

Searching Out for the Essential

Interview with Kirsi Kivivirta / Ceramics Now Magazine, Issue 3, 2015 / Questions: Vasi Hirdo

Your architectural ceramic tiles can span to up to three meters in size. How much time do you regularly spend on a piece? How do you frame the tiles together?

My working process is always affected by the interior space, housing area or another environment where the finished work will be placed, as seen, for example, in my works at the Arabianranta housing project. Sometimes I incorporate visual elements into a mosaic work to help tie it to a particular place. If I don't know the placement of the work when I am building it, I envision a place. This is a necessary prerequisite for my process. Places, things and forms on a monumental scale are inspiring as are monochromatic qualities, continuity and repetition of a certain kind. The same applies to inspiring musical works.

In my series of monochromatic mosaic works, the entire process sometimes takes many months. These rhythmical works mounted on walls are composed of hundreds of different sized pieces. Naturally, at the same time I can be working on smaller projects. The large works are physically very demanding.

My main material is porcelain. I start by rolling clay slabs together to make a large body that will be the final size. I cut the first primary lines and divide the main areas that will later be broken into even smaller parts. I have developed my methods of drawing and cutting clay. After the firing, I glue these small pieces onto large panels of 3 mm light aluminium.

You sometimes include soft details like knots or rings in your tiles. What do they represent?

I aim for simplicity in my expression. There is great joy when things come up easily and spontaneously without forcing them. I am looking for timeless symbols and forms, everyday objects or phenomena that are common and familiar for all of us. For me, they represent the flow of time, a path of our life in general. Repetition is one of my devices.

Tell us about the sculptural work that you're creating.

My sculptures are based on geometrical forms, bricks and cubes from small arrangements to big installations. In the Construction series, I am exploring the idea of the demolition of buildings by cutting away at the clay. The series was produced quickly, in contrast to the prolonged process needed to create works that ponder the purpose of construction. The absence of something is often felt more strongly than its presence. Although the technique of cutting away the clay is rapid and perhaps easier than building it up, it can't be done without focusing on the material as the work progresses. For me, the clay is a partner in the discussion. It responds immediately to the slightest thought or touch, reflecting the different facets of temperament and state of mind. The concept of a house is a metaphor for the human body.

In the Tempo series, I have printed silkscreen images onto either casted porcelain or stoneware. The images are photographs of urban landscapes, often with snippets of nature and often with the silhouettes of bare trees. These organic images reflect my longing for the wilderness, a nature that exists mainly in our memories.

Through references to water, stones and trees, you transmit the viewers a sense of serenity and calm. How much has Finland's landscape influenced your work?

Our country has four distinctly different seasons full of contrast. Obviously the landscape is a very

rich source of ideas. Having always lived on the coast, I have an attachment particularly to the landscape of the sea. My palette is limited— shades of white and gray, blacks, natural pigments and metallic oxides. I think an innate calmness arises from the minimalism of the natural tones of my palette.

The Finnish coast with the archipelago has had a great influence on me. We have a summer cottage on an island, and I spend a lot of time there. It is easy to find harmony there, and I'm sure this reflects in my works.

How did you become drawn to minimalist art?

As I create art, I move effortlessly into a familiar existence. My work is a kind of composition process, moving pieces around, in which various elements look for their places and their dynamics. The intention of my expression is to reduce and eliminate factors and to search out for the essential. I am a part of the Scandinavian design movement that is characterized by minimalism and functionality.

When and how did you learn to embrace the imperfections of your works?

This is a good zen type of question! There is a tremendous potential in raw materials and natural resources. Clay as a primordial raw material is a powerful and expressive medium. As an artist, I am on a journey to explore and understand the natural properties of clay and the firing process. The "ceramic's change" is enormous and can not always be controlled. One must accept it and be humble towards this medium.

You have worked as a teacher for the past 25 years. In what ways has teaching influenced you as an artist?

Teaching has always been an important part of my profession. Working outside the studio helps me to structure my timetable. It allows me to be a part of a greater community; of education professionals, teenagers, children, parents. It also gives me a chance to develop diverse abilities like empathy, teamwork, decision-making, updating skills. Teaching is a two-way street, what I give, I receive back tenfold. It keeps me connected. In the social confrontations and interactions, there are vast reservoirs of potential and opportunity. Teaching is very educational!
Do you think the media of decorative ceramic tiles will be positively or negatively influenced by 3D printing technology?

Clay can be one of the 3D printing materials which produces an object that is durable and lasting. In my opinion, there are great possibilities in using 3D printing, for example in intricate forms and shapes. This technology would free the artist of the traditional methods, for example of mold making. It could have positive effects in the medium of decorative ceramics and especially on large scale customized tile and brick productions. In the end, artists and designers are responsible for the quality of the output.

Does the public sauna still function at the ground floor of the building that hosts your studio? If yes, do you still meet once a year with other ceramists to bath and discuss important issues?

Yes, the Arla sauna is still operating and has since 1924. The public sauna culture is going through a revival these days. Plans for a public sauna have been included in the new Helsinki Central Library plans. Our group of ceramists meet at least once a year to have fruitful discussions, and sometimes it's at the sauna. The idea of the large Ceramics and Space exhibition at the Design Museum, Helsinki, 2014-15 was born from one of our earlier group meetings.