

Ceramics seen from a new perspective

When we in Scandinavia talk about the US and what is “American”, we are easily tempted to generalize. But just like many extensive cultures throughout history, the contemporary USA is an amalgam of impulses and traditions from a variety of sources. Consequently, there is no simple answer to what the notion of “American” represents. The same is of course valid for a description such as “Scandinavian”. Although Scandinavia is a smaller area both by size and population, there are important differences within the region.

Bearing these basic assumptions in mind, I went to see the exhibition *Strata: New Perspectives on Ceramics from Scandinavia and the United States*, which was up at Skulpturens Hus (The house for Sculpture) in Stockholm during the summer. The Swedish ceramic artist Backa Carin Ivarsdotter initiated the exhibition, which consisted of works by nineteen artists. She had made the selection of the Scandinavian participants, while a co-curator, Lisa Tamiris Becker of Colorado University Art Museum, stood behind the American selection. The title of the exhibition, *Strata*, (the plural form for *stratum*) has double meaning. It can refer groups within a society, but is also a geological term for layers in the ground. The question of eventual groupformations and major differences between American and Scandinavian ceramics became an underlying theme, holding the exhibition together.

From a Nordic horizon, American ceramics is often described as monumental and expressive. Of course this is a tendentious image that obscures the presence of other traditions and ways of expression. In an exhibition like this, however, it comes as natural that monumentality is in focus. The premises of Skulpturens Hus, a factory building from the 19th century, are demanding. A modest and whispering artistic expression will easily drown in the big rooms. Not for nothing, then, were many of the American works in the show marked by large-scale formats and sometimes by violent expressions. But at the same time they meet the Expressionist tradition with reservation. It is a long way to the heroic approach to creation that is connected to Peter Voulkos and other pioneers of ceramics’ abstract expressionism. In the hand of the American artists in this exhibition, the clay appears more as a working material, than an existential challenge.

The pieces at the exhibition that stood out as closest to the expressionist tradition were not American, but Scandinavian: Torbjørn Kvasbø’s bombastic, colorful sculptures from 2003. In this body of work the artist strives for an intensity that is achieved not the least through his obvious fascination for what is possible to make in clay, with regards to color and form as well as size. The contradiction between the eruptive surfaces and the wheel-thrown cylinders that makes up the half-hidden structural skeleton of the sculptures captures the tension between different poles that has been frequently observed in Torbjørn Kvasbø’s artistic oeuvre. But most of all, these sculptural forms manifest Man’s imprint on the world, his triumphant reshaping of both the Earth and himself. This visualization of human conditions is brought to us through an individualistic, emotional act of creation.

Some of the American artists are also using emotionally inclined modes of expressions, but in a more veiled and distanced way. Walter McConnell’s two sculptures, *Instant Edens* and *Swan Service*, were literally placed in veils. The works were temporarily built on spot in porcelain clay and during the exhibition they kept their moist behind a layer of protecting plastic. These artificial microenvironments, lit up from above, reminded of aquariums, an association that was reinforced by their nature-motives. In *Instant Edens*, cracking fat leaves, curly flowers and other organic shapes created a lush tower, while *Swan Service* consisted of a swan in absolute solitude. Regarding the treatment of the material one can, just like in Torbjørn Kvasbø’s sculptures, detect a fascination for what possible to make with clay. But if the results of Torbjørn Kvasbø’s eruptions communicate some kind of catharsis, Walter McConnell’s work deliberately balances on the edge of being disgusting –

there was something pushing and repelling over the dusky plastic chambers and the sculptures with their surfaces wet with damp.

To make images from plants, fruits and animals has an extensive background in art history, but today the imagery has its main models in consumer products. In the supermarkets, we find shelf after shelf filled with garden and interior decoration objects of this kind, often in realistic plastic materials. Walter McConnell's work can be seen as a skilled play with the fictionmania of consumer society, but I rather read it as a serious contemplation on loss of meaning and connection. The titles *Service* and *Eden* seem to relate to a religious world. But what remained here of the spiritual idea of Paradise was but a grotesque assembly of vanitas symbols, put into physical decay.

A different application of the ceramic material could be seen in Denise Pelletier's *Vapours*, placed centrally in the largest room of the building. The piece consists of a large number of invalid-feeders, arranged hanging in threads from the ceiling. These replicas of authentic items from old hospital equipment seem to refer to the role porcelain has had in the process of modernization. In the form of sanitary-goods, tiles, electrical safety supplies and tableware, the industrial porcelain became a practical, and in its pure whiteness also a symbolical, part of modern life.

