



Tied 2/12, h 61 cm, 2012, photo Ole Akhøj

# STEEN IPSEN

## An Opus in Nine (and counting) Movements

Noel Montrucchio

**D**anish ceramics enjoys a particularly high international profile. What many find most intriguing about this fact is that there is no rigid formal philosophical school or artistic manifesto of ceramic art underpinning this success. Today the health of Danish ceramics is robust, in part because of their 'anything goes' attitude. For proof, simply ask a hundred knowledgeable individuals to make list of Denmark's most important ceramists over the last quarter century. What you will no doubt end up with will be lists totalling nearly a thousand different artists, i.e. little or no consensus. Such is the rich depth, breadth, and diversity of the Danish oeuvre. Note that the total will only be nearly a thousand because there are several artists whose contributions simply command inclusion. The sheer power and scope of their work and international recognition will not allow otherwise. One name would surely appear on most, if not all, lists. Steen Ipsen.

Born in 1966 in Naestved, Steen Ipsen works and lives in Copenhagen. He is one of the most important ceramists of the current generation working in Denmark. Ipsen has reached a point in his career where even his most ambitious experiments and changes in direction invariably show a sure hand, an eye for potential and a profound knowledge of materials and technique. Part of that is due to his choice of the Danish School of Art and Design, where he was a student in both ceramic art and design. Every graduate from that institution has a thorough grounding in the essentials of ceramic art and design without the handcuffs of a rigid formalism.

Confronted with any piece of work by Ipsen since he graduated in 1990, it is easy to imagine you have chanced upon an artefact from the cluttered office of a molecular biologist. Or perhaps more likely, a mathematician specializing in topology. It is probably best to go with the latter metaphor. Had he not been such a rigor-

ously curious ceramic artist, it is easy to imagine Ipsen immersed in the complexities of topology, that arcane branch of mathematics dealing with the way in which constituent parts are interrelated or arranged in two- and three-dimensional space.

Like the music of Johan Sebastian Bach however, the threads of topography and repetition run continuously throughout Ipsen's entire output. It is an unbreakable thread that has wound through his work from the very start, like the aria that begins and ends the Goldberg Variations. It seems the same but it is oh so different in how it tells. Ipsen's clay and glazes have always been about repetition and abstract topographical landscapes; ideas and symbols—not words and descriptions. As with Bach, you expect repetition but always get something a little bit different and a lot more inventive and elegant the next time around.

When surveying his work over the span of his career, it is just too tempting to resist subdividing it into periods, a la Picasso. First comes the Modules, then followed successively by Profiles, Vessels, Spikes, Bubbles, Extrudox, Geometric, Tied-Up, and currently Organic. This can be misleading because in no single period is the pursuit of an individual idea and its consequences complete. Each successive development has its roots, even inspiration in previous work. But be careful: even in his repetition,

he is not stepping into the same river twice. An unbroken pattern of growth and evolution flows throughout the entirety of his oeuvre. Yet each of his past explorations leaves its fingerprints on his next. All the way to the present—and almost certainly—all the way into his future extrapolations.

**Modules**, though Ipsen's earliest work, it is both once and future art of the highest quality. It would be a grievous error to assume that this is mere geometrical decoration. These are pieces that stand alone, complete and contemporary for all time.

**Profiles** are early work that begins the artist's focus on themes and variations. These ideas in turn made an easy transition into vessels.

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**Black/Red Geometric 2**  
h 24 cm, 2012  
photo Ole Akhoej



**Organic 5**  
h 22 cm, 2013  
photo Ole Akhoej

**Vessels**, from the small to the monumental, are a synthesis of all that has gone before. The visual impact is now heightened enormously and colour becomes an added essential voice in the Ipsen ceramic choir. A precise textbook approach does not define Ipsen's relationship with geometry for he perceives it as images and pattern. From the very start of his ceramic career, he has had a keen eye for the ornamental potential within the universe of geometric form. Early examples of this are his large porcelain vessels from the 1990s with strict, repetitively faceted forms that turn into brightly coloured patterns on the surface. In later works, he has thematically explored repetition in the piece—or the 'variation of repetition'—as was his title for an earlier exhibition.

**Spikes** are reminiscent of pencil sea urchins or one of the myriad of micro- and macroscopic living creatures. These are beasties/objects as diverse as microbes, sponges, jellyfish, insects and humans; already imagined by nature but somehow made more real and challenging through the ceramist's eyes and hands.

