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At home with master ceramicist Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye

A converted gym in Paris provides light and space for the 80-year-old to work

Ebüzziya Siesbye in her studio with colour samples and her pots © Thomas Chéné

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The side street leading to Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye's apartment in Paris's 14th *arrondissement* is charming — bustling market stalls, chatty locals, the smell of expensive cheese. The apartment building is not so engaging; its industrial exterior gives no clue to the uplifting space within. In 2003, Ebüzziya Siesbye converted a ground-floor gym into her home and studio to provide space and light to work. And work is what this 80-year-old ceramicist is very much about.

Her bowls can fetch more than £40,000 at auction and are exhibited in museums all over the world so Ebüzziya Siesbye could be forgiven for resting on her laurels. But even today she is preparing for two major solo exhibitions, spending seven hours a day at her wheel, wearing overalls and a protective handkerchief over her hair. Out of the studio, in a navy silk shirt and heels, and with chunky silver crosses on her fingers, the Istanbul-born Ebüzziya Siesbye has a youthful rock star energy. The manual labour involved in hauling wet clay, then kneading, coiling and glazing it, may be her secret. "I have to work continuously, for six or seven hours, just to do the clay-work for one bowl," she says. "It is very physical work, very concentrated."

Her open-plan apartment is the counterpoint to this labour — an expansive, relaxing space with wooden floors, minimalist furniture and high windows, their blinds lowered by remote control at the height of the afternoon sun. Almost all the artworks on the walls are by friends. “Here was the basketball hoop,” she says cheerfully, pointing to a spot on a wall now taken up by a framed black and gold serpent, by fellow Turkish artist and collaborator Nil Yalter.

Bookshelves containing volumes of poetry in various European languages run the length of the apartment, alongside glass cabinets full of archaeological artefacts. Discreet curios are dotted around the otherwise orderly space: a stiletto shoe balancing on a tiny wheel; a book that transforms into a lamp. Up a steel staircase is a mezzanine bedroom. “I like to look down in the morning; it’s like looking at a different space”, she says. “I ask myself — ‘I wonder if they’ll serve me a coffee down there?’”

Notebook © Thomas Chéné

Pot of paint brushes © Thomas Chéné

Balanced on the worktop is a tiny blackboard with shopping items written haphazardly in English, Danish, French and Turkish, four languages in which she is equally comfortable speaking and thinking. Her language skills (plus proficient German) reflect an eclectic life — a childhood spent in Istanbul, teenage years at boarding school in England (“I hated it”), and Istanbul again for art school.

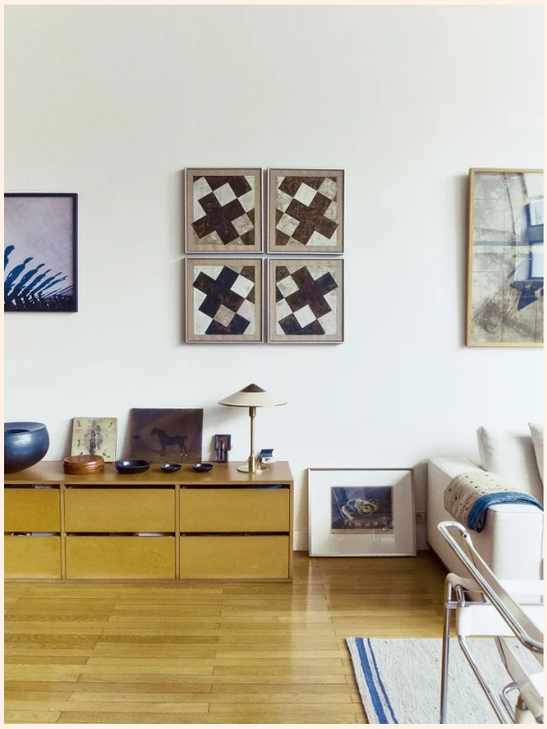
She rebelled against the conservatism of her teachers and left, in her early twenties, to work as a hostess at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, before moving to Germany for a factory job (“proper, dirty work”). From there, she moved to Denmark, where she worked for eight years as a ceramicist at the Royal Copenhagen Factory and married a Dane (hence the surname, which she retained after an amicable divorce).

