

# Ceramics with a sense of fun -

The works of

## Ute Naue-Müller

Hella Holsten



photo: Falk Müller

In Dresden, a ceramist lives and works whose works provide a variety of experiences. Nowadays, she is called Ute Naue-Müller but she began her career as Ute Großmann. However, despite any changes, continuity in style is unmistakable. There have always been vessels, with separate areas of glaze like mosaics that turn into landscapes. In others, pictures and symbols are impressed, creating reliefs where light can work on matt and glossy as well as on raised and impressed areas. In addition, the artist sometimes makes use of collages, thereby achieving surrealist effects reminiscent of Max Ernst. Or with a slip trailer, she puts so many dots of slip in her designs that whole snowstorms scurry over the surfaces, or the pieces remind us of distressed leather. They make us want to explore them with our hands, like a text in braille.

In particular with her vessels, Ute Naue-Müller has made use of these techniques and continued to create new themes in form and colour. The aim is not a decorative juxtaposition of various colour shades but to create rhythm and syncopation, to play with series and their adaptability and to provide satisfaction for the eye. Any schematic repetition would promptly prove to be dull, but in their divergence from the expected pattern, these vessels hold the gaze or make it wander between concentration and expansion, from the return of similar shades to breaking expectations, between recognised intention and fresh surprises.

One might mistake these vibrant vessels for Naue-

Schmierfink, ("Graffiti Artist") 2016, stoneware, glaze, slip, h 37 cm



It is not pathos that is on show in Naue-Müller's works when she exhibits her sculpture high up. Perhaps it is the figures themselves that she has surprised when they have swung themselves up onto an appropriate platform.



Frau Gutsel und ihr Hund, ("Frau Gutsel and Her Dog") 2011, stoneware, glaze, raku, h 51 cm

*Inscription: The apparent ageing of the two was scarcely noticed by evening strollers passing by. The brand new trendy outfit thus doubly paid dividends: it was so enchanting that many a critical glance gently slipped from greying hair and deposited turds. Photo: Reiner Großmann*





**Pigasus**, 2016  
stoneware, glaze  
slip, h 37 cm  
photo:  
Lars Thümmeler

opposite page -  
**Postamente**, (a pun on  
"post office" and  
"pedestal" in German)  
2017 stoneware clay, slip  
h 32 cm  
photo: Falk Müller

Inscription,  
front:  
Talente hin,  
Berufung her.  
Nichts gelernt,  
folgeschwer.  
Arbeit bis zur Rente  
bei der Postamente.  
(Ute Naue-Müller)  
("Talent here | Vocation  
there | Learning nothing |  
Serious consequences. |  
Work to retirement | At the  
post office.")

Reverse:  
In the 19th century, cats  
were tested in the postal  
service. For instance, in Liege,  
Belgium, 37 cats had to  
deliver the mail in a 30 km  
radius around the city. How-  
ever, the experiment was  
short-lived as the discipline of  
the animals employed left a  
lot to be desired.

Müller's trademark but that would only be half the story. In her work there is a whole cosmos of figural pieces. The vessels already reveal a tendency towards the sculptural. These structures, which are reminiscent of vases because of their openings, tend to stand on feet.

"Auf den Sockel gehoben" ("Placed on a pedestal") is the title of the exhibition of work by Ute Naue-Müller with which Galerie Fata in Hamelin celebrated its 25th anniversary in autumn 2017. Ceramics on a plinth or a pedestal? Ceramic plinths? How does that fit? And what does the artist do with it?

Plinths and pedestals have a long tradition. What normally stands on a pedestal? If we follow tradition, then devotional objects do, as well as celebrities, pioneering thinkers and like-minded people. We expect sculptures in marble, bronze or other weighty materials. But in ceramics? These, as we know, stand on feet of clay and are thus not only metaphorically in danger of a fall. Ceramic figures deserving respect and with a meaning, in a presentation of heroism, dignity and rapture – is that possible?

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A range of animals received the portrait treatment in the pottery: wolves, fish, crocodiles and toads, all kinds of chameleons and axolotls, an elegant giraffe, a confused hippopotamus, a rocking pig called Pigasus, a hare on the hunt and a frightened fox, some portrayed as busts, some as full-length figures. They often have a plinth – a plinth full of meaning. Only rarely is a sculpture simply given a title or a motto like the vessels, which the artist always releases into the world with a name. They are frequently accompanied by a text, sometimes a quotation, but usually the text is from the artist herself. If they are too long for the front, they continue on the back or run all the way round. They modify the traditional inscription, instead of the name and dates of birth and death, there are poems, subtle dialogues, heavyweight questions. Naue-Müller's works talk to themselves but they also speak to us. How does this happen? Does the artist write a text for the figure? Does the figure illustrate the text? Who knows?

