

Article written by Bo Borg, Art Critic and member of AICA- International Association of Art Critic.

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Clay Without Borders

Ceramic art has a history going back for thousands of years, yet it never ceases to develop. It is both national and international in expression. It follows and is transformed by people's situations and needs. And so its future begins anew everyday. It is in meetings between people that ideas are conceived and development takes place. And just as a thousand years is no age for a pleasing form or for a material that can be developed, a thousand miles is no great distance for good ideas. And as with good ideas and human experience, clay knows no borders.

Clay without Borders is the name of a collaborative project involving Nigeria and Scandinavia that has now completed its introductory period. Four Swedish and four Norwegian artists working primarily with clay spent some intensive weeks in November 2007 working in Lagos with colleagues from Nigeria. On an official level this collaborative project has been financed by national organs for development aid and cultural exchanges including the Swedish Institute and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Corporations with worldwide operations such as Ericsson in Sweden and Statoil in Norway have supported the project as has Quintessence which is one of the leading art galleries in Lagos.

The project has involved colleagues who normally work in their own, personal way, sharing their knowledge and experience of the material and techniques which, despite fundamental similarities, have developed very differently in different places. The similarities are manifold, as are the differences. What are described as cultural and socio-economic factors find their way into the very consistency of the clay and the ceramicists' fingertips as well as testing the eye's judgement as to what is beautiful and practical, spiritual and domestically functional. However strong the traditions may be, there is always room for yet another developmental step in the close encounter between creativity and people. *Clay without Borders* seeks to become a meeting place and a melting pot for ideas, expertise, relations and collaboration.

The Scandinavian artists taking part were Tulla Elieson, Sidsel Hanum, Anne Line Sund and Gunilla Maria Åkesson from Norway and Åsa Jacobson, Margon Lindberg, Elisabet Svensson and Inger Södergren from Sweden.

Many of these skilled and experienced artists and craftswomen also have wide experience of international collaboration.

"We have chosen strong craftswomen. We wanted the best to take part. These are artists who can work with very limited equipment yet still achieve a powerful artistic expression" claims the Norwegian project manager Tulla Elieson. "And the idea behind the collaboration was that we should learn from each other in simple conditions. And so it is a matter of non-technological ceramics."

Sidsel Hanum's work seems to have been drawn using liquid clay in a mould. She produces a sort of embroidered ceramics. She builds open net structures that are both fragile yet expressively strong.

Gunilla Maria Åkesson builds her organic forms in a seemingly intuitive way, directed by her emotions. And her glazes become part of the form. The entire process seems to be governed by feelings rather than by aesthetic notions.

Anne Line Sund cuts her wheel-thrown forms into a series of facets. On these she draws black patterns against the light ground. She frequently uses transfers to print images on her vessels.

Tulla Elieson makes very large, flat "wheels" made up of thin ribbons of clay. She creates a dynamic movement running from the centre outwards, inspired by a vision of the cosmos.

Åsa Jacobson works with exhibition pieces and public commissions, producing unique items as well as household wares. She casts, rolls, builds and throws materials such as concrete, glass, brick clay, porcelain, etc.

Margon Lindberg recognizes no limitations as to genres or hierarchies regarding arts and crafts. For example she works with cross-overs of drawings, photos and sculptures and presents the works in dialogue with each other and their surroundings.

Elisabet Svensson produces sculptures and reliefs, often as public commissions. She regularly returns to symbolically charged house forms. She works in a non-traditional manner and does not use glazes, preferring to paint her pieces with acrylic colours.

Inger Södergren searches for the point of balance between a strict form and a more expressive, charred surface. She creates a very personal world of beautiful forms and she uses their relationship to their surroundings as an element of expression. Her artistic language shows traces of previous visits to Nigeria.

These very different ceramic artists share the fact that they are all good examples of the creative diversity and richness of expression that is characteristic of the best Scandinavian ceramics today.

With twenty members of the Craft Potters Association of Nigeria (CPAN) under the direction of Umaru Aliya (chair) and Ibukun Ayoola (secretary), they produced an exhibition at the National Museum at Onikan in central Lagos and spent a week or more exchanging ideas beneath a large tree in the park outside.



"Everyone is here as both teacher and pupil. We demonstrate techniques and tricks of the trade. And we explain why we do as we do. There is a great deal of cross-fertilization and many meaningful discussions", Inger Södergren observes. "Everything is different from what we are used to and we gain a useful and stimulating perspective on our daily activities."



The joint exhibition at the National Museum of Nigeria was an important cultural manifestation. It was opened with full protocol with the Swedish and Norwegian ambassadors in attendance and other distinguished guests, interested parties, press and TV. There was no doubt that this cultural exchange was treated with respect.

The exhibition provided a dynamic mix of colours, forms, patterns and ideas that turned the premises into the creative arena and fount of inspiration that it was intended to be.

Opinions were divided as to whether the differences or similarities were most interesting. The exhibition clearly strove to show the unity of creativity and the diversity of craftsmanship in a non-hierarchical manner. Throughout the exhibition one saw exhibitors and visitors comparing and discussing cultural diversity. Knowledge improves understanding and respect, and this was an important point of departure for the workshops during which the participants both taught and learnt.



"Much of our work is governed by economics. There are no shops selling materials. I dig my clay in the forest. And I cannot glaze my work because gas is too expensive and the electricity supply never works. We work more with traditional techniques and patterns. The Scandinavians are freer in expression. We learn a lot about design and methods from each other. The Scandinavians' work is much more than pottery. They are really clay artists", maintains Nigerian potter Ibukun Ayoola. He works himself with pots and stylish garden sculptures.



"I have been in Nigeria previously and working with Nigerian ceramicists has influenced my style", Inger Södergren explains. "When I was working on my project to produce my own versions of traditional West African Udo drums I combined my own style with traditional African techniques. This has given me knowledge and experience which I should have been professionally poorer without."

The exhibition allows one to make comparisons that are interesting both aesthetically and sociologically.

"One difference in style that one notices in the exhibition is that many of the Nigerian ceramicists taking part are, primarily, skilled at conserving a tradition. Their work is often terra-cotta coloured. They do not have the same access to imported clays and cheap electricity for glazing that we take for granted. So the differences are cultural, but culture is always governed by social and economic factors. Common to all is a love of the material and a striving to use it as well as possible, both functionally and artistically", Tulla Elieson comments.

The collaboration makes its mark both in ideas and in attitudes and skills. In styles and in an open approach to other forms of expression.

"I can see how my journeys to Nigeria have influenced my style. My forms have become more organic and one can clearly see Nigerian inspiration in the details. Such things are enriching and help one to develop", says Inger Södergren.

A continuation of the *Clay without Borders* project is planned. Nigerian ceramic artists will be invited to visit Sweden with a view to furthering the friendship, collaboration and exchanges of expertise that have already been set in motion.

Bo Borg
Critic and art historian

Participants in *Clay without Borders*: Sola Adetoyinbo, Vincent Ali, Ato Arinze, Ibukun Ayoola, Temilolu Ayoola, Fatima Bello, Ogbonna Dennis, Bala Lawal, Sola Maiden, Josephine Nwokike, Neighbourhood, Johnson Nwobodo, Maraba Pottery, Afam Okwudili, Ozioma Onuzulike, David Olusanya Owolabi, Ojetunde Sheriff, Åsa Jacobson, Margon Lindberg, Elisabet Svensson, Inger Södergren, Tulla Elieson, Sidsel Hanum, Anne Line Sund, Gunilla Maria Åkesson