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Erna Aaltonen

ERNA AALTONEN
NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia



COLOURED SPHERES RESIDE IN THE LIGHT-INFUSED interior of Hedge Gallery, located near San Francisco's (California) Financial District. Fourteen works varied in size are staged across a banquet-sized matt-white table, accompanied by five others placed nearby. This presentation of reverberating clay forms represent the most recent body of ceramics by the Finnish artist, Erna Aaltonen (born 1951). Titled *Nostalgia*, this exhibition was on view from 27 April to 9 June, 2012 and was the artist's first American gallery exhibition though her work was seen in 2011 at the Dallas Art Fair. Her forms, which bridge the structural and conceptual territory between vessel and sculpture, feature organic spheres, elongated pods, narrow ellipses and two-foot high folds of undulating shape. Together they define this space as a suggestive and timeless realm with an assertive manner. You want to be in this setting to absorb the lyricism these works emit, but there is no room for any other type of work due to their collective force.

Nostalgia is a curious name for this show. It compels the viewer to study the work while cueing into their titles so as to elicit meaning. *Glow*, *Rotko*, *Splash* and *Noki* typify Aaltonen's nomenclature that allude to the universality of nature but also invoke Finnish words and ideas. The show's title is a reference to her

concept of longing for home. It is also acknowledgement of what she considers the crucial touchstone the pot form has served throughout human history. In this respect, *Nostalgia*, Aaltonen believes, is homage to all the fine pot makers throughout time. Her building form through ribbon-like stoneware coils is slow, methodical, and contemplative supporting her connection to other form-builders and vessel makers, especially from the notable Finnish tradition of design. With neither moulds nor potter's wheel, Aaltonen sculpts organic forms whose small openings at the top are sibling to their modest base on which they rest. Fourteen ovoids were on view at

A Review by Nancy M Servis

Hedge Gallery, eleven of them populating the expansive table top *en-masse*. Three amoeboid verticals standing nearly two feet tall were intermingled throughout the show. While representing Aaltonen's connection to water, they especially echo the Finnish designs of Alvar Aalto glass. In form, these are a departure from the abundant roundness of other works, though they share Aaltonen's technical focus regarding surface texture and oxide colouration. Two mysterious pieces, *Ravine* and *Rotko*, are large smoke-coloured ellipses where she dwells in a minimalist ideal both in colour and form.

All of her works are of manageable size yet



possess a sense of monumentality through her artistic assuredness and confidence of form. Combed textured surfaces, which have been built-up using layer upon layer of slip, are mottled with colour oxides of ochre, melon, gun metal and bone that counter balance with pieces of intense azure and moss achieving a restrained expressionism across the work's surface. While clearly visiting an exhibition of ceramics, the impulse is to also consider the artist as colourist whose pieces evoke associations to Symbolist painters through their emission of colour. Aaltonen has worked in ceramics since 1981, often within the context of art communities and workshops. Ceramic art, she says, provides her with the splendid opportunity to combine form, colour and surface structure into one continuous whole. Her artistic evolution from years of ceramics practice, discipline and personal direction is firmly realised in the exhibition at Hedge Gallery.

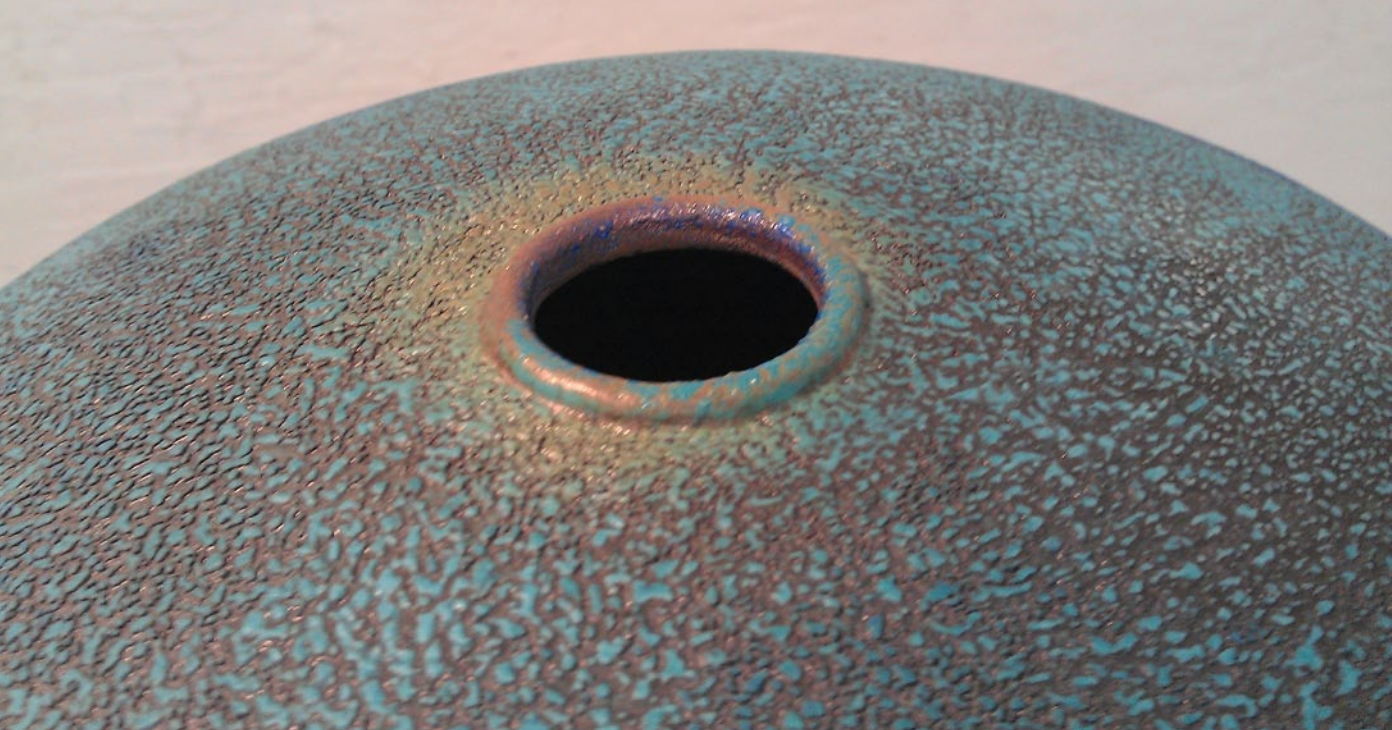
As a student at the Kuopio Academy of Design from 1981–1987, Aaltonen studied with Heikki Jylhä-Vuorio whose textbook, *Keramiikan Materiaalit*, remains influential today. She also interned in 1987 at the Arabia Porcelain Factory colour laboratory, (Finland's acknowledged centre of materials and design) and then joined its staff from 1987–1988. While there she worked on the Pro Arte series and assisted a range of artists, including Kati Tuominen-Niittylä, Jun Kaneko and Howard Smith, who later became her life-partner. Together they formed



