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The Porcelain of Maria ten Kortenaar Boogie-woogie Feeling

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Left: Turning Darkness Into Light. 2008. 10 x 24 cm.

Above: Hong Kong. 2005.

WHILE SURROUNDED BY HUNDREDS OF CERAMICS at the Taiwan Ceramics Biennial 2008, I stayed for a long time before a simple, wide cylindrical piece by Dutch artist Maria ten Kortenaar. I couldn't drag my eyes away. What drew me to it and kept me fascinated was the incredible delicacy of the colours, the fragility and the rhythmic movement of this finely constructed piece. Slender, often irregular square discs were joined

closely and simply. The gaze could uninterruptedly follow the delicate up and down meandering of the lines produced by the arrangement of the alternating white and brightly patterned elements and enjoy the complementary, gently muted colour contrasts, which combined so wonderfully with the soft white of the Limoges porcelain. The piece united a clearly maintained structured arrangement with a playfulness and a dancer's gracefulness.

Later I met Maria ten Kortenaar and it turned out that she is actually a goldsmith. This explains her 'instinctive feel', this sensation that the coloured porcelain elements are placed like precious, translucent stones in an ethereal setting. She studied at the Rietveld Academy in the 80s, graduating in 1985. In 1994 she turned her attention to ceramics, which gave her "more opportunities for working with colours". She concentrated on earthenware and attended a number of workshops with Rob Brandt, Henk Wolvers and Seung Ho Yang, among others. She sees



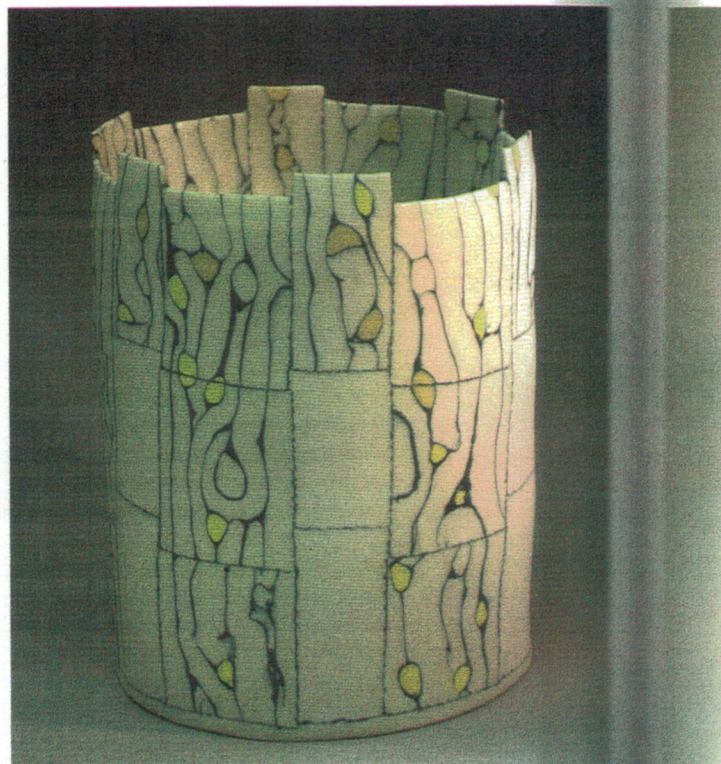
Sunset Blues. 2008. 17 x 22 cm.

this as pivotal for her way of working, because "you make unusual things, you experiment more". A good 10 years later in 2005 she discovered porcelain for herself, which gives her colours an even greater radiance.

The coloured elements of her pieces comprise solid-coloured porcelain elements, which she joins together to form a variety of patterned square strands. The slender discs which she cuts off these strands are in turn joined together alternately with pure white porcelain discs of a comparable size, so that the vessel grows upwards row by row. For this purpose Kortenaar uses cobalt-dyed porcelain slurry, which gives fine, dark-blue lines between the individual modules. This delicately trembling continuous line is placed over the entire form like a finely vibrating network and makes everything vibrate. At the top, the vessel ends in a line meandering up and down,

which results from the superimposed 'design', with discs slightly deviating from each other in size. Since working with porcelain, the Dutch artist has used the cylinder form almost without exception.

