

# ON THE LURE OF EMPTINESS AND THE COURAGE OF PUTTING EVERYTHING AT STAKE

– some thoughts on the vessels of Gunilla Maria Åkesson

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**At first, it seems simple.** Gunilla Maria Åkesson makes ceramic vessels. For many years the cylinder has been her foundational shape. But instead of throwing its smooth curves, she coils the shape by hand. This is where she begins to push the limits of the possible. By kneading paper into the clay, she reinforces the material, thereby being able to build cylinders so wide and large that they should be a physical impossibility. Round and round, the thin walls grow between her fingers. The light paper fibres lend stability to the moist clay, which would otherwise collapse under its own weight.

Once in the kiln, the function of the paper changes. As the temperature rises above 1200 degrees Celsius, it burns up. But it doesn't disappear without a trace. During the firing process, craters and crevasses open up in the glazed surface of the clay. Much later, when the pieces have cooled down, the glaze can be reminiscent of solidified lava, where the heat still appears to be simmering from within. Other times it has crackled like a dried riverbed, where streams of forest green and jade drift downstream from the upper edge of the cylinder. When she picks up the finished vessels in her workshop, it is quite possible to consider each of them as pieces of crystallized landscape or rugged terrain. Volcanic eruptions, dark ponds and expanses of sand and ice await. At the same time, Åkesson can entice the light of a winter sky, with the soft pink and turquoise shades from the zircon or tin glaze. This method has been developed gradually. In the series of works titled "Container" from 2016, she uses the paper to create patterns in the surface. During the following years, she has it burned out of the clay before the cylinders are glazed, by bisque firing the goods for a long time. But lately, she has been alternating engobes and glazes in layers, sometimes using up to seven coatings. In the kiln, they react with each other, unite, transform and disintegrate in unpredictable ways.

**It soon becomes apparent** that nothing is particularly simple or obvious when it comes to Gunilla Maria Åkesson's work. At first glance, the austere lines and timeless formal language may seem easy to connect to a history of both Scandinavian modernism and the age-old traditions of Japanese ceramics. But rather than resting confidently against this framework, she puts everything at stake. The risks she takes are both artistic and technical. During the process, everything can be achieved or obliterated. She moves stubbornly between

contrasts and opposites in an effort to bring them together in one object. The works derive their appeal from the friction and release that arises when she succeeds.

Although she clearly relates to ceramic traditions, it may be interesting to draw a parallel to how artists working in other mediums allow the act of creation to contain a measure of destruction. When the Gutai movement came to the fore in Japanese avant-garde art of the 1950s, it was with a manifesto that claimed that the inherent beauty of materials emerged all the more strongly when exteriors were damaged, cracked or in decay. To free themselves from painting's lofty legacy and pretensions, they resorted to drastic tactics, among other things relying on chance as a key element in paint-splashed happenings. The objective was always to let the material speak for itself, as it does so powerfully in Åkesson's vessels. More recently and closer to home, the young Malmö-based painter and sculptor Jamila Drott, with a background in textile art and graffiti, has developed a method that similarly contains its own paradox. The moment she creates her works, she also incorporates their disintegration. She applies found objects, tools and car paint to metal plates. In her works on paper, bound together in artist's books, she mixes bleach and cleaning products into the paint. As the image takes shape, it also begins to dissolve in spots. Just as with the bubbling, crackled and flaky surface of Åkesson's ceramic pieces, every perforation, dent and unevenness reinforces the luminosity of the works. The imperfect holds its own perfection.

**In Gunilla Maria Åkesson's case,** the tension is introduced from the very beginning as she challenges the clay to embrace a maximum space with a minimum of matter. With such large, thin vessels, cracks can occur at any time during the process, if the material is not kept moist enough or dries too quickly. Unfired, they are extremely fragile and must be handled with the utmost care. The planning, accuracy and patience required during this stage differs sharply from the phase of firing and glazing. Here a sometimes methodical and sometimes uninhibited experimentation takes place when engobes and glazes are poured over the vessels from different angles. It is fundamental to the ceramic process that all claims to complete control must be abandoned the moment the kiln is closed. She often fires her work not once or twice but several times, which stresses the clay and creates tension.



When the kiln is opened, sometimes only a single work remains intact, among drifts of shards and capsized pieces. At the same time, unexpected effects occur in the chemical reaction between clay, engobe and glaze. Åkesson deliberately makes the glazes boil and crawl, contrary to established ceramic ideals. Then she thoughtfully studies the result. Intuitively, she considers and reconsiders every step in a process where not only big gestures but also small shifts can radically alter the entire thing. The classic shape of the cylinder comes up against the dissolved, gnarled surfaces, reminiscent of everything from corals and birch trunks to blazing fire. Alongside this gestural expressivity, the vessels appear filled with a clarified tranquillity. So the reddish-brown or black clay stands out in rough relief against the glaze's glossy flow of the smoothest white, streaked with cobalt and lime.