**Bubbles** begins Ipsen's ceramic works based on sketches and models that explore the diversity and rich potential of spherical shapes. He shares a fascination, perhaps even obsession, for this shape with painter turned sculptor Pol Bury (12,000 Balls and the fountain sculpture L'Octagon) and Gerhard Richter's Kugel (Sphere), a 1992 single stainless steel sphere that acts as a mirror, reflecting all of the surrounding space at once.

Steen Ipsen creates ceramics that must be seen and touched in the flesh to truly understand what the artist is saying.

#### **Extrudox A/S—**

Ipsen and Anne Tophøj met in 1984 during their design studies. Now both are ceramists with an international reputation. Twenty-seven years after their first encounter, they worked together once again for one summer to experiment with new techniques for working with clay. Under their able hands and artist's eye, instantly finished objects came out of the extruder in their final form.

Some see similarities in this alliance with Surrealist Automatism, automatic writing and drawing, and the idiomatic improvisation of free jazz.

**Geometric** sees the blending of insights achieved in previous work. Ipsen knows his art history and he has extended previously travelled paths to entirely new destinations. Given the infinite potential yet to be discovered in the universe of geometry, his sculptures suggest new interpretations of geometric abstraction.

**Tied up** is once again a blending of previously used techniques and spatial relationship to take them further in their ability to speak to the viewer. These are ceramic works consisting of joined, simply coloured spherical elements, that are subsequently tied up with coloured strings and ropes of PVC, leather, and other materials in a continuous connecting line/pattern, resulting in an abstract and highly spatial, sculptural expression. These works, rooted in the geometric, brings about associations of an erotic nature, in as much as they are reminiscent of early modernist sculptural experiments of the Bauhaus, Barbara Hepworth, and Henry Moore.

**Organic** – Throughout his career, Ipsen has used his extensive collection of plaster moulds to model clay elements and then join the elements into unique sculptures.

'Many years of experience with more rigorous hand modelling of objects has given me the desire to work with a spontaneous, playful, and easy freehand technique. An initial sketch of the scenario I want to achieve helps me minimize the distance between the idea and the finished object. Nevertheless, when I build up my hand-modelled sculptures, I allow my ideas to run out of control for a while before tightening my grip. I find it fan-

tastic to work with freehand modelling. It gives me enormous freedom to be able to end up in a far different way than I initially planned.'

'I intend to continue working with the more monochrome glazes as in my earlier works. Many of the sculptures will be glazed in white. My new works can be connected to modern design and architecture as well as the shapes and expression of Danish and Scandinavian design.' But like American organic architect Frank Lloyd Wright, Ipsen believes that good modernist sculpture is timeless and fits perfectly with fine vintage design and architecture.

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Steen Ipsen will continue his long association with gallery owner Annette Sloth in Brussels for the fifth time when he exhibits at Puls Contemporary Ceramic between 19 October and 16 November 2013.

**Noel Montrucchio** is a freelance writer and former editor of one of Europe's most popular architecture and design magazines. He is an avid collector of contemporary ceramic and glass art as well as painting. His articles appear in various international ceramics periodicals. Montrucchio was the editor and a primary contributor to *Carmen Dionyse My Art, My Universe 2*.

### Steen Ipsen

From 1996 to 2004, Ipsen was the Head of the Department of Glass and Ceramics at the Danish Design School, Copenhagen. Ipsen has been a member of the board of Danish Crafts at the Danish Ministry of Culture since 2006. In 2012, Ipsen, Bente Skjøttgaard, and Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl — all active Danish ceramic artists — established and continue to direct Copenhagen Ceramics, an exhibition space dedicated to providing maximum artistic license to new experimental ideas and showcasing and demonstrating the high quality and great diversity of contemporary Danish ceramics as well as work by selected non-Danish artists.

He has participated in major exhibitions in Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, France, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and the USA. His work is represented in major museums and private collections worldwide. These include illustrious names such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Musée Magnelli in Vallauris, France, the Museum of Art and Design in Hamburg, Germany, Icheon World Ceramic Center in Korea, Design Museum Denmark in Copenhagen, and Trapholt Art Museum in Denmark. Renowned Danish private collections include the New Carlsberg Foundation and the Annie and Otto Detlef Collection.



### ANNETTE SLOTH

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### Extrudox

Anne Tophoej and Steen Ipsen, h 30 cm, 2012  
*photo Ole Akhøj*