View of the open-plan apartment from the mezzanine © Thomas Chéné

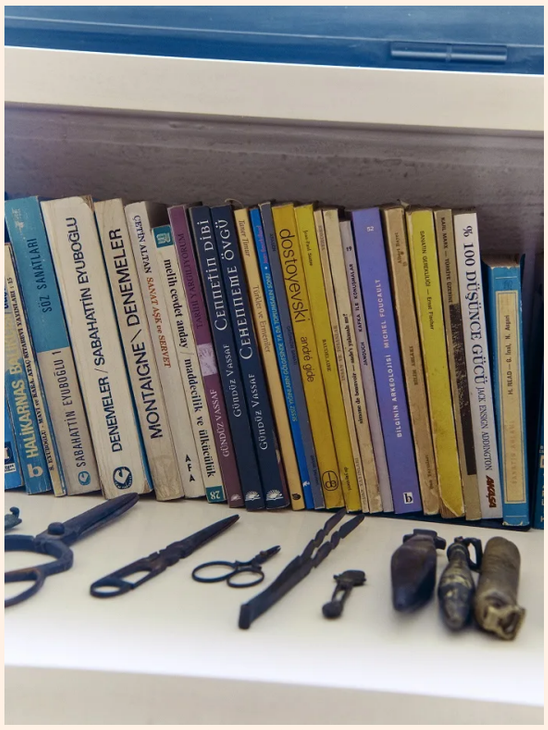
In 1980, she finally moved to Paris, where she says she feels utterly at home. “I’m a city rat,” she says. “I once moved a kilometre out of Paris and I hated it.” She is a firm advocate of the 14th *arrondissement*. “It has the best fish, the best cheese, right on your doorstop.”

Regarding her set of china teacups with a critical eye, Ebüzziya Siesbye disagrees with those who consider ceramics a form of design. “Design implies a production line of many pieces, thousands maybe. I make *unika* — unique pieces. There is only one of each, and it needs my hand from beginning to end.”

Her studio, which adjoins the apartment, is filled with the bowls that have made her name; she makes around 30 a year. Their colours range from bold reds and yellows — her recent favourites — to gold and silver, and the more subtle blacks and blues of her earlier career.



Japanese lacquer works and Louis Poulsen lamp on chest © Thomas Chéné



Bookshelf and 18th-century Ottoman tools © Thomas Chéné

“In the 1970s and 1980s I developed very special blues and they became extremely popular. So I stopped making them. I am not a merchant. I have never made anything thinking about whether people will like it.”

That blue phase for which she is known came after a “difficult time” in her life. “I needed the blue. It is a soothing colour, it makes you feel good. Colours are a state of mind, like music, or the seasons — you need different ones at different times.”

Kick wheel © Thomas Chéné

Arrayed on narrow shelves above her desk is a library of colour samples for her glazes, accumulated over 50 years. In a collection of notebooks, she has written the process that produces each glaze — its components, baking time and temperature of the kiln — in Danish, the language she was learning when she honed her craft. The odd English swear word in block letters denotes her mistakes.

"I have been developing my colour samples ever since the beginning [her first workshop was in Copenhagen in 1969]. It takes two years to fully develop any glaze. Here are all the blacks — bluer blacks, greys, blacks in different shades. The shape, the colour, the glaze of the bowl, have to be like skin and bone. They have to melt into each other."

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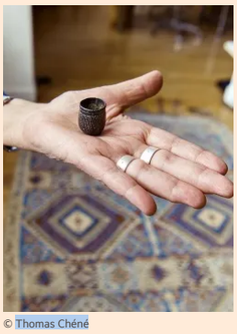
But the colour library is significantly depleted. Last year Ebüzziya Siesbye sent four metres of samples to be included in an exhibition at Galeri Nev in Istanbul. This December she has a solo exhibition opening at the Pierre Marie Giraud Gallery in Brussels, and another in October next year at the new Arter Museum in Istanbul. "That will be entirely black," she says firmly.

Ebüzziya Siesbye knows what she wants. She is the recipient of countless accolades, a knight of France and of Denmark, and she has lost count of the number of museums that exhibit her work ("around 34, I think"). Yet, when asked whether she ever worries that her next bowl will not be good enough, she does not hesitate.

"Of course, all the time. That doubt is very important to me, you need it. You know damn well if you could have made the bowl better, if it has *duende* ["spirit" or "magic" in Spanish]. It has to have a vibration, it has to have an aura. It is not enough to be beautiful."

Favourite thing



© Thomas Chéné

Ebüzziya Siesbye selects a Hittite thimble, dating from around 1,500BC, that she found in Turkey.

"My father was a big collector, and he used to take me to the Grand Bazaar to help him search for antiques. There was a stall where things not considered valuable were kept in a drawer. I chose this and paid for it with my own pocket money.

"This little thimble is like my soul — I feel that I come from it. I am so inspired by Mesopotamia and Anatolia. People say 'the simplicity in her work comes from the Scandinavian influence' — no, it comes from Anatolia, from my roots."

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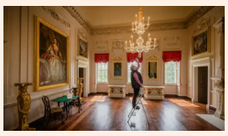

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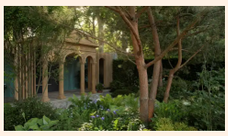

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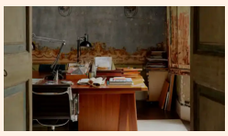

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