

The City and its Image

The Porcelain Sculptures of Pálma Babos

Article by Zsolt Bagi



ONE POSSIBLE PICTURE OF A CITY IS A CITY MAP. WHEN I hear the word 'Budapest', often the first thing that comes to my mind is one of the big city maps found in the Budapest metro stations. Of the word 'Paris', it is not so much the city maps in the metro stations as the maps of the metro that first come to mind. On the other hand, 'Rome' and 'Florence' do not evoke such a picture in my mind; rather, they appear as experienced space, in which the passage of time is written on the face of the city; as the narrow alleys of Trastevere, or as the city of living Renaissance. The difference is not that one is an abstract image, while the other is a concrete one. Nothing is more concrete in Paris than the map of the metro. It does not depend on personal connection either. I have a lot more personal experience to connect me to Budapest and even to Paris, than to Rome. It is the characteristics of the image that are different, so much is certain: in one case the point of view is external, while it is internal in the other, and the reason is that certain cities prefer to show themselves in specific views. From the era of Haussmann, Paris likes to show itself from above, from a distance. If you look down along the axis of Louvre-Tuileries – Place de la Concorde – Champs Élysées – Étoile-Défense, your view necessarily becomes geometric. Your perception is unable to encompass this vast space, which is not meant for the internal point of view of perception, but for the external vision of a conceptual image. Budapest replicates this in many aspects. Florence, on the other hand, has an internal

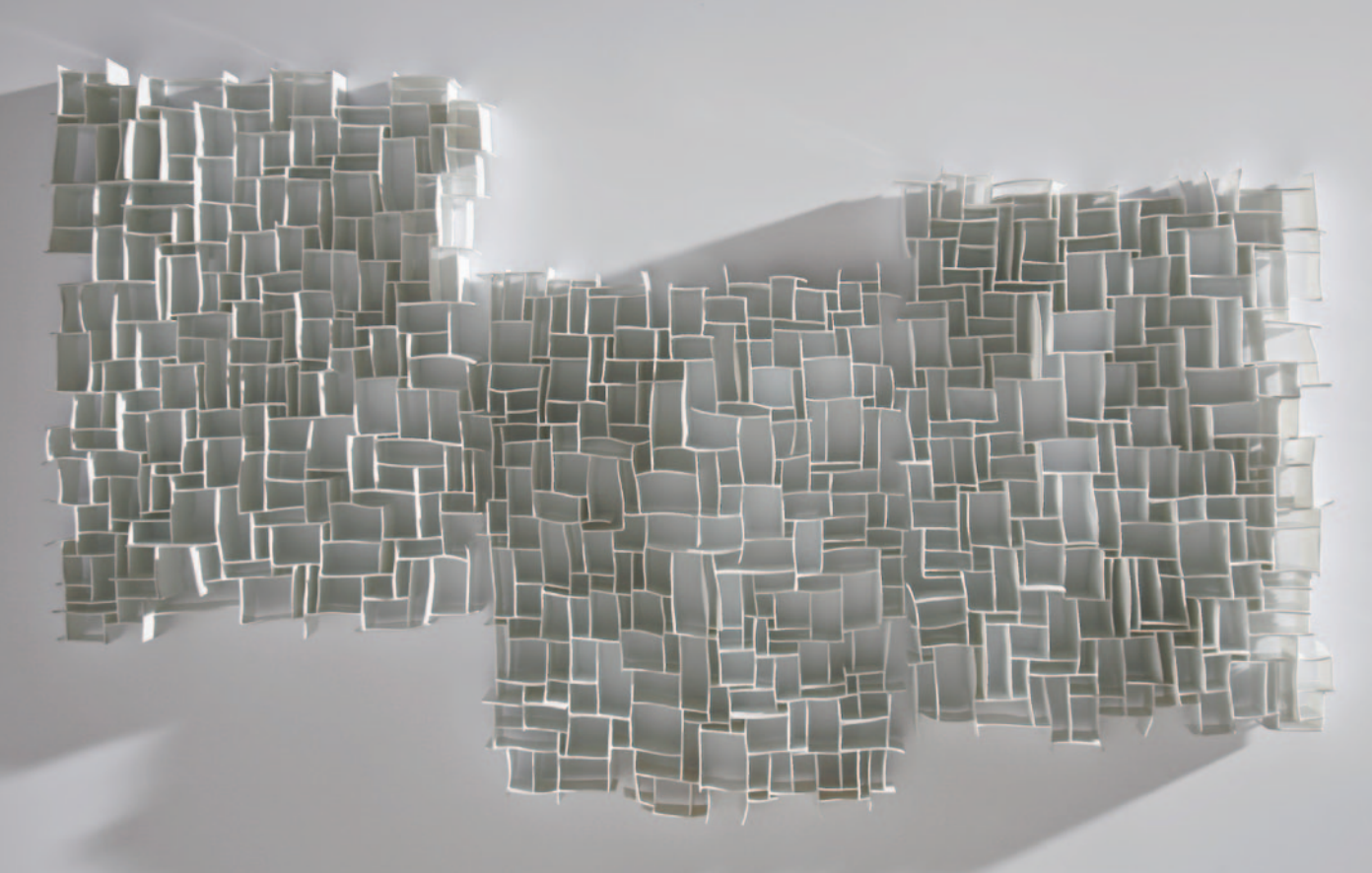
Facing page: *Single (Detail)*. 2012.
 Selected for the European Ceramics Contest 2014. Bornholm, Denmark.
 Above: *Memories From the Future/City*. 2011.
 Handbuilt and glazed porcelain, fired to 1380°C. 68 cm.

