



Heidi Bjørgan

Written by Frances McDonald

For Norwegian artist Heidi Bjørgan there are no bad experiences in the kiln. 'If it's broken in two, maybe I can re-use part of it,' she says. 'I can re-glaze it, put raw clay on it, re-fire it'. Casting objects from her collection of readymades, using components 'left over' after casting, incorporating found objects or items selected through collaboration, applying 'crazy' glazes and re-firing again and again, her works sometimes look as if they have melted or imploded in the kiln. Challenging our perception of what ceramic art should be, they are spontaneous and uninhibited. Choosing not to keep a meticulous record of glazes and temperatures, each piece brings something new and unexpected, even to Bjørgan herself. Aiming to do something different every time, to extend her aesthetic vocabulary and achieve the impossible, her objects appear indeterminable, yet strangely familiar; peculiar, yet totally engaging.

While striving to do something different each time, the one consistency that Bjørgan will admit to is the desire to break the rules. There's nothing new about this in ceramics. As far back as the nineteenth century, George Ohr, 'The mad potter of Biloxi' as he was known, created wildly expressionist, distorted forms. Considered the most radical potter of his time, he famously declared that no two pieces of his were ever the same. His work would remain largely underestimated and underappreciated until it was reappraised in the late 1960's. Not surprisingly, Bjørgan cites Ohr's rule breaking works as one of her sources of inspiration. This desire to challenge existing norms continued into the twentieth century with the Japanese Sodeisha movement, whose members sought to break free of tradition, and individuals such as Isamu Noguchi who, according to Edmund de Waal, played 'fast and loose with Japan's ceramic heritage'. In London, the Basic Design course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts that encouraged students to experiment, produced a new breed of potter who rejected the philosophy of Leach and Hamada while in the US, the work of Peter Voulkos and the Otis Institute resulted in a seismic shift in studio pottery.

Heidi Bjørgan continues this tradition of rule breakers and, just like many of her predecessors she too began by first learning everything 'from start to finish. I think that's why I break rules in one way', she suggests. 'Because I know I'm breaking the rules. If you don't have the skills, you won't know this.'

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as the head from the Gustav Vigeland work, *Death and Life*. Looking back, she feels it was a good start. ‘I understood that I was going in the right direction’. It was during her Masters at the Academy that she first began observing and collecting readymades. Often details from larger objects, she wanted the opportunity to elevate them, give them a second chance, a new life. In seeking to re-conceptualise everyday objects as art, once again there was nothing new in this approach. From the early 1900’s, artists such as Duchamp and Man Ray had replaced function with concept and a new point of view. It’s a genre that had also been explored

Previous page:
Object 7000,
2020, stoneware and
earthenware, 22 x 28
x 24 cm. Collection of
the National Museum
of Norway. Image
credit: Heidi Bjørgan.

Below:
Pink 1734, Heidi
Bjørgan featuring Linda
Sormin, 2019, stoneware,
earthenware and fur,
22 x 60 x 20 cm. Private
collection, Geneva,
Switzerland. Image
credit: Thor Brødreskift.

by ceramicists such as Ryoji Koie; his literal translation of the Japanese term *yakimono* (fired thing) saw him combine clay with everyday objects such as clocks and sewing machines. But, while Koie’s works – inspired by events such as the atomic bombing at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster – connected the viewer with the darker reaches of humanity, Bjørgan’s work is often bright, quirky and sometimes humorous. ‘It’s one of the things I love about her work’, says Monique Deul, Director of the Geneva based gallery, Taste Contemporary, who has worked with the artist for a number of years. ‘While it’s considered and thought provoking and themes may re-

occur, she still manages to surprise me and occasionally make me laugh’. In 2007, Bjørgan exhibited a series of brightly coloured objects that incorporated readymade animals tied to the surface. Teasing the viewer with the notion of function, she has utilised items such as handles and pedestals for their aesthetic potential and opportunity to acquire new value. The idea that objects shift from functionality to being about function has been, according to Howard Risatti, a fundamental shift in understanding craft. Rather than lacking function, they engage with it conceptually. ‘They are thought of as “critical objects of crafts”, objects whose aesthetic/artistic potential is concentrated in their exemplary but unfulfillable function’.²

