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Michael Geertsen : Stepping Over the Lines

“Form is primarily a mobile life in a changing world,” wrote art historian Henri Focillon back in 1934. Michael Geertsen’s creative trajectory might best be described as a mobile life in a changing world. Geertsen grew up, studied, and began his artistic practice in a time in which the longstanding definitions and roles of art, craft, and design were called into question by a new generation of makers of things that flourished from the 1980s onward. Eluding facile categorization, their work challenged the traditional hierarchies—philosophical, aesthetic, and even economic—that separated art, craft, and design into separate disciplines. The new graduates from university art and design programs combined and synthesized the roles of artist, designer, and craftsman, they moved comfortably among mediums, and they readily incorporated new materials and technologies into their practice. The reassuring categories of art, decorative arts, craft, sculpture, design, and applied arts were found to be of little use, to the frustration of collectors, curators, galleries, and critics. Geertsen’s background and practice are emblematic of this sea change in the realm of material culture.

In the late 1980s, Geertsen began his formal studies at the Danish Design School in Copenhagen, where he clearly learned to appreciate Danish design principles of integrity of form, sensitivity to materials, and elegant simplicity. At the same time, however, Geertsen also apprenticed himself to a ceramist, which irrevocably prejudiced him in his choice of medium. By the early years of the new millennium, Geertsen had developed a distinctive vocabulary of forms in his sculptural ceramics that drew upon both his schooling in design and his practice as a traditional wheel-based potter. A work from the year 2000 (illus. 1) can be considered a preface to an extended body of work he has produced in the past decade; to create this diminutive work, Geertsen threw three simple and traditional ceramic forms on the wheel—a cylinder, a cone, and a plate. These were sliced and combined to form one piece and covered with a unmodulated and untextured monochrome glaze. The result was a work that seemed to exist in a neutral and yet poetic realm somewhere between the handmade and the industrial. It was this in-between territory that Geertsen would further explore in the coming years.

By 2003, Geertsen had found his stride in this format. The sculptures had become more complex, often combining sliced segments of ten or more thrown vessels (illus. 2). Their interlocking forms were imbued with a dynamism achieved by suggesting that the sculpture is made of perilous stacks of fragile forms held in suspended animation. The analytical nature of the composition, the dynamic interlocked forms, and the sleek

industrial surface and colors immediately evokes the still lifes of the early 20th century Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni. At the same time, the simplicity of the forms and the neutrality of the surfaces seems to echo the meditative still lifes of Giorgio Morandi.

As the decade unfolded, Geertsen's compositions continued to grow in complexity, and they also began to inhabit architectural spaces such as walls and ceilings. The works were installed in eccentric and unexpected spaces, such as ceiling corners or above doorways, and in clustered sequences in an artfully random arrangement. Individual works became players in a larger narrative of exuberant forms. A visual integration between architectural space and sculpture was sometimes achieved by painting large geometric planes directly on the wall, and installing the sculptures on, near, or impinging upon the painted surfaces (illus. 3).

While the crisp geometric profiles and sleek surfaces of his compositions continued into the middle years of the decade (illus. 4), the work began to evolve and morph into softer, more organic forms. (illus. 5) Shapes changed from hard-edge to softer more organic forms, and a new color palette was introduced, along with patterning on the surface to create a dynamic tension between form and ornament. Geertsen's focus had shifted from early 20th century Modernism to mid-century Biomorphism, science fiction aliens, and Pop-Art patterning. The patterned surfaces sometimes resembled painted camouflage or abstract versions of animal skins, and the once disciplined cones and cylinders seemed to have melted together in the kiln. These works expressed a dynamism quite distinct from the early works; while the early compositions were stable, meditative, and refined, the later works were much more strident, seeming to interact more directly and more emotionally with both the surrounding space and the viewer.

It was at this juncture that Geertsen moved into another mode of work that made use of mirror-like gold and platinum lustres to animate the forms and literally reflect the settings in which they were placed. The curved mirrored passages on the works distorted the shapes being reflected, creating an ever-shifting and lively series of abstract shapes and colors. Internal orifices of truncated cones coruscated with light, much like pieces of jewelry inset into the ceramic body. This baroque phase of Geertsen's mid-decade work has persisted, with variations and subtle modifications, to the present day. Geertsen's love of early 20th century modernism was not entirely forgotten; some of his muscular and organic forms are decorated with bold black, blue, and red geometric patterns that recalled similar decorations inspired by the Suprematist paintings of Kasimir Malevich found on early Soviet propaganda porcelains. Geertsen once again forged an intellectual link between his vision as a 21st century artist with his keen knowledge of the artistic, social, and political context of his chosen medium of clay.

Artist and writer Edmund de Waal has written eloquently about Geertsen's work, making special note of the work as a way of "questioning the place that ceramics has inhabited, as well as the place that ceramics will inhabit in the future." Herein is the essential significance and meaning of Geertsen's sculptures. By enveloping his timeless forms in a cloak woven of both historical and contemporary artistic and even architectural concerns, Geertsen engages the viewer in a dialogue about memories and recollections, much in way that still life painters capture a moment in time that expands or contracts in its psychic space according to what the viewer brings to the work. In their technical perfection, their imposing forms and colors, and their psychological and intellectual allure, Geertsen's works are records of that brave new world that exists between art, craft, and design.

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