in the form of a Belgian furniture saleswoman?

In fact, many interesting parallels abound in their careers. Success in business followed after taking their university degrees in far different disciplines. Likewise they were each gifted athletes; Ives in American football, baseball and sprinting and Van Hoey in tennis and cycling. But there the similarities begin to run out. Ives, a true American original and

generally regarded as the first US composer of international renown, began serious composing when only 14. Van Hoey on the other hand committed to professional ceramics (or as she says, "When ceramics happened to me") quite late in life at age 50. The music of Ives went unperformed for many years and was resoundingly ignored during his life. Van Hoey on the other hand began attracting acclaim almost immediately.

While the insurance executive went from strength to strength for more than three decades in his business, the furniture saleswoman's business success lasted only a little more than half of that. But even a little success can be a curse if your inborn creativity is unable to withstand the intolerable boredom of constant repetition. Van Hoey freely admits that she,

"Thoroughly enjoyed the first 15 years in sales; they were challenging and interesting. The last five were torture however." There were no new challenges in her field and it was too late to pursue a professional career in sports, her abiding passion while youth



Above: *Three Vessels*. 2012. White earthenware. 12 to 18 cm/h.

All border images: *Installation (Etude Geometrique 1 and Etude Geometrique 2 combined)*. 2008. Dark earthenware. Bronze Medal at the 5th World Ceramics Biennale 2009 Korea, Henry van de Velde quality label.





and the body permitted. After 20 years she finally, to quote the oft-used euphemism, 'left furniture sales to pursue new challenges' – read she was fired.

Fortunately for the ceramic art world, husband Mark Uytterhoeven had her back. Long one of Belgium's most popular and respected television presenters, his advice was "Find something you can commit to completely and go for it with everything you have got." He promised his full support for whatever she chose and she likewise promised him her best effort. Today, when she is not with her husband of 28 years, ceramics occupies virtually every moment of her thoughts. Given her passion (some might say obsession) for the work and the exploration of ideas it entails, it is easy to think that even Uytterhoeven occasionally has to call her back to the moment.

To the Pablo Picasso dictum that "Bad artists copy, Good artists steal" should be added "Great artists explore." The amount of white space on the ceramics world map that Van Hoey has explored and colonised on her own in just five years is almost unimaginable. This is made all the more impressive by the fact that by ordinary standards, she is a veritable beginner, a newbie, a mere fledgling in one of the oldest of all arts and/or crafts and one that invariably prizes maturity over youthful exuberance and mere flash.

Ceramics appealed to her innate feel for materials. There was a good school immediately at hand. Once she committed, it quickly became six years of evening classes at the Institute for Arts and Crafts in Mechelen, the medieval city of her birth. By day she honed her newly acquired skills and experimented with her steadily growing collection of equipment and tools. She also travelled. "I went to every master class and workshop I could find in Belgium and Europe," she recalls. "I have

always been able to learn something from anyone, even when I have no intention of using the particular techniques they are teaching. It is all about learning clay."

The list of her 30 or 40 master teachers reads like a *Who's Who* of contemporary clay artists and craftspeople: Giovanni Cimatti, Ian Currie, Don Davis, Tjok Dessauvage, Victor Greenaway, Richard Godfrey, Ian Gregory, Netty Janssens, Noboru Kubo, Shozo Michikawa, Anima Roos, Seung-Ho Yang, Sacha Wardell, Patty Wouters and Henk Wolvers to name just some of those she sought. She learned something from every one of them, although sometimes it was that their approach was not for her. By the time Van Hoey finally

earned her ceramics degree in 2006, she was already travelling paths far advanced from the confines of pedagogic and academic structure. But with, it should be noted, the enthusiastic encouragement of her teachers and colleagues that she could do this ceramics thing.

Initially, Van Hoey viewed ceramics as just throwing on a wheel. "I did not see myself as an artist so it seemed appropriate to concentrate on functional ware. It was never my intention to become an artist. I did not presume so exalted a status. But I did want to be at least a good craftsman so I made pots – lots and lots of pots." As her explorations steadily moved further and further into the unknown, she successfully left behind the baggage of years of just making pots. Her work is constantly evolving. Most of her pieces start out on paper as mathematical equations and not, as one might expect, as sketches of shapes. Many of her current experiments (and indeed her finished pieces for exhibitions) are about technical refinements and scaling an idea up or down.



Top: *Vessel*. 2009. White earthenware. 16 x 23 x 21 cm.
Above: *Vessel*. 2009. Red earthenware. 16 x 21 x 21 cm.





Everything in her work seems to originate from a flawless order and geometric logic. This in itself is hardly surprising given her academic disciplines of almost three decades ago. There is a body of neurological researchers who maintain that the language of mathematics similar to that of music, poetry, paint, physics (and yes, clay) embeds a connection at the neurological level that, once learned, is forever present in the mind of the problem solver.