perspective, since the focal sacred space of the city, the Piazza del Duomo, which is dominated by the Santa Maria del Fiore, is connected to the profane main square, the Piazza della Signoria by a walk, rather than an avenue.

The cities of Pálma Babos unite these two meanings of 'the image of a city'. On the one hand, they are maps: representations of the relationships that organise a city into a city. On the other hand, the towers are alive.

Maps, or at least relative maps: paths, directions, houses, similar relative heights, the order of windows on the tower blocks, order in the volumes of rooms; a textural network of near-identical relationships (white porcelain pieces), where the similarities, or even identities are the source of disorder, of 'otherness': here, form is created by relationships, rather than form creating relationships. Tower form is not the 'essence', but the result of these sculptures. If such a sculpture is a map, then it is a map of something nonexistent, something that is created by the map itself. As an image, though, it does not represent the city first of all, but the relationships.

The network of identical or similar rectangles is the image of a system without hierarchy. A network differs from hierarchical systems in that there is no preexistent pattern in it. A traditional



Clouds (Installation). 2014. Handbuilt and glazed porcelain fired to 1380°C. Approx. 100 x 10 x 60 cm.

building, before Modernism, would always follow an example. The Palazzo Rucellai of Alberti is the model of all Renaissance palaces but, in turn, it too follows models: cultural patterns, such as the column orders of Vitruvius and mathematical shapes, such as the circle and the square, the perfect forms according to the *De re Aedificatoria*. In contrast, in these sculptures, the pattern is shaped by a number of structural decisions and these decisions are also clearly apparent.

There is a base, which definitely determines the most elementary system-feature: the existence of a 'down below'. In the case of a sculpture, this is an almost necessary feature, but not completely necessary. There are sculptures without a substantial structural significance of downward and upward directions. No doubt, it is a much less compelling feature for a painting. In some paintings of Kassák, the visual architectures have down and up components, but in most cases, the architecture does not require the existence of a bottom edge. In the case of these sculptures, however, the 'bottom edge' has further function and meaning: it is the foundation. These networks can become images of cities precisely because they are buildings; they have foundations on which architectures are built. The second decision is about the material. These buildings are composed on the principle of support

from below. This network, or pattern, is a supported structure. The principle of modern architecture is not support from below; it is based on tensioned cantilever beams. Porcelain is not the material of cantilever beam construction and, although these buildings may somewhat resemble the general shape of modern block houses, they are not the images of those. They are the images of supported network cities, which are neither traditional (hierarchical) nor modern (based on cantilever beam structure). The next decision concerns the supporting system. First of all, it means the creation of a ground layout, because that will determine the system as a whole. If 10 squares made the base, then 10 squares closed the vertical column. In addition, this decision is about the vertical and horizontal positions of the elements, which determine the relative heights of the individual floors. Some of the towers try to keep to the plane and system marked out by the foundation, while others are in disintegration and, the farther away from the base, the less the floors reflect the structure and plane of the foundation. For the structure of the towers is never predetermined: it has to be fought for.