Facing page: *Erna Aaltonen: Nostalgia*. 2012.
Main Exhibition Gallery at Hedge Gallery. Photo by Patrik Argast.
Above left: *Nietos*. 2011. 32 x 13 in. Photo by Johnny Korkman
Above right: *Charades*. 2012. 32.75 x 10.25 in.
Photo by Johnny Korkman.

ARTEOS studio in South-Central Finland where their artistic collaborations succeeded and where Aaltonen's technical and artistic capacity prospered. Moving to the town of Fiskars in 1996 and setting up a studio in one of its old buildings that is now an artists' colony, she embraced her nature-based direction in a communal creative environment.

These experiences within the context of Finland's nature and ecology set the stage for what is seen at Hedge. Deceptively simple, both in form and setting, the ceramic artwork of Aaltonen offers visual, technical and conceptual reward. While this exhibition illustrates Aaltonen's celebration of pure form, it also reveals her capacity to draw viewers to her works, directing them to their surface intricacies. Her hand-built coil pieces are slowly formed, then stroked



Above: **Crete (Detail)**. 2012. 25.5 x 20 in. Photo by Nancy M Servis.
 Below left: **Greenway**.
 Photo by Johnny Korkman.
 Right: **Secret**. 2012. 25 x 8 in. Photo by Nancy M Servis.



using a small saw, wisp, or unconventional tool such as clipped credit cards from which Aaltonen achieves her desired textural result. Applied metal oxide patinations settle in the groves and recesses caused by scoring, creating an organically controlled surface as seen in *Flame*. This work and other rounds in the show reflect her vessel emphasis though their strong forms and comparatively miniscule openings dissuade the full acceptance of this idiom.

Work such as the elongated and amorphous *Secret* illustrates Aaltonen's sculptural effort, whose assertion as such (as opposed to vessel) revolves around the mouth-like opening on the top. Here, these openings serve more as passage-ways than vessel indicators where the continuation of interior to exterior, exterior to interior activate the work. It is also the area where her interior glazing treatment, which differs from the exterior, interacts in a delicate surrounding ring of integrated colour. This subtlety reinforces Aaltonen's assertion that her work is sculpture, based on the pot form. She cites the Finnish word *ruukku*, or Swedish *kruka* which are broad interpretations of what constitutes a pot from modest cooking vessel to masterpiece. With this in mind Aaltonen addresses form using openings, interiors and voids, leading from a functional perception of her work to a sculptural interpretation. Redressing the purpose of the traditional vessel opening, Aaltonen designs forms that at first seem utilitarian but attain a sculptural reality. One elongated work, *Nietos (Snowdrift)*, omits the opening altogether.

The exhibition at Hedge Gallery establishes Aaltonen's work in a regional context that is rich in ceramics accomplishment. The depth and breadth of Northern Californian sculptors, potters and ceramists succeeding in clay is extensive, as exemplified with consistently notable shows at Trax Gallery in Berkeley and the recent exhibition of Jun Kaneko's sculpture, paintings and drawings at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco. The introduction of this Finnish artist and her work is due in part to the international design focus of Hedge Gallery and it broadens the artistic dialogue where clay is the chosen building material. In an adjacent room to *Nostalgia*, contemporary and period furniture, mid-century accoutrements and European



Flame. 2012. 17.25 x 17.25 in. Photo by Johnny Korkman

designs are displayed, reflecting the gallery's premise of showing work that is pristine in its makership. Here the traditional arenas of art, design and craft are interwoven and equally shown in a stimulating enclave of objectification. While the fine quality of the varied pieces is evident, the gallery's tendency to over-elevate them fosters some unease, putting many of the works on view, including Aaltonen's, in a distant realm. We want to engage with these pieces and partake of their three-dimensionality as a participant, not restrained observer. Quieting this sense of austerity would benefit the gallery context eliciting accessibility to and comfort with the works on view.

Aaltonen's exhibition of ceramic forms in San Francisco's Hedge Gallery is a welcomed contribution to the evolving *métier* of clay. Her assembly of 19 confident works for the exhibition, *Nostalgia*, reverberates nature and Finnish design while attaining a universal appeal and focuses noteworthy considerations regarding ceramics identity. Supported by a concise and well-written essay in digital form by Teija Isohauta, Erna Aaltonen's work, known by many in Europe, makes a successful entrée into California.

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