

BEING BORN

Imagery in Susanne Kallenbach's ceramics

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Clay is one of the most ancient artistic materials known to mankind. Extremely malleable at first, then fire-hardened, it is ideally suited to the manufacture of pottery, brick and sculpture. Today, clay artworks are a seminal phenomenon in the spectrum of contemporary art. Susanne Kallenbach's particular importance for contemporary ceramic art is grounded in her free sculptural works, which are steeped in intense imagery.

COLOUR As early as in her diploma work, Susanne Kallenbach was realizing non-representational drafts and models. What took shape at this time were broad, flat slabs built of horizontal bands of colour, vertical colour streams and split colour zones: abstract, finely-balanced compositions with a swinging colour rhythm that animated the entire surface. Sculptural accents such as gouging and scraping, broken edges and cavities were subordinate to this overriding mosaic structure. Susanne Kallenbach conceived her shapes by tracking her inner sensibilities, without prescribed references. She developed the pictorial aspect while assembling patches of colour. Her debut, with thought-provoking titles such as "Snow White", highlighted the barely comprehensible content of these purely abstract works.

Visualizing ceramic colour – clay treated with cobalt, nickel, copper – in picture panels is a practice closer to painting than to sculpture. From the flat surface image, Susanne Kallenbach progressed to the image which expresses itself in volume and plastic forms.

STONE One important point of reference in Kallenbach's ceramics is brick. Her sculptures are born from brick, inspired by her freelance work in the 1990s in the brickworks Blomesche Wildnis, where she was

engaged in the restoration of listed buildings. Her series entitled “Waving Goodbye” experiments with the formability of perforated bricks. From angular, massive stele bases sprout wing-clips curled like shells and teardrop-shaped spurred volute tongues. The soft plastic formal impulses lying dormant in the clay are wrenched out as the material is crushed, squeezed, compressed. This existential dialogue between ceramicist and clay, in the course of which she by various means elicits from the material a pictorial language, determines the work and the image.

A classic analogy in art theory is that of the state as a giant house and of the house as a miniature state, and simultaneously as a body. For Susanne Kallenbach, the wall built of bricks and mortar, layer by layer, is a symbol of the individual in society.

BODY The artist sees brick as a metaphor of the body. The pictorial aspect of her work is determined above all by the human figure. In 2016 she developed the “Homecomers” using hollow and solid bricks whose oblong clay mass was transformed, when subjected to enormous pressure and violent blows, into bulging anthropomorphic forms. The result is a sculpture which retains a flexible aspect despite its cubic block appearance, and which in keeping with the overall theme highlights vulnerability in the form of a maltreated clay body. The slip elements add uniform accents of colour and interpret the sculptural values.

The truncated physicality of Susanne Kallenbach’s artificial figures is expressed in her resolutely physical approach to the act of creating. All the figurative, though by no means representative, motifs in “Oracle” and “Dancer” are subject to this overriding sculptural principle. The human figure is at most suggested in the rough assemblage of material: the head is a protruding, highly rounded form, the torso a pillar-like mass with a waist, arms and legs perhaps a

bulge at the edge or a peripheral joist. To some extent, the artist relies on narrative moments. The figures have striking eyes; some of them wear wide notched robes.

Shaped in clay and surrendered to fire, these archaically poetic figures engage with their artistic sister-forms in prehistoric, pre-Columbian and ancient African sculptures and explore the spiritual origins of the visual image. All of them are united not only in the high discipline of depiction but also in free composition, which follows a rhythmic impulse of its own.

TIME Susanne Kallenbach is a committedly critical observer of contemporary events. In her disturbing tableau “Ruhmes Feld” (“Field of Glory”, a pun on Donald Rumsfeld) she reacts to the war in Iraq. Perforated, skeletal, rocket-shaped cylinders are assembled as emaciated stick-figures staggering through a sandstorm in a sinister Dance of Death: a powerful image evoking individual suffering that transcends political pathos.

Susanne Kallenbach is continually creating subjective models of her personal understanding. Her artworks mediate between the world and human beings. Clay, the material so familiar to us, becomes a medium of dialogue.

SPACE Landscapes inspired by various journeys form the models for Kallenbach’s expression of nature in its totality. On the “Siberian Walk” the artist operates with sixteen vase structures grouped to form a frosty-coloured forest panorama; the weathered, scored, veined or earthily crusted appearance of their flanks suggests tree-bark and rock formations. The image circles round the mantling surface and circumscribes an inner space. The narrative becomes sombre, the tone icy. In the Lofoten piece, the maritime landscape between steep mountain slopes bordering the Raftsund becomes a dialogue between the two components

of flat basin and tall beaker, expressed also in the contrast between the blue-green to grey-white glaze of the inner surfaces and the boldly rugged, riven materiality of the outside. Art becomes visible in nature.

Susanne Kallenbach recently translated her impressions collected on a visit to Ladakh, that barren, bizarre mountain country between the Himalaya and Karakorum called “Moonland”, into a serried installation of slender brown clay cylinders with melted-on Ladakh earths and scratched, partly glazed clay walls. These are ceramic substrata in an observed topography which progress to the open form of reportage. Nature is not being illustrated here; in the dynamic motion of the clay spirals growing on the potter’s wheel, it is comprehended as a universal principle.

One has to see Kallenbach’s œuvre as something in perpetual mental motion. Like a spinning-wheel, it is suspended in an energy-laden state from which two movements are equally possible: the small steps of direct experience and the long strides of cloistered reflection and reminiscence on work completed, necessary to refuel the batteries. Both aspire to pure form.

FORM A key work is “Basin and Rock”, dated 2008. The narrative has practically fallen silent. The fundamental form is a fine organic variation on stereometry based on an oval shape pointed at one end. The monochrome colouring is entirely derived from the ceramic mass of the grey and red earthenware; the rough surfaces are sanded, smoothed, polished. The dermis appears naked and starved. The elemental expression of the material evolves in quiet yet highly sophisticated refinement. Susanne Kallenbach demonstrates in this piece the process of transformation from the amorphous to the designed.

In “Still Life”, the objective principle of the frame encounters the vivid sensuality of a salt-fired fragment

in blazing red. Two layers of sharply edged borderlines around a crested core visible within them are pieced together as three equally significant, nestable clay shapes, stimulating a process in which the viewer becomes aware of continually changing images: that is the true objective.

Reflecting upon the concise interpretation of clay constantly leads to wittily minimalistic, primary forms. The abstract compositions cool down into geometry. The epitome of this is the rounded brown hollow cut from the “Round Object”, whose indentment exactly corresponds to the missing segment of the sphere. The harmony of volume and scored lines evokes pneumatically taut skin. This ambivalent contemplative image rests in itself as an absolute sculptural presence.

Susanne Kallenbach’s mastery of her art has an unmistakable character: demanding, yet unpretentious and serene. That says a little about the artist and a great deal about the possibilities of ceramic sculpture.