The basis for her current pieces is thinly rolled sheets of clay. These are cut into semi-circles using paper patterns she has calculated to give the final size and shape she seeks. These pieces are then laid in a hemispheric mould and seamlessly joined and then turned on the potter's wheel while still in the mould. The result to this point in her process is a perfect hemispherical bowl. When the clay has dried to the hardness she needs, Van Hoey uses a pair of scissors rather than a scalpel to cut triangular segments from it and then overlaps the freshly cut edges. This opens up the path to new three-dimensional shapes whose logic and clarity appeal to all who understand the beauty and message of shape. These objects are nothing less than the marriage of the circle to the square, to the triangle, to the line and, ultimately, to the point.

Van Hoey uses no glaze on her present work and for this she is sometimes criticised. Her response is that the absence of glaze leaves the clay's inherent colour and material characteristics to be displayed in all of their purity and presence. The combination of lines and surfaces makes for a more powerful yet

subtler sculptural impact.

She was profoundly inspired by the origami she saw on a visit to Japan in pursuit of yet more teachers and experience. This visit, says Van Hoey, "led directly to my investigations into folding the hemisphere." Van Hoey's technical skill with her materials and tools results in exquisite objects that deeply satisfy the hand and eye while at the same time challenging the imagination.

This interviewer made the facile observation that much of her present work seems to be simply variations on the same theme as her earlier work and was she not at risk for a similar boredom and burnout suffered in her

first career. Her reply was calm and measured but not without a bit of an edge to it. "Starting so late, I only hope I have enough time left to explore all of the paths that I have opened thus far."

Hers is work that has always been marked by its meticulous finish and attention to minute detail. It is immediately obvious to those who have watched her grow out of professional infancy over the last five years that she is consumed with the idea of making every piece as near to her continuously evolving ideal of perfection as possible. She positively oozes zeal to do it better every time. While Van Hoey confesses to an addiction to constantly improve her technique, finish, and explorations, her visitor had the distinct feeling that she is amazed at what comes out of

her kiln every time she opens it after a firing. Her excitement is palpable.

Van Hoey's Belgian gallery has played an important



Top: Dinnerware: Geometry for Chef Peter Goossens. 2011. Bone China. 30cm, 25cm, 20cm, 15cm and 10 cm progressively. Photo by Serax.

Above: Etude Geometrique. 2008. Dark earthenware. 16 x 30 x 30 cm/ea.





role in her rapid rise. Dane Annette Sloth, is herself a star, albeit on the international gallery scene. Sloth recalls that, "I first saw her work while on the Jury for the 2008 *Biennale Internationale in Vallauris*, France. I was gobsmacked. A few months earlier in 2007 her first work to be publically shown had earned her the Design Vlaanderen (Design Flanders) recognition as a New Revelation. Revelation indeed. She was an emphatic and unanimous selection for the Vallauris Biennale. This early work subsequently received the prestigious Henry van de Velde quality label in 2008." Sloth is particularly proud of the fact that Puls was the first major gallery to give Van Hoey an exhibition and continues to be her most ardent international champion.



Ann Van Hoey in her studio.

Van Hoey has already been wooed into the world of commercial design. "Design is a completely different discipline from my art pieces. I have no training at all as a designer. When I was initially approached by Serax, I was flattered of course since they are one of Europe's top producers of porcelain dinnerware and work with such well-known designers as Piet Stockmans, Nedda El-Asmar, and Kiki van Eijck. But in all honestly, I was not interested. I had heard enough from many of my various master teachers and artist friends to know that you always have to make compromises. And from my experience with industrial manufacturing in the furniture business, I knew that it was naive to expect absolute perfection on every piece. But I also knew that this normally does not cause any serious trouble if you are working with a top company.

"The folks from Serax persisted and eventually my natural competitiveness took over. In the end I just wanted to see how well I could do it. What finally won me over was the chance to learn more about another facet of clay." Then she laughed and added, "That and the fact that I did not have to make the finished product. I only had to provide a single earthenware prototype of each piece and then assist the Serax technicians in refining the design to enable large-scale reproduction in porcelain. I am glad I am doing it and intend to continue so long as it does not take too much time away from my ceramic art pieces. I have learned a lot and it has broadened my perspective."

Ann Van Hoey is a woman who has been captured by the poetry she finds in the geometry and the beauty of her clay equations. Hers is an art that is about space/time, pure clay and monochrome. This once 'accidental artist' will no doubt continue her relentless search with clay for the elegant solution – the Holy Grail of the mathematician, the engineer and the true artist she has become.

Has success come too fast? At age 55, she should take pride in the fact that she has already reached a level that she never expected. Can she be this good, this soon? You will have to decide that for yourself. She will be much too disciplined and busy in the time she has left to bother with such a silly question. She knows only that she has 'promises to keep' and 'miles to go' before she sleeps. (With apologies to Robert Frost.)

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
Robert Frost (1874–1963)

*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Noel Montrucchio is a freelance writer and former editor of one of Europe's most popular architecture and design magazines. He is an avid collector of ceramic and glass sculpture. His previous forays into writing about ceramic art include contributing to and the editing of Carmen Dionys *My Art, My Universe 2*. All photos by Dries Van den Brande unless noted.
All works are slab built and fired in an electric kiln, unless noted.

