



1 *The Other*, porcelain and steel, 2004, H163cm max 2 *Encounter* (detail), porcelain and steel, 2006, H163cm max 3 *Stack* (detail), porcelain, steel and found object, 2007, H158cm



Inter-face

As Bryan Allen Moore explains, the work of Ivan Albrecht avoids any easy classification.

Ivan Albrecht is a sculptor, Serbian in origin, living and working in the United States since 2000. His work has travelled constantly across continents for more than ten years, breaking the boundaries of borderlines because the concerns are universal. His practice is primarily ceramics, from industrial clays to delicate porcelain. However, the industrial and political context created through his work is adjusted by the use of other materials such as steel or microchips. Although he would emphatically deny his wishes to be perceived as an artist manipulating social and political forces in a didactic way, there is something highly approachable about the issues raised in the work.



SUGGESTION In his approach Albrecht resists the fragmentation of post-modernism by specifically arguing against the accepted bricolage methodology of many western practitioners. As an artist at the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade during the NATO campaign in the Balkans, he was destined to become an individual rather than part of a value system of an overtly imposed singular culture. Not a lumpen, but also not a reactionary, he believes that his role as an artist affects social change through interpretation, or covert suggestion, of a wider socio-political context. As counterpoint to the historical canon of his European training Albrecht's participation in the industrial dialectic of ceramic materiality places him within the contemporary.

Making use of his mould-making and slip-casting skills, he creates individual works using these 'unacceptable' means of production. This acute knowledge of craft skills enables him to work beyond a sensuousness that excuses the ceramic pseudoscience of accident and alchemy through the displacement of the hand in the deceptive deskill of the productive, but not the artistic labour. Specifically, Albrecht avoids a didactic position in both his making and concept, nor does he carry an explicit political banner, but, rather, allows his personal experiences to shape his work in a way that will enable the audience to draw their own conclusions.

IDENTITY In his New York debut at Weisspollack Gallery the solo installation *The Other* (2005) presented an eerie reality with an emphasis on production, assimilation and destruction, all centred on an idea of identity. These forms, which start from a product designed for mass consumption, are infused with a sense of individuality through their destruction. Rather than digesting them all at once as products of an abstract concept of utility, for which the viewer has no invested relationship, they highlight a concern about specific character. As representative of his critical and reflective process, this piece started with a single object as a kind of technical accomplishment that grew into an evaluated form, informed through a wider concept.

Hidden within this idea is Albrecht's denial and rejection of a central part of his conservative European training that sees the traditional role of the artist as an individual creating a work, as well as with the historical idea of the artist as part of a larger collective of professionals producing works of art. The models of a Styrofoam head are selected as a kind of 'mental reproduction' or a play on repetition without copying. Taking the idea that this particular head, in the context of mass culture, is a projection of an ideal person for that system, this head assumes a specific identity amongst the choices in the consumer category of mannequin uniqueness. The objects are ordered as though they were constructed and mechanically reproduced, in the absence of any ideas of artistic virtuosity, save for one expressive violation of form. Playing with notions of artistic involvement through the manipulation of these generic forms, we are confronted on a formal level with objects that have little more than a specific destructive act as evidence of the maker. There is something both inhuman and figurative about this work. At best it looks inwards by contemplating forms that are uncertain portraits and, worse still, hazy reflections of ourselves without gender or emotion. This piece is our environment, operating somewhere between a tragic department store and an uncomfortably acute and introspective reflection in the mirror.

Stack (2006), unveiled at the 4th World Ceramic Biennale in Korea in 2007 is mounted on a more ornamental stand than *The Other*, evoking



a kind of nostalgia. The eight heads laid upon the platform one on top of each other are deflated, each compressed by the weight of the one placed above. The head at the bottom makes us realise that it too is deflated, essentially a repetition in what could be an infinite stack blended together by inert gravity. It is a passive blending of identities, devoid of any signs of struggle or force, a gesture of submission on the part of the individual.

INDIVIDUAL A type of specific individual is confronted in *Circle* (2007). The reference to the generic department store head is, again, strong, yet that identity is questioned by layers of melting, occupying an opposite space that a false hairpiece would in a different context. Some may question Albrecht's methods such as his rebuff of his

4 Souvenir, porcelain, 2008, H29cm
5 It-SELF, porcelain and steel, 2003, H148cm
6 Circle (detail), porcelain and steel, 2008, H162cm
7 Inter-face, porcelain and steel, 2006, H28cm
8 Waiting, porcelain, wood and galvanised steel, 2004, H142cm

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conservative European training and his use of industrial processes. With regards to the obvious rejection of colour, the work identifies closely with a generic point about neutrality. His adjustment to western, specifically American, society has led him to address consumer culture and commercial production through the use of mould-making and slip-cast forms. It is no accident that these are industrial techniques for producing ceramic objects in quantity. This work enables the viewer to identify with and relate to the object within a specific material and cultural history, while considering the disfiguration as something significant.

There is no act of destruction or manipulation of form in Albrecht's most recent work *Souvenir* (2008), which makes use of an androgynous head of mass display culture. The head is not only devoid of identity

but also finished with reverence to its specific place within a generic context. From a distance, or with a mere glance, it appears to be decorated with a floral motif of sorts, lazily moving itself around the form. On closer examination this design can be seen to consist of the housefly, appearing to assail the head as a platoon. One reading of the work might equate it with traditional concerns of the contemporary artist. It is an industrial copy yet glossed and preserved that says it has not been copied. The flies swarm in mockery of the Victorian decorative arts, ideas that are decadent from a period that, from our perspective, seems embarrassingly ill-informed.

At one level Albrecht's work may seem easy to categorise, especially its lack of the pragmatism that is expected from contemporary artists. However, this misses the minutiae of the work, which makes use of a sense of order, proclaiming its authority as a strong and consistent statement of thoughtful and thorough meditation. Political content is approachable in art. The absence of colour, in this particular instance, renders any statement sterile. These works are vessels for reflection because they remind us of both our humanity and our responsibilities. One easy answer is that the stylised use of contrast is an ironic poke at industry and consumption but the reality is that this contrast makes it very clear that certain things in this world are, in fact, black and white. ■

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