

# In Studio with Brenda McMahon

Evelyne Schoenmann

To catch Brenda for this interview wasn't easy. Either she is throwing pots, or she is firing her kilns in the backyard, or she is travelling all over the country, attending ceramics shows. Finally we caught up between San Antonio (TX) and Breckenridge (CO), and among other things talked about her famous paper saggars.

**B**renda, you are present at a lot of ceramics shows all over the country and you run workshops on your unique saggar firing method. How does each art venue affect your business?

I have been selling my ceramic work at art shows across the United States for 19 years and it has proven to be a very good business. I love travelling and I meet great people, some of them are collectors, others prospective collectors and still others are makers wanting to learn about my process. I have been blessed to make a good living doing these shows and I've devel-

oped a strong and growing customer base through the years.

*You once told me that your paper saggar vessels attract people to visit your booth, and once those customers see the Wall Art Tiles they want those as well. Can you tell us something about those wall murals?*

I have been making my saggar fired vessels for 2 decades and I always say they are my long-term love. About 10 years ago I began creating wall art pieces. My wall art is dimensional and illustrative, so instead of saggar firing them, I

der and discovery in the saggar firing.

The wall art, on the other hand, has much more design control, vision and direct language in it. The glazing is an exciting accumulation of colour palettes built up over the years and the scale opens me up a world that vessels do not.

*You also do workshops from time to time. The ones I know of are held at La Meridiana International School of Ceramics in Italy. I've read that the one in 2015 even combines ceramics and yoga. How can people interested in your workshops*



oped a strong and growing customer base through the years.

Teaching taps into a different part of the soul. Workshops are wonderful because it is a studio experience, rather than a 'sales' experience. There I am an artist talking shop and sharing technique. Together, the workshop group exchanges ideas and grows creatively – becoming exponentially greater than the sum of its parts. Workshops uplift my creative spirit in a way that shows cannot. The balance of the two

created a similar colour palette using slips, stains and engobes. The wall work is my newest passion and I believe the two bodies of work tap into opposite and complimentary creative energies.

*What do you prefer: doing vessels or murals?*

I love doing both vessels and murals. There is a quieter rhythm to throwing and burnishing that appeals to my meditative sensibility and there is a sense of surren-

*inform themselves?*

My workshop schedule is always listed on my website. I usually teach at studios and art centres across the United States. Last year I had my international debut at La Meridiana. I'm excited to say they invited me back to teach 2 workshops in 2015. For the September workshop I will be sharing my love of yoga for anyone interested in exploring gentle body opening.

*Our main topic here are your paper sag-*

gars. It is incredibly fascinating to watch you open the fired saggars by crumbling them between your hands and freeing the coloured pot. The first time I saw you doing this I had the Christmas-feeling of opening a present. Please tell us about the process from the green pot to the finished beauty.

I begin with a simple, strong form, thrown on the potter's wheel and I like a form with a lot of surface area. I burnish each piece two times, once with a river rock and the second time with a stainless rib. If needed I will burnish the vessel a third time.

Once bisque fired, I am ready to saggar fire. I use a 'tumble stack' saggar, paper pod and foil saggars. My favourite saggars are the first two.

I saggar fire from the pit-fire idiom, which means I use organic materials as the main 'design compliment' to my surface. Minerals are either naturally occurring in the organic materials or they are 'infused' in the organics through a wash.

I bundle each pot differently, depend-

I fire quickly to cone 09-07, depending on the results I'm seeking. I do not generally soak at the top, and I cool the kiln overnight. The kiln is fired in a neutral environment as all the reduction is occurring inside the saggar.

My paper pod saggars are a great way to create a controlled environment with an open fibrous weave. They are a treat to crack open for me but also to share with my followers. I have videos on my website and you-tube channel showing the 'opening of a paper pod saggar' for all to see the 'new life' revealed.

Once rinsed, I wax each burnished piece with a paste floor wax, attach a natural wood handle and they are complete.

*I am sure you will reveal your paper-clay recipe to us.*

Paperclay is a mixture of clay and paper fibre. Newspaper, toilet tissue and other recycled paper can be used as a pulp source. The paper has to be slaked down, blended and drained. Paperclay is an organic mixture that goes bad after 2

ture thick enough to paint onto each paper layer and you want to use 7-10 layers of paperclay around each vessel.

Paperclay will begin to smell rancid as it starts to go bad. To preserve the clay, dry it fully and it will last longer. Re-hydrate the clay when you are ready to use it again.

*Your great, long-standing experience in doing saggar firings and vapour fuming will be published in a book this year. Can you bring us up to date regarding this technical workbook?*

I'm really excited about my first book. It is designed as a workbook for potters but I have made it beautiful so it will sit nicely on any tabletop! My working title is Saggar Firing: Unearthing the Mysteries. I am the kind of teacher that gives it all away, so everything I know is in this book and easily understood. It is designed to be a compliment to my workshop – or a workshop in and of itself. The book should be out by the end of 2014, just in time for a great holiday gift!



ing on what I'm trying to achieve. As I wrap the vessel I layer dense material with lighter material working from creating bold lines to softer fumes. Each vessel is intentionally wrapped with a clear idea of where I want to go. I teach all of this in my workshops.

I fire all my paper saggars in an outside gas kiln and each firing lasts 4 - 5 hours. The kiln is preheated during the first hour and heats slowly for the next few hours up to about 1200°F. After that

weeks, losing its properties. I use cellulose insulation fibre as my paper source. It lasts longer and is easy to mix.

Fill a 5-gallon bucket half way with dry clay from trimmings and recycle. Slake down to a thick yogurt consistency.

Paperclay is a 4:1 ratio, clay to paper pulp. I use between 200-300 grams (10 oz) of cellulose per ½ a 5-gallon bucket of clay slip.

Paperclay should be a gel consistency. For saggars, you want to keep this mix-

**Brenda McMahon**

Gulfport, FL (USA)

[www.brendamcmahon.com](http://www.brendamcmahon.com)

YouTube: Brenda McMahon Saggar Firing

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Patrick Van Craenenbroeck (Belgium).

Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist. She lives and works in Basel, Switzerland and Liguria, Italy.

[www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch](http://www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch)