

Multi-talented Monica

Monica Ritterband. The name rings a bell to most Danes. Some will remember her from television, from when she was bringing the news to us in the late 1980s on the public channel DR1. Others will remember her as vice-president at the Carlsberg breweries. Today, most people know her as one of the most popular artists in Denmark with a distinct production of gigantic sculptures placed in public places, parks and main streets, as well a string of highly successful and visible designs for Danish and international companies specializing in applied art. But who is she?

Words Kristina Rosengren

How is it possible for the same person to work first as a journalist, later as vice-president at a large brewery and then, all of a sudden, change horses and become perhaps even more successful within a third, and entirely different, area?

“It’s possible because there’s no conflict. And besides, it’s not something that just happened out of the blue. I’ve been working with art all my life. Art is part of my luggage. Most of my family on my mother’s side are artists. And as child I assisted my mother when she received large public assignments for making mosaics. So technically I’ve been quite trimmed for the job since I was about 12-13 years old. You could say that I took part of this luggage and turned it into the foundation of my professional life at the age of 41. I’ve always been working with art concurrently with my career, but I quit my job in 1997 because I had a burning wish to make art the centre of my life – 24 hours a day.”

You’re a qualified journalist, but you’ve been working full-time as an artist since 1997. Do you find there’s a bridge or a kind of synergy between these two worlds in terms of expression?

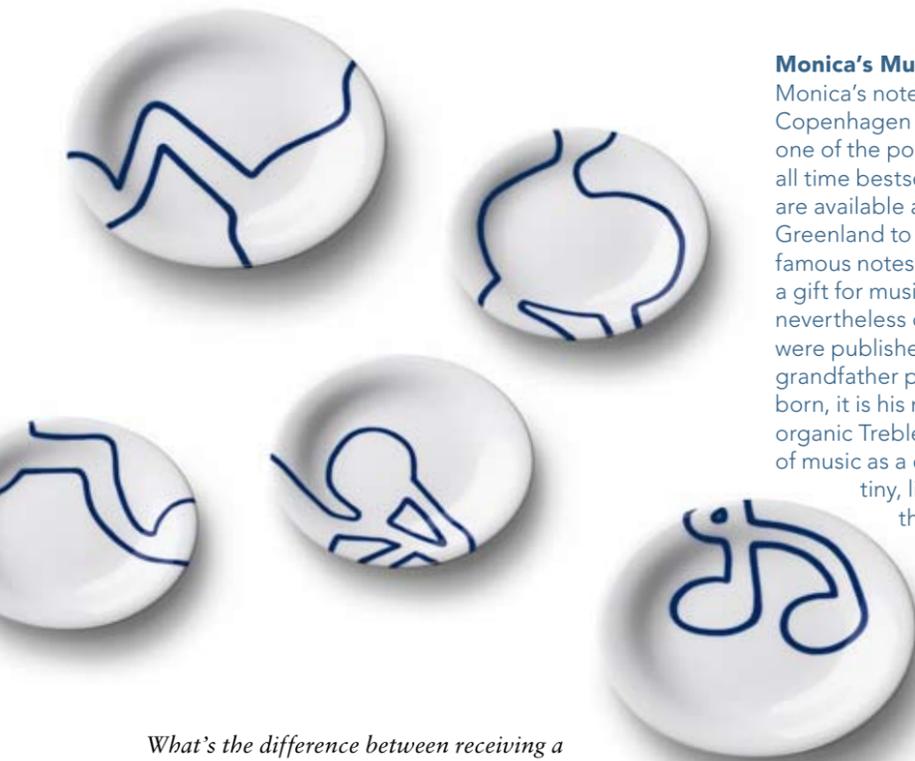
“Well, of course there’s a great difference in the way of communicating as an artist and as a journalist. Journalism tends to be concerned exclusively with facts and with describing the outside world. In my work as an artist and a designer I also have a story or a thought I wish to express, but I only show a corner of that story; the rest is up to the beholder of the particular piece of work. So I’d prefer comparing the visual arts to poetry, rather than to journalism. Poetry and the visual arts are both a kind of compressed emotion or sensation, that do not necessarily have to possess an external logic.”

If you were to characterize yourself as an artist, what words would you then use?

“It’s always extremely difficult to describe yourself. But I want both what’s crazy, what’s honest and what’s groundbreaking in terms of design. When I work with applied art I’d like to reach as large an audience as I possibly can. So I try to combine wild ideas with a broad appeal. And with broad I don’t mean easy or popular. But what I do only makes sense to me if I’m able to get people to enter a universe where they feel like staying. At least just for a while.”

Facts about Monica Ritterband

Monica Ritterband has been elected “Artist of the Year” four times, and since 1997 she has had more than 25 large separate exhibitions and performed design tasks for the country’s leading manufacturers of textiles, porcelain, glass and more. She has furthermore been commissioned to create a large number sculptures and paintings for municipalities, ministries and companies. You can get a complete overview of her work at www.monicaritterband.dk



Monica's Musica

Monica's notes from Royal Copenhagen have become one of the porcelain factory's all time bestsellers. Her Musica notes are available at select stores all over the world, from Greenland to Japan, from the USA to Russia. Her world-famous notes are inspired by her grandfather. He had a gift for music, but had to earn his living as a tailor. He nevertheless composed a number musical pieces that were published over the years. And even though her grandfather passed away many years before Monica was born, it is his music books, with the curved notes and the organic Treble Clef, that made Monica enter the world of music as a child and experience the single notes as tiny, living creatures, each with their own sound, their own personality. "Musica" with Monica's notes is a quite extraordinary concept, allowing you to combine a whole set with the personalities of the different notes. There are six different cups, six different bowls, six different dinner plates etc.