However, the beauty of the wide or goblet-like porcelain cylinders only becomes visible after the forms have been 'corrected': after assembly and drying, the ceramist rubs the entire piece clean of all blue colour residues and also reduces it to a wall thickness of around one millimetre, "as thin as possible", as she says. After an initial baking at 1040°C, the porcelain



Champagne. 2009. 13 x 17 cm.

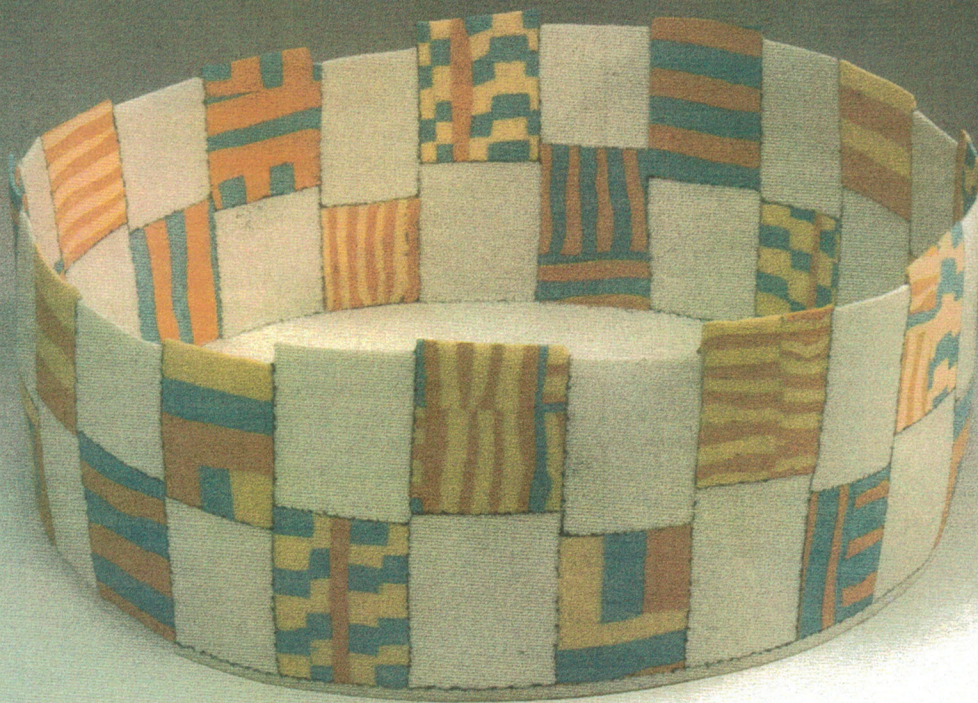
pieces are polished and sometimes glazed internally, before being fired again at up to 1240°C.

Maria ten Kortenaar sees her pieces as 'objects'. In other words, they are not intended for use. "I work slowly and precisely," she says. She needs three days to make one of her pieces. When asked about technical difficulties, for instance alterations and differences in behaviour of the differently coloured porcelain elements, different shrinkage coefficients and subsequent crack formations et cetera, she shrugs her shoulders: Everything has simply always gone well. Yes, people told her that it wouldn't work this way and predicted endless problems, but everything has simply always worked. No, she hasn't produced any test runs or fired samples.