As I stated already, the image of the city is also alive. Porcelain, in the process of burning, goes through a stage when it becomes soft, right before it finally hardens. The towers wobble and bend and they become aged, both in the sense that they bear the story of their making and that they become the images of something temporal. Babos is expecting



Left: *Break Up*. 2013. Handbuilt and glazed porcelain with hand painted decoration fired at 1380°C. Collection of Seto Art Museum, Japan.

Above: *Twin Towers*. 2013. Handbuilt and glazed porcelain fired to 1380°C. 30 x 18 x 51 cm.

this moment, the occurrence of the event. It is an event that is both foreseeable and unforeseeable: it is certain to happen, but it is impossible to tell how it will unfold. The unbalanced, 'faulty' system collapses during burning and it hardens into eternal form while it is in collapse. Precisely because it is a supported system, it can bear the marks of time; concrete beams may collapse or crumble, but never melt or bend. The towers of Babos harden into porcelain-eternity in a moulten, collapsing form. Burning deforms the porcelain sheets and they bend. The city is imprinted with the marks of a lifelike event. What is a tool for preventing this defect in the normal process of porcelain manufacturing, the deformation during burning, becomes an instrument of producing the event. It is the defect itself that becomes distorted: it becomes the essential meaning, an event.

The image of a life event is apparent on every single tower: the relationships become bent, congested and misaligned. A life event – since it is an event – has no form. Life only has a form before and after the event, but not during it. An event, while it is in progress, cannot be captured; for example, when a life is in the process of collapsing because of some kind of tragedy. I am trying desperately to keep the car on the road, but my life is no longer in my own hands. The last straw that I am holding on to is the moment right before the event, as if I could keep things in their normal order. I have no idea what is to come, but I know that what is to come will not be what it was before. Events are bidirectional, have

two meanings at once – says Deleuze. Something comes into being, and the event is substantive in that direction. On the other hand, something comes to pass and the event is destructive in that direction. That is why an event is paradoxical and escapes description. These two conflicting meanings are present in it at the same time, rather than successively. Can a life event itself be pictured, immortalised? It looks as if Babos has found a way to do that: in this junction, relationships become non-relational – mere material, a mess of porcelain, which has no structure. Walls cave in, sheets of porcelain stack on top of one another, nodes disintegrate and the sheets no longer connect anything. They merely lie in a heap of layers. The event, in this respect, is a case of de-formation: deprivation from any form. It is well defined and it is directed by chance at the same time.

The Collapse series raises another question: tower blocks do not collapse in the way the towers of Babos do. Anybody living in the age of 9/11 knows that. The tower collapsing into itself and the cloud of dust is burned into our minds. Since then, every catastrophe movie builds the visual representation of cataclysm on this city-trauma. Babos does not. In her works, 'collapse' is more of a fall of something living. What kind of city image is this? And, in the first place, what kind of a city is this?

I would call them ideal cities, were this attribute not



Above: *Collapse*. 2012. Handbuilt and glazed porcelain fired to 1380°C. 27 x 29 x 34 cm. First prize at El Vendrell Ceramics Biennial, Spain 2013.
Right: *Couple*.



reserved for the utopian cities, the well-planned cities of renaissance through early modern history. These are the towers of ideal cities, but not in the sense of planning and invention, rather, in the sense that they are experimental specimens of imaginary, living cities. They are of cities that do not exist anywhere in reality, but could be the images of any city. We may view any city through the towers of Babos: in every city, we can find the images of bent and distorted time, or of buildings connected by passions.