Furthermore, the actions of feeding and caretaking that the suspended items are associated with, can be read as metaphors for a still ongoing construction of society. Through regulations, recommendations, and warnings, society's official institutions have an impact on what its citizens consume, in both a literal and a transferred sense. In *Vapours*, the actual amount of objects, and the beauty in the arrangement – they are like a flock of birds – also seem to give an illusion of the seductive overflow of commodities that is another characteristic of our society. In its skilled way of connecting material and industrial history, nursing, hygiene and esthetics, the piece gives interesting aspects on the of building modern society.

Another, but to its matter similar perspective on society, can be found in Swedish artist Jennifer Forsberg's sculpture *If*. A city of small, stylized houses is placed on a wooden table under big ceramic bell-like objects, with red lamps inside them. Are the hanging objects church-bells, heating-lamps or perhaps warning-lamps? The bells hang low in long lines from the ceiling, and are seemingly pressing the air down over the miniature-city. One gets the feeling of compressed atmosphere in a society under pressure and threat.

The houses are standing on a table, as if they were placed there for a meal. But is somebody coming there to eat them? Or is this cut-off society eating itself from the inside, through unstoppable functions in its very structure? The ambiguous presentation of isolation, control and paranoia gives us a picture of the state of condition in the Western world after the terror attacks of recent years. Regarding the material, one may note that compared to the work of Denise Pelletier, Jennifer Forsberg's piece does not direct the attention towards any symbolic values in the materials themselves. Instead, the message is built up around the visual motif and the associations it gives us.

Connection with the connotations of the materials is to be found, however, in the work of Norwegian Gunhild Vatn. Here the porcelain appears as clinical and anonymous, again clearly connected to the modern civilizations process. At Skulpturens Hus, Gunhild Vatn showed porcelain utensils suspended in tight steel wires, a move that was recognized from her exhibition in RAM Gallery in Oslo in 2003. But here, the room was smaller, the atmosphere more tense, and thereby the visitor's experience was different from the earlier show. Where in this exhibition many works were markedly monumental, this notably well-installed room affected the viewer through consciously restricted means. In Gunhild Vatn's visualization of how minimal means can have a big impact, her installation in itself became in illustration on the function of the bridles she depicts.

Simple but effective methods to engage the audience was used by the young

American Thomas Müller. In his *Redemption Piece for King Minos*, a group of small bulls, cast in porcelain was lined up in a quarter of a circle in a corner. The figurines were accompanied by a text telling the story of the Cretensian King Minos, who received a magnificent bull from the Ocean God, Poseidon. Minos kept the bull, instead of offering it, whereby his wife betrayed him with it. The result of this misalliance was Minotaurus, a monster that Minos kept imprisoned in a labyrinth, feeding it with humans.

The text in the exhibition informed that the bull-shaped figurines cost two thousand Swedish krona per piece, but also that one could 'break one for free'. During the opening, several pieces were crushed against the brick wall. Unlike some other interactive crafts projects, however, the possibility for the visitors to interact here did not seem to be an excuse for bad craftsmanship. As a contrary, these figurines were carefully made, and in themselves they formed an interesting piece.

The bull is an animal loaded with symbols. It has often been sacrificed in ritual contexts, and in the form of Minotaurus, the animal itself demanded human sacrifices. From the history of ceramics we know the bull as a common figure for tomb figurines. In Thomas Müller's invitation to the audience, the image of the bull opens up for questions about sacrifice, guilt and concessions in a metaphorical and far more ordinary meaning. If enough many visitors give in to the impulse to crush the sculptures, do they not by that destroy the meaning for those coming after? Should I therefore control myself, and refrain? Which visitor's experience is the most valuable?

Of course it is difficult to say something general about American or Scandinavian ceramic sculpture by just viewing this one exhibition. Anyhow, it is tempting to try and formulate a few basic assumptions. All the works discussed in this article are united by their artists' clearly marked desire to communicate with the viewer. The artists present dramatic images, underline the premises' influence over the experience or offer the audience a possibility to alter the work. Looking at possible differences, one is tempted to say that the American artists seem slightly more interested in leading the viewers further to religious, mythological or conceptual ideas. The works from the Scandinavian participants are more dependent on the direct, physical experience and rarely establish connections to the history and symbolic value of specific ceramic materials.

This may be disputable, of course. However, this exhibition offers possibilities not only to get to know new artists, but also to see new sides from already well-known names. When the work, like here, is put together carefully and with respect, in fitting surroundings, good circumstances for a dialogue is created. Even if the question about the difference between the regions' ceramics has to be left unanswered, there is a great value in exhibitions like this.

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Originally published as "Keramikk i nytt perspektiv", *Kunsthåndverk* (Norway), issue 3/2005, pp. 34-37. Roughly translated by Jennifer Forsberg and Love Jönsson.