Restlessly, Gunilla Maria Åkesson turns her back on caution and moderation and embarks into unknown terrain. This amounts to an expansion of the ceramic field, where concepts such as success and failure are rendered obsolete. When she applied to the National College of Art and Design (SHKD) in Bergen, Norway in the late eighties (now the Faculty of Art, Music and Design at the University of Bergen), it was precisely this way of relating to pottery that attracted her. There were no limits to what could be done. But the freedom that the education offered came with a price. To find her own voice in the material, she had to first venture outside of her own comfort zone. Then as now, it is about pushing the investigation to its very limit, even if it means that the work is ultimately lost. To constantly have the courage to keep asking yourself what happens next.

**After graduating** in the early nineties, Gunilla Maria Åkesson quickly became established on the Norwegian scene and also began exhibiting extensively internationally. When she returned to Sweden after twenty years in the neighbouring country, she still found herself in a situation as an artist where she doubted everything. As her new studio at the old farm on Österlen was being completed, she came close to quitting completely. The cylinder became her way back. She likens its clear, simple and open shape to the painter's white canvas. Although the parable is more complex than that. As promising as an empty canvas may appear, it can be equally daunting to confront. From the shelves in the former car repair shop, she lifts down boxes with engobe and glaze samples, but also her discarded pieces. Even ideas and objects that have been rejected can prove to point forward in unexpected ways. Vessels that have cracked inside, she can refine through kintsugi, the Japanese art of caring for broken things in a way that doesn't hide but emphasizes the repairs. Instead of dismissing the crack as a defect, it is accentuated according to tradition with gold leaf, in Gunilla Maria Åkesson's case with gold paint and glue. In traditional Japanese culture, the technique is not considered to decrease but rather increase the value of the object, by adding another dimension of care, experience and time.

Outside the workshop, the garden awaits and beyond the cow pasture, the hiking trail stretches towards Listarumsåsen, the silhouette of the ridge stands as a reminder of the ice age. The main road is not far, but

few find their way to the abandoned quarry that has turned into a quiet lagoon. It is with this proximity to nature that the work continues. But rather than finding a starting point in these shapes, Åkesson's work encompasses its own topography. Like the surrounding landscape, they consist of layer after layer of narratives that can be anchored in both the past and the present. Born in Älghult in Småland, Gunilla Maria Åkesson grew up with the famous glass district and the forest around the corner. Early on, she became interested in the craft of glass, not entirely unlike pottery. Both consist of materials that in ancient times were taken out of the earth to be formed into containers for the basic needs of subsistence, with the help of hands and heat. These objects can survive through millennia but just as easily break in an instant. When she returns to the archetypal form of the vessel, she is also relating to this field of tension between the perishable and the eternal.

**The paths she staked out** during her years as a student can still be seen in her practice. Back then she tried to work architecturally and monumentally with building blocks that interacted in a spatial rhythm. Similarly, the austere but sensual vessels she now works with can be seen as part of a larger composition or score. The sketches she has put up above her workbench are renderings of the presence of a series of interior or hidden rooms. Their soft organic forms share something with the corporeal crevices she has previously worked with. The charge between the outer and the inner, the casing and the void, the material and the immaterial, reappears as a undercurrent in her practice. This dynamic, which is the starting point for her exploration, reflects a basic prerequisite not only for human existence but for the entire universe. In physics, researchers have found that the world we physically experience predominantly consists of nothing. Extensive voids open up between atoms and particles from the macrocosm to the smallest part of the microcosm. Antimatter, dark energy and black holes are counterweights to the visible matter and the forms of energy we know. That we still experience our surroundings, from the things we touch to the planet we inhabit, as a more or less tangible entity is due to the forces that hold the components together. The perspectives are overwhelming – scientifically, philosophically and existentially. Elements of this can also be discerned in Gunilla Maria Åkesson's work. In her more recent pieces, she is sometimes drawn to blackness, the dark cavity embraced by the thin ceramic walls. The shape is the same. It is the vessel, the container that both closes and opens, but not in anticipation of content. Her works are already full. Emptiness has its own idiom. Few knew it better than the poet Tomas Tranströmer.

*The airy sky has taken its place leaning against the wall.*

*It is like a prayer to what is empty.*

*And what is empty turns its face to us*

*and whispers:*

*"I am not empty, I am open."*

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*The quote by Tomas Tranströmer is from the poem "Vermeer", translated by Robert Bly in The Winged Energy of Desire (2004).*



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