

Clay is the stuff of creation. God created Adam “from the clay of the soil”, “from the dust of the ground” or “from a clod of earth”, depending on the translation of the verse in the book of Genesis, and breathed life into him. Prometheus, too, formed human beings out of clay soil before he fell from grace; the same is true of Obatala, the god of a West African creation myth. From Olorun, the god of heaven, and Olokun, the goddess of water, he had received “a snail-shell full of sand, a white hen, a black cat and a coconut” to create the world. The hen scattered the sand, on which Obatala planted the coconut, which grew into a tree; the tree was beautiful and provided food for Obatala, but he felt lonely, the cat notwithstanding. So he “formed figures out of clay and prayed to Olorun to breathe life into them. Thus the first human beings appeared on earth.”

Clay, shaped with the hands, and the breath of life. That is what makes a human being. And this being multiplied, settled the land and learned to live from what it offered him. For this, he needed a good stomach, courage, ideas, muscles, tools and equipment, and it was fitting that he too began to form objects out of clay (which he first slurried and purified): vessels to use and figures to worship.

Ceramic art, one might say, is based on divine craft copied by humans. Early. As long ago as in the European Neolithic period, so I have read, people were making fired clay and earthenware pots. In the Siberian region of Amur, earthenware objects have been found that were over fifteen thousand years old, and in South Moravia there were findings that were over twelve thousand years old. What made them possible were earth, fire, air and water – the Four Elements of ancient philosophy (after the definition probably formulated by Empedocles) which formed the basic “essence” of all being.

But one more element is necessary: apart from imagination and talent, one needs physical strength.

Clay art, the potter’s art, is a very physical art form. It is Art-Work. Although I have never observed how Susanne Kallenbach works, I can imagine her standing at her work-bank in her apron, sleeves rolled up, breaking lumps of clay apart in her hands, kneading them, twisting them, forming them “by the sweat of her brow”, as God foretold to Adam when banishing him from Paradise, and this long before the kiln is heated to ultimately fire what she has formed. To render it fit for touch and use, to make it durable and timeless. (And the proximity to the solemn aspect of creation becomes clear to me when I contemplate her slender vases, sometimes standing like sisters in a group of a good dozen together, lined up in solidarity like a row of skittles or a tree nursery; because then I reflect that for all our individuality, we can only survive as a community.)

But it is not only pottery in general that is old-fashioned, even in the sense of un-fashionable, timeless; this is especially true of the feeling of Susanne’s works. Formally they orient themselves toward the most fundamental shapes: cylinder, tube, square, bowl, sphere. And their rough, chiselled, crusted texture, together with the muted palette (reddish brown, a dry white with hints of grey, shadow-black and distant blue) recall organic phenomena; they resemble fossils, appear the result of long slow growth or what has been there forever. They recall patches of ground, slices of landscape which humans have not (yet) destroyed. Thor Vilhjálmsson’s Iceland is an example that occurs to me, where he makes his figures find their way through mist and twilight, ever seeing only what is immediately before them. The “steel-grey cliff, chiselled out over the centuries by the river’s course”, for instance; scree and sand-courses and “narrow grass-covered strips of earth”; frost-fractured stone, the slope bearing “lichen like verdigris on copper”, the “moss-ridden gravel”, “heather humps”, naked roots, the “green spots in black moss” and all the erosions from wind, rain and snow.

Mentioning Iceland here is apposite. Susanne is drawn to inanimate and hardly accessible nature, mountains, rock formations, gulleys, rifts, watercourses. She has never been to Iceland, but she has visited the Lofoten islands and has (due to her Bavarian origins) frequently visited the rugged mountain

scenery of the Alps. The landscape is here not only inspiration but also challenge. In the catalogue for the symposium Lofoten-Kiel in 2001, she writes about her work in the north of Norway: "Snow, wind and light blur this landscape to something soft and white, and sometimes erase it altogether. God plays tricks with the antenna, and suddenly there are fish above me. Only the tideline shows me the boundary between water and land. Determining a form in this continuous process of transformation is about as impossible as working with clay." But she confronts this impossibility, and one of the results is the work "Modification (two views)": two oblong forms, almost as thin as plates, upright, black, with an irregularly cracked white glaze. Two "views" which seek, perhaps, to capture the power of time?

At any rate, the force of nature inscribes its mark in her vessels and objects. It is transformed into graphic elements: areas of dots, stripes, wavy lines, calm bands of colour and occasionally (to recall: "suddenly there are fish above me") strange little marks. A mysterious language of brushes and gouges. And when recently I picked up a book with close-up photographs of tree-bark, it was impossible not to notice their similarity to the surfaces of Susanne's "Shards", as she so modestly calls them. And whole landscapes, seen from a distance, can occasionally appear similar: they are crinkled, notched, mosaic-like images assembled of patches with burst or turned-up edges. And their colours can also be found in Susanne's palette.

Susanne Kallenbach translates the language of nature into her works. They reveal how great phenomena manifest themselves and are embodied in the minuscule – "great things appear small to me, the small great", wrote Adalbert Stifter – and simplicity is for the artist an essential quality, or in Stifter's words, a "gentle law". I notice this ever more clearly when I contemplate the pieces which she has given us, with which she has astonished us, over the years and decades. And when I hold them in my hand and stroke them, they begin to speak. The thin grey piece, for instance, arched like a tile and notched on top, appears like a snakeskin after the snake has slipped out of it. The gently curved bowl with the coquettish foot and the mugs with their compact dependability.

These mugs especially, I think, lend themselves willingly to our everyday routine – we hesitate to use the bowl, and for the snakeskins any kind of practicality is out of the question. But the mugs are content to be perfectly crafted utensils. "The crafted object", Octavio Paz once wrote, "is neither set on living for a thousand years nor obsessed with its imminent demise. It diminishes over time, accompanies us through our lives, gradually becomes worn; it neither seeks death nor denies it. It simply accepts it. The work of the craftsman teaches us how to die, and thus how truly to live." In contrast, objects made as art grow beyond everyday mortality. They assume no superiority to it, but they leave it behind.

Craft and art. A ceramicist, I think, moves in both circles. I imagine it is not easy to tolerate the tension between the two while in the middle of working. And even more difficult to guide it so that every lump of clay can grow into something animated by the divine "breath of life".

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Work of art and crafted utensil, nature and "view". Object and drinking-cup. Old and new, encrusted and smooth, scorched and filigree-fragile: Susanne's characteristic, impressively rich work not only tolerates the great opposing energies but lives from them. Proudly and serene.

Added to this is the element of the unexpected. Glossy, bubbling shapes on occasion, such as the knobbly "Casserole", or the astonishing, silkily shimmering interior surfaces of some of her bowls. Matte mirrors, delicate as the inner surface of broken shells. Bowl and offering, I think. Day and dream.

now the dreamers go about with their dreams
openly visible on their skin

with a mother-of-pearl shimmer of skins
and entrails distributed over

the body like old-fashioned
maps; the particular

bends of the moment mark
the seeds of the future as

a contagious fossil plantation
and the earth's crust cracks like

flaking canvas...

Aren't these lines by Inger Christensen so absolutely full of what I associate with Susanne Kallenbach's art-works? Skin and dream, body and map (landscape), the earth's crust that cracks, the "seeds of the future" that thereby become apparent, the unexpected... Only the beauty remains unmentioned, though Susanne achieves it almost incidentally. Beauty is another dimension. It is difficult to speak of, but I can see it. And feel it with my fingertips.

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