

By Edmund De Waal

Artist & Writer

Looking at the work of the young Danish ceramicist Michael Geertsen in exhibitions in Copenhagen, Liverpool and Chicago, as well as in his dusty, atmospheric studio, has made me think hard about how ceramics are displayed. This is because Geertsen's work is, in itself, about display. His work is an interrogation, a questioning of the place that ceramics has inhabited, as well as the place that ceramics will inhabit in the future. At their most basic his ceramics are assemblages of thrown, cut and rearranged forms, glazed in hard primary colors, and placed in strange and exacting positions. They exist in a world between the still life and sculpture, the cusp between imagined utility and brokenness. What I find intriguing in Geertsen's ceramics is that they seem to enact many of the most problematic issues facing contemporary ceramics, without becoming bombastic.

This was certainly true of Geertsen's solo exhibition in 2004 at the Museumsbygningen in Copenhagen. His assemblages hung on the walls in vertiginous ways. They hung at wildly different heights, so that you were constantly surprised by looking up or down into pieces: your control of sight lines, or of how you met the work was challenged. It reminded me of what the American art theorist Rosalind Krauss has written of 'Postmodernism's museum without walls'. She wrote of 'the sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a faraway object, and thereby to interject within the collection of these objects a reference to the order of another. The pierced partition, the open balcony, the interior window- circulation in these museums is as much visual as physical, and that visual movement is a constant decentering through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea-market.' This sense of decentering movement, common to the architecture of Zaha Hadid or Daniel Libeskind, was the feeling of this particular exhibition.

Krauss' perception of the 'discovery of the museum as flea-market' is also particularly apt in relation to Geertsen's work. Firstly it brings into focus Geertsen's use of the shapes of everyday vessels. When you examine the work there are bowls and beakers amongst the rings and arcs and cylinders: a bricolage that suggests the kitchen cupboard, the museum store, the flea market. Secondly it suggests that there is a collapse in the rigid hierarchies of how museums operate: it points to the move away from rigid narratives and taxonomies in museum display towards more open –and occasionally even lyrical–displays. The wearying experience of visiting many ceramic exhibitions over the last years suggests that this collapse is to be welcomed. In general ceramic exhibitions are difficult territories to navigate through. One sometimes wonders whether there is any difference at all between the design of exhibitions and that of shops. In both, material culture is up for sale. In both there is the frisson of

anxiety about getting a return on your investment. Both are about stopping people-customers, collectors, and getting them involved. In both there is that shuffle between the standing back to look, and the reaching forward to read a caption or discover the price. The props are often the same too, more often than not etched glass and birch veneer. Then there are the pools of light that make objects glow, seemingly of their own accord. There is the lighting design that creates the tidal pull through spaces, from one exhibit, one grouping of commodities to another. In exhibiting craft, galleries and museums often still use the device lifted from Chardin or Morandi, that little condensed stage set of different objects.

This is no surprise: we knew this all along. Cultures of display and cultures of commodification, feed on one another. The genre of still life, so brilliantly analysed by Norman Bryson in his book *Looking at the Overlooked*, validates, gives value to, things which may not have much intrinsic value. The fewer the objects contained within the still life the more attention they gain, the more value they accrue. Consider the current cult for arranging pots within tableaux, on stands or shelves: is this more than a way of trying to circumvent the problem of pots being dispersed, of value dissipating? Isn't this return to ceramic still life what a recent art historian has described: 'The artfulness of a museum display can produce an intensified aesthetisation: careful spacing and lights isolate the work of art for the sake of more concentrated contemplation.'

This model for approaching the display and exhibition of objects has been the subject for long and fierce debate. It is now 25 years since Brian O'Doherty published his classic series of articles 'Inside the White Cube', analyzing the synergy that has grown between the display of art in the seemingly neutral modernist gallery spaces that he called 'white cubes' and that of art itself. He pointed out that this kind of display had become almost mandatory; 'An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th century art.' In this kind of environment there arises a particular quality of attentiveness, so that even 'the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an aesthetic conundrum.'

What Geertsen does is to take the attentiveness and apply it to his particular pieces. They are conundrums. Part of this is their structure. He is clear about this: 'My objects are simple geometrical elements put together in staggered split levels, like rhythmic, spatial symbols containing traces of our everyday functional objects...' Their rhythmic quality is crucial. When you see them-see into them or through them- you are conscious of the repetition of elements. They bring to mind John Dewey, the American Pragmatist philosopher whose book *Art as Experience* tackled the question of how the process of making art defined its outcomes. Dewey suggested that there is a basic rhythm which he compared to the alternate flight and perching of a bird, to a gathering in of energy and then a releasing of it: 'Art, in its forms, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience...The act of producing that is directed by intent to produce

something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving, has qualities that spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.' Dewey goes on to suggest that 'Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.' In Geertsen's ceramics this is abundantly clear: there is that relation of 'doing and undergoing' of 'gathering in of energy and then a releasing of it' that Dewey finds in art works. Moreover we can feel the process of making, breaking and reassembling that goes into the works.

Geertsen is considerably less interested in prettiness in his assemblages than many of his peers. He has written that 'in my freestyle ceramic pieces, what interests me is the place where functional pieces and sculpture meet. In their studies of basic shapes, my objects make reference to classical ceramics, but in form and color so that it challenges both space and the viewer. I believe that ceramics, both functional objects and one-offs, have a function as contemporary statements. They are pictures of our social conventions, our way of life, and our rituals in a given epoch.' At their best Geertsen's ceramics throw back to us the challenge to consider how we approach ceramics and how we display them. They give us a fresh and invigorating sense of how the still life can come out of the picture plane and into three dimensions. They make us look up. And as in the very best flea-markets, they surprise us.