Generally she is very passionate, spontaneous. Her inspiration is personal experience, travel, encounters,

love, the death of a friend, "things that touch me". For instance, the *Hong Kong Series* was inspired by a short stay in this city where the huge buildings and the glimmering sea of neon lights at night made a lasting impression on her. After visiting Cuba one summer, she transferred the colour impressions to the piece *Cuban Colours*; the death of a close friend and her involvement flowed into a piece with the title *Not Only Black*. She describes herself as romantic and her work in porcelain as "a kind of poetry". The most important thing to her about porcelain is its whiteness: "You have to

are as incidental as they are fundamental and compelling. It 'inevitably' ensues from the work process and results – not consciously controlled – from the displacements which the coloured and white elements undergo as a result of their mechanical pressure connections with each other: which explains the modest, subversive magic of these dynamics. With the most recent pieces, one almost has the impression that oxygen is bubbling up through a liquid, that small brightly iridescent particles are dancing effervescently to the surface or sinking to the bottom in slow motion.



Mixed Feelings. 2007. 25 x 11 cm. Biennale Taiwan 2008.

use it!" For Maria ten Kortenaar it is an equivalent to paper on which you write or an empty canvas. And she infinitely values its translucence and radiance, she rhapsodises about the 'delicacy' of her material.

The porcelain pieces by ten Kortenaar have a musical quality. This isn't just because the distribution of the coloured elements in the white is partially reminiscent of notation but also on account of the rhythm which is inscribed in the pieces through the arrangement of the coloured elements; the alternation between exhilaration and solemnity, between powerful individual strokes and a joyously bubbling *Allegro*, between an elegiac melody and a glassily clear staccato hammered from vessel to vessel. Naturally the famous *Broadway Boogie Woogie* by Piet Mondrian also inevitably comes to mind at some point – everything seems to be moving here. The dynamics of the pieces

And then again, you think of antique glasses and/or mediaeval chalices with semi-precious stones or colourful glass pieces embedded in or set onto the walls to make them more sumptuous. Finally, the way in which the blue engobe is used and the resulting clearly visible joints are reminiscent of the fine solder of the goldsmith, which also serves as a joining element. And the division of the structure into small sections, which is typical of many parts, is also more reminiscent of a jeweller's workplace than that of a ceramist. But the end result is effective vessels with a height of up to 25 cm.

It is important that Maria ten Kortenaar never allows her 'porcelain patchwork' to degenerate into a random rag rug. The arrangement of the pieces of the puzzle is always dynamic and is sustained by a quite defined artistic intention, expression and mood. This

starts with the composition of the colourful individual pieces, extends across their integration and recurrent frequency, through to the ratio of coloured and white porcelain elements within a vessel. However, white always remains visible as the supporting base.

"You're on the outside/looking inside/What do you see?/Reflections and emotions/That's probably me." A small poem that you can read on her web site. She does not paint on her patterns, her pieces show the inside on the outside. Outside and inside – there is no difference, no filter, you



Top: Maria ten Kortenaar.

Above: *Together on a Sunday Afternoon*. 2008. 9 x 17 cm. Inset: ten Kortenaar's signature.

can read them/her, undisguised, an open book. Her unglazed exterior almost has a more defenceless, intimate effect than the glazed interior view, whose preciousness is increased by the brilliance and intensity of depth of the transparent coating. But through this kind of unreserved surrender and communication by the ceramist, the pieces take the viewer with them on an inner life journey, which always keeps open and seeks the connection to our own experience, sensation and memory.

Gabi Dewald has been editor of the German-based

KeramikMagazinEuropa/CeramicsMagazineEurope since 1993. She works free-lance for the German dailies and other international magazines in the field of fine and applied art as well as contributing to books and catalogues. Dewald serves as an advisor, a juror, as an independent curator and lecturer in Germany and abroad, mainly on contemporary crafts, especially ceramics. She is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC), Deutscher Journalistenverband DJV and the Journalistinnenbund JB. She is a former chair of the International Ceramics Magazine Editors' Association (ICMEA) Fuping, China. In 2001 she received a Ceramic Art Foundation New York Award (for critical writing), the first given to an author writing in a foreign language. In 2004 she initiated THINK TANK. (<http://www.thinktank04.eu>) (info@mariatenkortenaar.com)