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In 2008, Bjørgan returned to Bergen Academy of Art and Design to complete a Masters in Creative Curating. Since then her practice has taken on a new dimension. In 2011, she curated a major exhibition entitled *Thing Tang Trash*. The result of a research project called K-value, in which artists and academics from Permanenten (the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art) and Bergen Academy of Arts researched the use of rubbish and readymades in ceramic art, it was the first time in Permanenten’s history that an external curator had been invited to work at the museum. Featuring a cast of internationally renowned artists, *Thing Tang Trash*, as project leader Jorunn Veiteberg has written, ‘turned the spotlight on upcycling as a key tendency in contemporary ceramics in an attempt to find

out what found and bought objects can bring with them in terms of stories and values.’³ In 2016, Bjørgan curated, for the first time, a solo exhibition of her own work at the National Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Trondheim. Entitled *The Story of an Affair*, it juxtaposed her own work with pieces from the museum’s collection. Described by Jorunn Veiteberg as a ‘Baroque Fairytale’, this was an exhibition where the objects become part of a total installation, ‘an artistic expression where the boundaries between the artist and curator are erased.’⁴ *The Story of an Affair* also allowed Bjørgan to indulge her passion for museum collections, to engage with the past while creating something new. Inspired by the films of Peter Greenaway and David Lynch, she staged a series of dramatic, sensuous sets

Object 5003, 2020, stoneware, and earthenware, 45 cm. Collection of KODE - Bergen Art Museum, Norway. Image credit: Thor Brødreskift.

Further Info
Upcoming Solo Exhibitions
November - December 2021: Nitja Center for Contemporary Art, Norway

Upcoming Group Exhibitions
September - November 2021: Maison Louise Carré, Paris, France [presented by Taste Contemporary]

January 2022: CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art, Denmark

January 2022: artgenève 2022

September 2022: Taste Contemporary, Geneva

where objects were mysteriously illuminated in a darkened environment. There was an undeniable sense of theatricality in this work as once again, Bjørgan challenged conventional ideas as to what constitutes ceramic art, not only in her curatorial practice, but in the work itself. Re-contextualising and re-firing her work, sometimes up to 10 times, always trying to bring something different and new to the narrative, I’m reminded of a performer wishing to bring something extra to every performance of the same play and yes, ceramics has long been associated with performance – think of the Japanese tea ceremony – but this is performance that mixes and matches, puts the historical in dialogue with the contemporary, the old with the new. Just like George Ohr was a performance artist before the term had been coined, Bjørgan is again bringing something new to the table.

Just like her found objects that are presented in a new context, or even given a different function, Heidi Bjørgan seeks to continually

imbue her work with new meaning. Her pieces are being increasingly sought by collectors, and acquired by major institutions. In re-purposing and re-constituting the history of ceramics and art, and combining this with her own experiences and concerns, she bring us something new, in her own unique voice. It makes us excited to see what’s coming next.

Endnotes
1. DE WAAL, E. 2003. *20th Century Ceramics*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.. p. 117
2. RISATTI, H. 2007. *A Theory of Craft: function and aesthetic expression*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press. p. 285
3. VEITEBERG, J., 2011. ‘Found Objects and Readymades: upcycling as an artistic strategy’, in: idem (ed.), *Thing Tang Trash. Upcycling in Contemporary Ceramics*. Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts and Bergen Art Museums
4. VEITEBERG, J., 2016. ‘A Baroque Fairytale of an Exhibition’, in: www.norwedgiancrafts.no

About the Author
Frances McDonald provides consultancy, project and event management services for clients within the art, craft and design sectors, focusing primarily on object-based artists and artworks. Working with state agencies and academic institutions, commercial galleries and practitioners, she also writes regularly on contemporary craft and has contributed to publications such as *Ceramics Ireland*, *Irish Arts Review*, *Ceramic Review UK*, *Neues Glas: Art & Architecture* and *CFile.org*.

