

My Story: Mallorca – and ceramic sculptures using Raku techniques

The first time I visited Mallorca had nothing to do with art. I accompanied my daughter, her husband and two small children in the early 90's, as *babysitting Gran*. I would not have chosen Mallorca for a holiday but I was surprised at how very much I enjoyed the island, the capital Palma, the varying landscape, especially the inner countryside, the agricultural plains, the soft mountain ranges and the wonderful light.

I visited galleries in Palma and thought how wonderful it would be to have a temporary studio there.

In conversation, several people told me about Margareta Negorra who had been one of the largest landowners on the island. She annually invited artists from different countries for an art residency at what had once been a farm on the outskirts of the town of Santanyi. It included two or three fincas and large Atelier working areas. Usually two or three artists worked there at a time.

Margareta's nephew Arnau Panades, an architect, organised the artists residencies. I managed to contact him and a visit to his Aunt was arranged for what was more or less an interview. I had luckily brought photos of my work and the meeting with Margareta led to two, two-month residencies in each of 1998 and 2000.

Elderly Margareta, would occasionally visit *her* artists. She was a grande dame, walked aided by a silver cane in one hand and on the arm of a beautiful young maid from the Dominican Republic. Arnau would follow carrying a large bottle of champagne to share with the artists following her inspection of our artwork. It was a very interesting time especially getting to know other artists and it later led to an exhibition in Santanyi owned by a German gallerist.

I maintained contact with Arnau through visits over several years and my son bought a flat in Mallorca designed him. So there were also family reasons to continue visits to the island. My German husband Joachim died in 2003, aged fifty-two and after some years alone I met a new partner Roger who worked in Switzerland. Our life style meant trips

between Lausanne, England and Berlin. On his retirement in 2012 we decided to have an extended stay for a few winter months in Port Andratx, Mallorca.



However we enjoyed it so much this became eighteen months, during which time I rented an Atelier in an artist's complex under the auspices of the Sa Taronja Cultural Association in Andratx town. The location was a disused chicken farm where the buildings had been adapted to house artists and craftsmen and where larger spaces were used for social activities. Sa Taronja was a much-loved institution among local and international artists and an important part of Mallorca's cultural scene. I was especially enchanted by the abundance of orange trees immediately outside my little

studio. It was an idyllic place.

During the time there I taught a small art class and also had an exhibition *Ports of Call* in the Sa Taronja exhibition rooms. I was delighted that my family were able to visit the exhibition including my young granddaughter who still lives in Mallorca.

While I was based at Sa Taronja, I took part in a short course about **raku** fired ceramics. I was intrigued by the process and the results; it was the impetus that led to my producing a group of ceramic sculptures. I'll describe the process and my experiences in more detail below.



Raku



Raku originated in Japan around the 16th century and inspired various western adaptations of the process. It is traditionally characterised by being hand built rather than thrown, with pieces removed from the kiln while still glowing hot.

Contemporary potters then developed the technique of placing the ware in a container filled with combustible material immediately after removal from the hot kiln. One of the resulting effects is often a crackled surface such as that achieved on one of my pieces shown here. Another effect is that as a dramatic and almost alchemic process, the results

can be totally unpredictable. This both excited and scared me!

I felt fascinated and challenged by this unpredictable process, which also offers the possibility to scratch into the surface of the object before the firing, exposing black lines similar to some of my paintings and sculptures. Intrigued by my first modest results, I wanted to make more!

However, I realised that the techniques involved in working with the *raku* clay process were a step in an entirely different direction from the often-life-size wood sculptures which I had regularly been making since the early nineties mainly using my electric chain saw.

Nonetheless, with a solo exhibition coming up at aquabitArt in Berlin in November 2014, I decided to produce a small body of *raku* ceramics.



Initially I joined a small group in the atelier of Mallorcan ceramicist, Ruben Cano in Lluçmajor. Even the drive into the rural middle of the island was enjoyable. Away from the tourist parts of the south-east coast where I was living, there was the feeling of being in real Spain.



In Ruben's Atelier I felt myself in comfortable isolation. I was able to concentrate on working with the clay using ideas from my small preparatory drawings. The rhythm of Spanish conversation that I couldn't understand in the background further enhanced the feeling of new experiences and working with natural materials in a stimulating environment.

During the last minute telephone arrangements on the evening before the firing I asked Ruben if my work might be successful. His answer 'Margaret, remember they are all your daughters'!

The *raku* kiln is fairly small but is loaded with as many pieces as possible for each firing to make good use of the heat build-up. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that pieces do not touch each other, which would damage the glaze.

It took nearly two hours to bring each group to the required very high temperature and during this time I was busy glazing the next pieces. This meant that I had to work fast and the day turned into a long one with only a short break for a barbeque lunch and a glass of splendid Spanish red wine to sustain us!



The completion of each firing was dramatic! Ruben carefully lifted each red-hot piece out of the kiln. A key part of the process is that the pieces are immediately placed into combustible material. In this case it was a metal container of wood chippings, which spontaneously burst into flames.



The container was then covered and the objects allowed to 'smoke'. After ten minutes or so, the container was opened to reveal charred objects. At this point my heart sank; concerned that all was lost as I observed the blackened work with pieces of soot and burnt residue sticking to the sculptures.

As the sculptures were first placed in water to cool, they were still covered in charred material. But somewhat mystically, a work called *Andratx* appeared to be gazing back at us from the murky water! Following cleaning the results were totally unexpected. After the uncertainty of giving up my hard worked clay sculptures to the elements of earth, fire and water I was fascinated, profoundly relieved and delighted by the results.



Raku is an unpredictable dramatic process, almost alchemic in the mysterious, magical and always surprising results that occur. For me it was a challenging, exciting and rewarding experience

Examples of pieces I produced in Mallorca:



Andratx

29 x 30 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze, silver glaze



Algaida

35 x 15 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze, silver glaze



Cabrera

32 x 14 x 4 cm

green glaze, manganese oxide lines



Ariany

42 x 26 x 2 cm

raku: engobe, dark blue glaze



Muro

24 x 12 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze



Santanyi

39 x 29 x 3 cm

raku: crackle glaze, Manises glaze



Montuiri

46 x 26 x 27 cm

raku: engobe, glaze, scratched lines, silver
glaze



Tramuntana

39 x 27 x 4 cm

raku: crackle glaze, manganese oxide lines

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