What's the difference between receiving a more or less predefined design assignment and then making your own unique works of art?

"The two things do have some elements in common – but the purposes differ widely. My own pieces usually emerge from inside of me – from some inner corner of my soul which I'd like to understand better. I guess I have a need to express who I am to myself somehow. When I work with design I'm much more focused. Still seeking, but more determined to make order out of chaos. But I very often use my own art as a source of inspiration and initiator in my design projects. For instance, I had been making a number of paintings and mosaics for a while using abstractions of dancers as leitmotifs. And then last year, I made them jump from the pictures on the wall and down on the floor into a whole collection of carpets designed for Ege Carpets. When I look at these carpets, I picture them in my mind as paintings – only now rather big and projected onto nappy canvases. Or take my musical notes. You also find elements of these in my large steel sculptures and in my Musica set in porcelain which I designed for Royal Copenhagen. And even if there is a difference between working on a unique piece and on a design project, I feel equally happy and satisfied doing both. Working with art is an introvert activity of digging, doubting and seeking, and it can be lonely – when I design the process is much more extrovert. Then I collaborate with, say, a weaver, a glass factory, a smith,

an engineer, an architect. When I've been working with my own art for a long period of time, it's like sensing the sky above again

as I leave my hole and enter a world of social interaction. Design also requires the ability to think beyond yourself and your own life experience. There's a function that has to work together with the form, which may very well be surprising and quirky. But the form has to be functional, and the look should enthuse more people than just me."

You've once said limitations can be exciting. Do you prefer creating within certain boundaries, or do you like the opposite just as much?

"I like both. I find it interesting to be limited in the sense of knowing what kind of space you're moving in. That this is where you have to find the solution. But on the other hand, I also think it's fantastic to be faced with an entirely open landscape – albeit a bit frightening. For instance, when I was asked to make the collection for Ege Carpets, the CEO told me that there was no idea or thought – no matter how crazy – that they wouldn't help me carry out. They wanted to get it all out of my head. It was quite overwhelming to get that message, to be shown that kind of confidence. Because I really wanted to live up to it – and, at best, give them much more than they expected. The best thing in the world is to see the sun light up another person's face."



Seductive sales

The Seducer is a recurrent theme in Monica's work (sketch to the left). In 2004, Monica participated in an auction arranged by the Municipality of Frederiksberg for charity purposes. All in all, 17 unique works of art from 17 different renowned Danish artists were placed on auction. Monica's relief "The Seducer", painted on 9 tiles, was sold for the price of 52,000 Danish kroner, which made it the most expensive piece at the auction. The funds, which amounted to 375,000 Danish kroner, were destined for a Unicef programme for children in Laos.



Sports sculptures

Scattered around the city of Farum are a number sculptures of great Danish sportsmen and -women made by Monica. The series include legendary sailor Paul Elvstrøm, racing cyclist Ole Ritter as well as swimmer Mette Jacobsen. Above you see football players Michael Laudrup and Peter Schmeichel in happy interaction.

Did you ever have to give up on an idea or a project because you couldn't crack it?

"When I work on my own pieces, I sometimes find myself surrounded by chaos. Then I have to leave it for a while. But sometimes you actually need an enormous amount of chaos to bring the kind of glow to your work that ends up providing the finished piece with the right energy and zest. Sometimes it's the pieces I've had most trouble with – even hated in the process – that I feel later on are the most accomplished. But I've never had the experience of being unable to solve a task I've been commissioned to perform – I'm simply too stubborn. Once I was asked to embody the values of the Municipality of Frederiksberg in an image-picture-project, and that was a rather hard nut to crack. But it was an incredibly interesting assignment, and the piece ended up being made in dialogue with the municipality. The process lasted more than a year, all in all. I've had the same positive experience a couple of years ago with the Ministry of Integration, who asked me to make a permanent award sculpture symbolizing the concept of integration. And then I had to spend some time pondering what integration could look like."

Can you explain the difference between making a sculpture weighing several tons and drawing a delicate porcelain set?

"The approach to a small, concentrated piece of work differs a lot from a project size XL. When you work with large objects weighing several tons and requiring the use of cranes, engineers, architects and smiths, then there's no room for surprises along the way. But in the initial phase of a large-scale project it's good, indeed it's vital, to have doubts. When you question what you're doing, it makes you think the whole project through. But at one point, your doubts need to be replaced by certainty, and from then on you must have a steady hand. If you waver, the whole project will waver. When you work on smaller projects within applied art, for instance, it's possible to make adjustments or alterations along the way, but once you've delivered it to the manufacturer, there's no 'undo' button to push."



In love with cobblestones

"I've always had a thing for cobblestones, and I love wandering about the old quarters of a city looking down at these wonderful, old, hand-carved cobblestones. The very thought that a human being has been working on each stone fascinates me. And then when you look at them, you realize that they are all different from each other – not two are the same. But as they lie there, side by side, they have this uniform expression that puts your soul and sight at ease. It's the same thing with us human beings; when you see us from a distance, we look pretty much the same, but when you get closer, you discover that each of us is unique after all. This goes for humans, and this goes for cobblestones." Monica has designed this textile, named Cobblestones, for Danish Art Weaving who manufactured it on the basis of Monica's hand-drawn cobblestones. The chair upholstered with the textile is Arne Jacobsen's Swan chair.