City dwellers are not fundamentally different from the city. What makes them city dwellers is that they too are images of relationships. The towers, just like city dwellers, are arranged in pairs, are moved by passions or, at least, by contingent bodily events, have 'heads' – that is, closing elements – and feet, or bases, that they stand on. City dwellers are tiny cities. In the interpretation of Babos, cities are not places, stacks of empty buildings to be populated by city dwellers. Maybe it is the other way around: it is the city that 'populates' its dwellers, as it enfolds them in a web of its multifold relationships, hands over its structure to them, the structure of the otherness that evolves from the identical and the structure of temporal event as a distortion of relationships.

City-dwellers are, to an extent, towers or houses themselves. Practically nothing but their passions differentiate them from the other towers. In the living city, passions appear as new kinds of relationships; not as a network of white porcelain, but as a connection

between network and network. The network of towers is, at first, only defined by their basic elements, but with passions, new connections are established: attractions and repulsions between networks. Sometimes the individual towers retain their identities, at other times, they interconnect with other networks, form pairs and they become inseparable from the system into which they are arranged.

Passion, therefore, does not affect the individual relationships (porcelain sheets), but the whole system, the form. Can we say that this is where the form of the tower appears in its identical form, in its totality? That it is the other, the other of passion, that first creates this identity? This claim is unjustified. First of all, there are those twin towers ('pairs'), where it is impossible to tell where one system ends and the other begins. And then there are towers that, under the effect of passion, lose their identities – rather than becoming finite, closed units, it is precisely the opposite: their disintegration becomes final. And lastly, there are those towers that appear to be the most passionate and, at the same time, are the least well-formed: they present the biggest distortion. Passion does not close the system of relationships, it actually multiplies them. Life is not in a binary opposition with the system; life is none other than the completion of the system.

The 'pairs' are, in this respect, the nuclei of the system's extension. The smallest extension is the formation of pairs. It was Husserl who thought that the inter-subjective world is based on the formation of pairs. This, however, is not exactly a Husserlian system – what is more, it may be the exact opposite. Pairs are not the foundations of the towers, but their



Above: *Passionate Couple*. 2012. Handbuilt and glazed porcelain fired to 1380°C. 56 x 26 x 40 cm.

Below left: *The Artist's Signature*.

Below right: *Portrait of the Artist*. 2014. Photo by Joris-Jan Bos.

images emerging through analysis; the images of the simplest passions, rather than images of the complex passions of the towers. Not because complexity would be based on the elementary; in fact, in this case, the simple itself is complex: a tiny tower. It is that the complex passions are reflected in the simple, most elementary passions of the dwellers: in the formation of pairs. If I want to use traditional philosophical terminology to describe this phenomenon, I could say that the towers of Babos are not monadic. For her, complexity or multitude does not presuppose a unity – on the contrary, anything simple can only be deduction. It is the antithesis of the claim of Leibniz that “the elementary must exist, because the complex exists.” The elementary is always a result; it cannot stand on its own.

This is why the final deducted element is the single. Singles are almost abstract city dwellers that are, still, structured as systems. The final element of a system is not its material, it is not the white porcelain sheet, but the final system-slice that it can be reduced to or analysed into. Something that is still a system, not an abstraction, not a building block or brick separated from the system, but something that shows signs of the network, even if only the bare minimum of signs. They are the case of ‘not a network yet’, which, at the same time, carries the possibility or the desire to become one.

The latest works of Pálma Babos are new kinds of images. They are the representations of her own cities in two dimensions. They are panel pictures of the living city, the city networking itself. These are cross-sections or snapshots, not the pictures of life. Not the images of the events, but the images of

states, not the images of passions, but the images of forms. The towers are images in a special meaning of the word; they are images of life events. The panel pictures are inapt for that purpose; we need the towers for the representation of life events. The panel picture can only be a form (a system in the plane) or a mere material (a pile of porcelain sheets), but it cannot be an event, or a passion. As pictures, they certainly carry new meaning, they are not simply representations of the towers. But they exhibit something else as well: the specific character of the towers, the representation of life-events.



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