

Baikal-CeraMystica Symposium

A symposium on Olkhon Island in Siberia

PETRA LINDENBAUER



View of Khuzhir

Every summer since 2012, the symposium *Baikal-CeraMystica* takes place, organised by the artist-couple Tatiana Eroshenko and Sergey Purtyan, with the Irkutsk Society of Ceramic Artists.

From 2013 to 2018, the Russian Federation supported this project, in 2019 it was the Presidential Grants Fund.

Fifteen artists from six countries took

part in the 7th *Baikal CeraMystica* symposium in 2019, with ten of them from the host nation.

The international artists were Pálma Babos from Hungary, Marisa Grilo from Portugal, Ivana Petan from Slovenia, Vagram Galstyan from Armenia, and I was fortunate enough to represent Austria.

When I applied to participate in this special symposium, I only had a vague

idea of the location of Lake Baikal in Russia. As soon as I heard that I would be taking part, I began to read up on the geography and biology of the region. I learned that there is no lake on Earth that is deeper, older or with more water. My enthusiasm and the thrill of anticipation grew steadily.

After six hours' flight from Moscow, I was in Irkutsk, the capital of the oblast of

The ferry to Olkhon



Landing stage for the ferry to Olkhon



the same name in the south of Siberia.

The “Paris of the East”, as the city is called, showed itself from its loveliest aspect. The flattering evening sun showed the wooden houses, some in a state of decay, some under a preservation order, in their best light, even if their delicate carvings and the bright colours may have seen better days.

Irkutsk lies on the River Angara, according to mythology the only daughter of Baikal, and it is the only outlet from the lake, which has over 300 tributaries – the sons.

Together with the other participants of the symposium, the next day we travelled east from Irkutsk in a minibus, transferring to the ferry to the island of Olkhon. After a ferry crossing lasting six hours, we arrived in Kuzhir, the capital of the largest island in Lake Baikal.

In 2019, the Baikal Center for Ceramics and Sculpture was set up there with the support of the Presidential Arts Fund. The building in the shape of a giant hemisphere is a permanent work and presentation space. The architecture, which is visible from all sides, is proudly called the Dome, with the round form visibly distinct from the angular timbered houses of the surrounding neighbourhood. In the Dome, it is possible to work outside the symposia, without any admission procedure and to take advantage of the programme on offer.

In the grounds right beside the Dome, several raku kilns were available for us. Electric kilns were also in readiness for bisque firings as well as one suitable for high temperatures. We were told that there might be problems with the electricity supply but we were lucky and even the results with firing porcelain were satisfactory.

Nevertheless, I preferred to take a break from my customary “stoneware world”, and once again I took the plunge with the experiment of raku – which as a travelling ceramist I do with increasing frequency.

Sergey was in complete control of the equipment and tirelessly employed all his energy and experience drying our work so that in the briefest of intervals he was able to present us with our freshly modelled works, bisqued and ready for glazing.

Before the symposium, we had been able to pass on our wishes regarding clay bodies. When we arrived, besides the familiar bodies from Spain and Germany, clay from the Donbass (east Ukraine) and



Baikal Center for Ceramics and Sculpture

Working in the Dome



Wooden house in Irkutsk





Exhibition at Irkutsk Art Museum



Exhibition at Irkutsk Art Museum

Russian bodies from Konakovo, Gzhel and Uyar and even Chinese porcelain were available.

I decided on an almost pitch black, heavily grogged body from Konakovo, which after firing was almost white. Anna Kupriyanova is very familiar with this body and showed us her technique of how to work with it precisely and in detail in spite of the high proportion of coarse grog.

The atmosphere in the Dome was pleasant and in spite of the many ceramists working with great concentration, it was dead quiet with everyone absorbed in their work. Every day, one of the participants prepared an introduction to a different technique. It was very exciting and instructive.

Valentina Komarova, a young ceramist from St Petersburg, showed us how she heated paraffin on a hotplate to make crayons with various additives with which

she could draw on clay. Sergey Purtyan initiated us in the secrets of making ocarinas, the Russian ceramist Urman Karazhanov gave us an insight into how he makes his works from clay tubes he throws on the wheel. Every evening one of the artists presented their field of activity.

The Dome was unceremoniously transformed from a workshop into a seminar room and thanks to the interpreting skills of Irina Trusova into English, communication functioned very professionally.

We could easily have had a sense of being marooned on this island. Everything had to be done on foot on rough, bumpy roads among cows wandering freely and the grey vans called buchankas. These were the only vehicles in operation, thundering along the bumpy roads with their countless potholes. But soon the walk to the lake shore, the hike to the shop or the guesthouse was part of the daily

routine. We planned and arranged things together and enjoyed understanding and appreciating the austere customs of this special location. We undertook a hike to find some pasties, buryatishe buusy, that could not have tasted better.

Olkhon is the largest of the roughly 20 islands in Lake Baikal. It is called the sacred island of the Buryats, a Mongolic people in Siberia.

Harsh steppes, hinting at nearby Mongolia, dense forests of pine, larch and birch, interspersed with pink-blooming rhododendrons and wild thyme, bright sandy beaches and rugged cliffs – all of these can be found here.

The lake, a world heritage site since 1993, is called the "wellspring of the Earth" as our largest reservoir of sweet water and research area for scientists. The unique sweet water seal is one of approximately 1,800 endemic animal and plant species in the Baikal region and

My workspace on the shores of Lake Baikal



Obvara raku, Sergey Purtyan and Urman Karazhanov





Metal tree by a Siberian artist



Hanging a wishing ribbon

countless mysteries are woven around its waters.

Working in such surroundings with such natural beauty on all sides was a special experience. The abundance provided by nature made the bleakness of some tracts of land on the island more intensely perceptible, yet everything is in harmony.

The sense of insignificance in the face of these overwhelming natural surroundings sensitized us and at the same time was inspirational. I was so far away from home but through the coherence of the environment, in a sense I felt that I had familiar ground beneath my feet.

"Shamanka" is the name given reverently to the shaman's rocks in Kuzhir, and it is considered the major landmark of the island, a sacred place which may not be entered.

Cape Shoboi and the rock formation of the "Three Brothers" are further sa-

cred sites. According to legend, Burchan, the god of Lake Baikal, turned his three disobedient sons into stone in punishment for not returning their sister, who had fled. There are still shamans there, high priests of a natural religion on Olchon, even if the powers that be in Russia do not view this kindly.

Amulets from the world of shamanic faith, known as "olgons", can be purchased everywhere, from the many kiosks along the unmetalled roads of Kuzhir. Sagas and legends are woven around the bizarre rocks and stretches of land and the magic of this island is perceptible everywhere.

On our excursions, we often passed richly decorated posts and "wishing trees", to the branches of which thousands of colourful strips of cloth and "wishing ribbons" are attached.

A closing ceremony to the symposium took place in the grounds around the

Dome, where our work was presented. The official exhibition of our works subsequently took place on the premises of the art museum in Irkutsk.

The organisers are in the process of setting up a dedicated museum for contemporary ceramics to make the collection of works made since 2012 accessible to visitors in a permanent exhibition. An ambitious project, which will become a catalyst for this fascinating region in the south of Siberia.

www.baikal-ceramystica.ru/eng
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Baikal.CeraMystica/@baikalceramystica>

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At the sacred shamanic site in Kuzhir



Group photo outside the Dome photo Palma Babos

