

## STUDIO VISIT

# Nina Malterud

Bergen, Norway



## Just the Facts

### Clay

earthenware

### Primary forming method

handbuilding

### Primary firing temperature

electric, 1940°F (1060°C)

### Favorite surface treatment

layers and layers of glaze, refired

### Favorite tools

a rolling pin, and the kiln

### Studio soundtrack

silence, the sounds of carpenter's tools from my neighbor's workshop, and occasionally radio news and cultural programs

### Studio wish list

more space

## A Series of Studios

My studio since 2011 is about 430 square feet in size. I rent it from a carpenter who is running his one-man business on the ground floor. The house is located in a part of Bergen, Norway, unfairly called the shadow side, a mixed-use environment with small and larger businesses, a harbor, shipyards, and residential buildings. Though we have our own spaces, I enjoy taking a break to talk with the carpenter about the weather and favorite films, and he is a good adviser for me when it comes to practical challenges such as exhibition equipment.

The studio has a large table and a wall that I keep clear as a work space. There are sometimes shelves on this wall for arranging work and seeing it from a different point of view. I also have a small electric kiln and a desk in the corner of the studio. The layout is not organized for a specific production workflow. I keep it orderly and clean because I was tired of the dry clay dust from previous studios. However, I sometimes fear that this same cleanliness and order could also potentially act as a hindrance to the creative flow of ideas.

My physical ceramics studio covers the practical matters that I need to work creatively. I also consider my extended studios to include other places: places for writing, places for reading and meeting, and places I visit on my travels. I have been attracted to thinking



Studio photos: Elisa Helland-Hansen

of my workspaces in this broader sense ever since I was one of the initiating editors of the Norwegian magazine *Kunsthåndverk* (Craft Art) in 1979.

### Paying Dues (and Bills)

I was educated at the National College of Art and Design in Oslo, Norway, from 1971–74, an education that mainly built on views of craft media and the craft fields developed during the 1950s. I was much in doubt about my direction after school, but then I became the assistant to the late ceramic artist Lisbet Dæhlin (1924–2012). Dæhlin was born in Denmark but worked most of her career in Norway. The experiences I gained from her studio became a professional foundation for my own work, I find that her work is still a strong reference.

I established my first studio in 1975 in the outskirts of Oslo in a former industrial area that had been converted into artist studios. The old factory buildings were close to nature, had high ceilings, and plenty of open space, so my studio there was an ideal workspace. The studio partnership I had with my fellow student

from college, Beth Wyller, was also an important part of my studio life. Though we are in different places now, we have maintained a life-long conversation and cooperation.

Despite the ideal studio situation, I left Oslo in 1994 for an attractive professorship in ceramics at Bergen National Academy of the Arts (one of the two Norwegian state-funded academies of the arts). In my memories, my previous studio has now become even more perfect than it was then.

During these years in Oslo I was strongly motivated by ideas of studio crafts that rose to prominence in Norway in the early 1970s. New public grants programs for artists were established and studio craft became an established art field. I worked with ceramics more or less full time. I made functional ware and some public commissions and was stretching the limits of volume and size, making large pots and tile wall murals. I participated in some temporary workshops situated in industrial locations, such as in the Swedish brick factory Hallsberg in 1997 with the theme of large pots, where I enjoyed the generous attitude with the other ceramic



artists who were working there as well as the use of equipment and tools designed for large-scale work.

I taught for eight years and in 2002 I was elected as rector (equivalent to president or provost) for the whole academy, a position which lasted until 2010. This was an unexpected career move. During the years as rector I hardly produced any ceramics. With responsibility for both the art and design departments, my competencies were stretched and my professional attitudes changed. I was confronted with issues in contemporary fine art which I knew little about and had to focus on becoming better informed in order to lead and advise the academy effectively.

A year after I stepped down from the position as rector, I decided to make ceramic work again. This was not an obvious decision for me at the time, as the years in the academy had somehow broken up the optimistic mood that I had developed during my first studio period. I had to reposition myself in terms of my thinking, as well as in terms of what I would make. I did not want to continue the large-scale work. I had realized that the technical challenges with these monsters occupied too much time at the expense of artistic considerations.

My present studio is therefore designed and equipped mainly for making small-scale pieces. I glaze and re-glaze using a range

of commercial low-temperature glazes. I often pick up a previous object that I thought I was finished with, but whose surface is not quite what I want it to be, add to the surface, and fire it in the kiln again to see how the surface changes.

Since the kiln is small, I can make enough work to fill it and fire it often, so I get to see the results of my layering processes more quickly. I want to give each object a specific character, no matter how much time it takes to achieve the right finish. With this work in my new studio, standard glaze faults like cracking and pinholes have transformed in my mind from flaws to characteristics that offer the potential for new expressions.

I spend about half my time in the studio. It is not my ambition to make it a full-time job and to be able to live solely from my artistic work. I want to steer my studio work away from the aim of production of objects for sale, and more toward study and investigation. This attitude is influenced from all the critique sessions in the academy in Bergen, and from my involvement there in the notion of artistic research and critical reflection.

I still do diverse assignments for university-level educational institutions, both in Oslo and Bergen and on a national level. This is mainly advisory work, which allows me to use the experience and



Photos of finished works: Øystein Klakegg

knowledge base I built up while I was rector at the academy. I enjoy the work and I find it intellectually stimulating to stay in touch with the developing processes within higher education institutions.

## Mind

When I was younger I found it easier to work, but now there are creative roadblocks all the way and I have to consider that as part of my studio practice. I try to approach this challenge with rational planning, but sometimes that is not enough. I am still finding other suitable ways to address and work through both technical and creative problems that come up.

When it comes to understanding or explaining the origins of artistic processes, I find the word inspiration rather inadequate. Art from all fields and many directions represent indispensable values in my life and certainly set a high standard. Many of my favorite artists are on different tracks from my own work, such as William Kentridge or Louise Bourgeois. Last summer I saw Matisse's *Cut-outs* at Tate Modern in London, England, which are works that I can relate to my own efforts. Being an artist has developed my empathy, curiosity, and engagement toward other artists' work, and some humbleness about my own importance.

## Marketing

I make my work accessible through exhibitions in galleries (mainly in Norway) and via my website. My buyers are public collectors/museums in Norway and some private enthusiasts. I set the prices relatively high, to make a statement of value. Unfortunately, there are not many ceramic collectors in Norway and no strong tradition of understanding the value of this field of art, so the market is not as strong here as in other parts of Europe or North America.

## Most Important Lesson

When I think about why I keep on doing this—making objects in the studio again after a long break, and rediscovering my interest in clay—it comes down to the fact that I am curious to explore the possibilities of the intriguing, complicated, and even the more traditional processes we work with in the ceramics studio. I am also interested in exploring means of expression other than verbal language. I consider ceramics to be the medium where I can make the subtlest expressions.

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