In the exhibition at Galerie Fata, cats have crept in and relax or stretch on their plinths. They too are special types. One is an old tom cat stretching in all directions, wanting to show what a fine fellow he is or once was. Well, we believe him of course, but what does the world call him? Ladykiller or macho? "Hasta la vista, baby!" He still uses his catchphrase. Olé!

A post office yellow cat with a corporate tattoo is, in contrast, a realist living in the here and now. It wears a tidy moustache and has earned a sense of entitlement, knows it is not well provided for but secure. Even if it is all over for the post office because no-one writes letters any more, it is part of Germany's tradition. We wish the cat a long life; it probably delivers newspapers in the small





hours because its pension is so low.

In addition to the quadrupeds of fable, Naue-Müller has a talent for avian role plays. With a group of 26 bird species in alphabetical order, she has provided us with a gallery of ways of living in which we can effortlessly recognise friends or foes and finally realise what high or low flyers we have to deal with in life. The series ranges from primeval birds, via ancient and classical special forms down to contemporary culture followers. Along side survival artists like chimaera and Icarus there are such widespread types as chicken and duck, owl, finch and blue tit as well as the ubiquitous urban pigeon from the orbit of fast food and microwave. Whether they are looking east, west, up or even down, they demonstrate to us that a lot goes on in their world. Only the raven took a hit, this being Raven Ralf, whose end is narrated in a poem by Christian Morgenstern.

Naue-Müller's ornithology exists in book form too, complete with details of habitat and habits, with the plinth texts in verse or prose. "Joke, satire, irony and deeper meaning", just with slightly less murderous intent than in Grabbe.

Then there is Frau Gutsel, who has been here since Naue-Müller began working in ceramics. One might conclude that the good soul flits through the works of her creator to reflect some of the trends in society.

To quote one example, of Frau Gutsel in 2010: in an excitingly patterned outfit, matching her dog's, she steps out beyond their shared pedestal. We see her again in the same year, in a double portrait, clearly in her full-length going-out veil with green circles on a pale pink background. Then Frau Gutsel disappears, pops up again in 2013 and reappears at greater length in 2017. – For instance, we surprise her in the office, where she has been looking after the obligatory green plant so devotedly that it has not only reached monstrous size but it has provoked an adaptation. Frau Gutsel and her watering can both now look just like the plant – is this perhaps a case of a hostile takeover?

The universe of Ute Naue-Müller has many inhabitants. They are jaunty, dreamy, threatening, cheerful or melancholy and show us life. We can recognise ourselves in them or they amuse us – ceramics as a commentary on the world, a very original concept.

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is a literary theorist. She lives in Dresden.

**Ute Naue-Müller** was born in Dresden in 1960, where she still lives. After studying process engineering at the Technical University of Dresden, she worked as an engineer until 1997. She gave birth to three children during this time. She then went back to the TU Dresden to study art education and German, studying painting and printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden in the evenings. She has been a freelance ceramist and a member of the Saxony artists' association since 2003. Vessels and sculptures with subtly nuanced glaze surfaces, initially raku fired. Later increasingly graphic and painterly surface treatment with engobes in conventional firings. Major competitions and group exhibitions in Europe and Asia: 2004 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale (Judges' Prize), Taipei, Taiwan; 2004 and 2006 Biennale de la Sculpture en Céramique, Luxembourg; 2007/2008 ICMEA Emerging Artists Competition, Fuping/China; 2013 Cheongju International Craft Biennale, South Korea; 2014 13th Westerwald Prize European Ceramics, and 2016 Ceramics Talent Award Focus Vessel, Keramikmuseum Westerwald, Germany.

Solo exhibitions in galleries and museums: 2006 Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kunstgewerbemuseum; 2008 and 2014 Galerie Rosenhauer, Göttingen; 2009 Galerie San Lorenzo Arte, Poppi, Italy; 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2013 Kunstausstellung Kühl, Dresden; 2009 Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Oldenburg; 2011 KERAMION Zentrum für moderne und historische Keramik, Frechen; 2012 Keramikmuseum Westerwald, Höhr-Grenzhausen; 2017 Galerie Fanta, Hameelin. Since 2010, she has run several workshops, in Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland.

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