

REACHING BEYOND THE POT

*Wouter Dam
Turi Heisselberg Pedersen
Anne-Marie Laureys
Monika Patuszynska
at
Gallery Le Don du Fel*

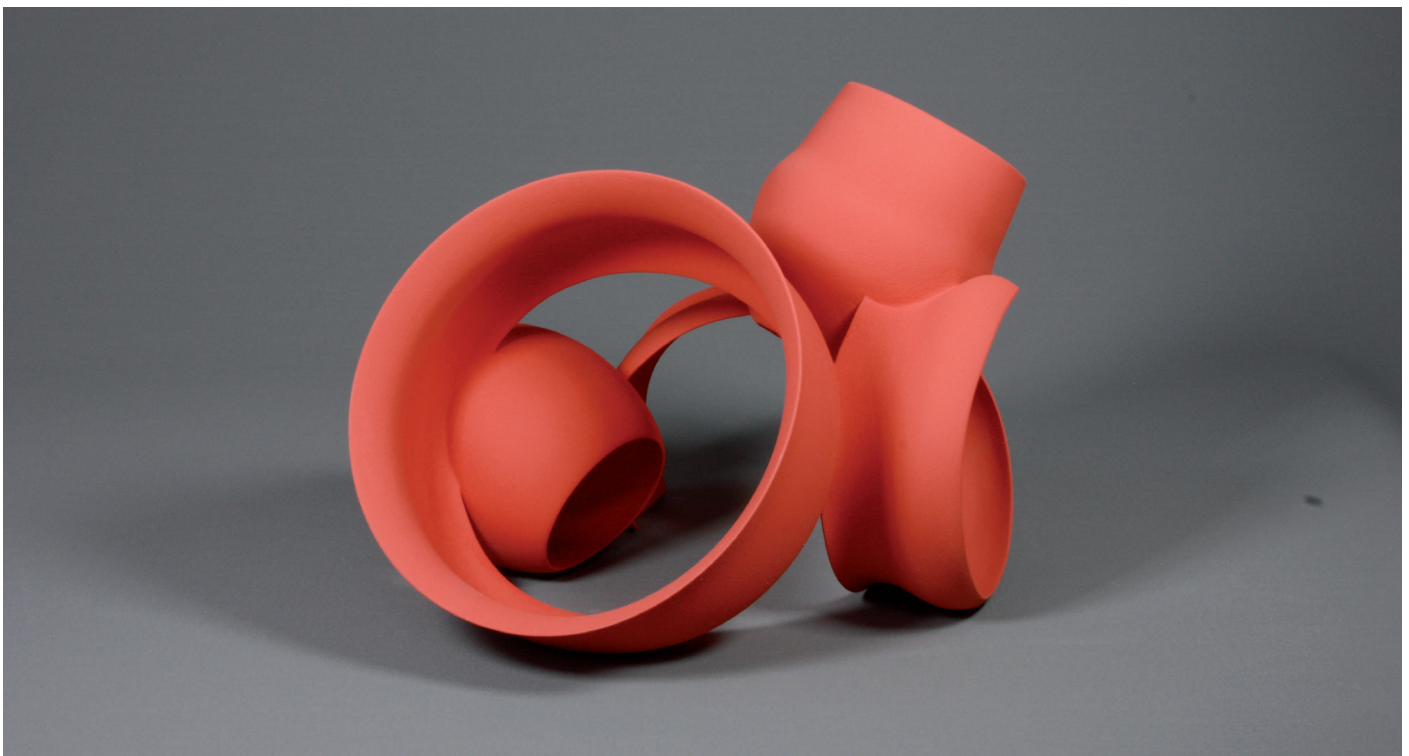
For our purposes today, let's divide the world of craft ceramics into two. On the one hand, potters who wish for nothing better, who are content to continue creating within the slowly extending boundaries of a certain tradition. And on the other, those who sense that these same boundaries are too constraining and that clay offers creative possibilities reaching far beyond the contingencies of function. Eager for adventure their cry is "Let's go see!"

NIGEL ATKINS

Monika Patuszynska



Wouter Dam



"Easier said than done" is what everyone notices very quickly indeed. Stepping out of the potter's studio means leaving the old rule book behind. What passed for competent yesterday may now appear trivial or insignificant because the original framework of appreciation has been replaced by one that is wilfully different.

For those seeking to reach beyond the pot, the key question is whether or not to conserve certain formal or elemental references related to their previous training or personal studio activity. Should it now be evident that I was previously trained or worked as a potter? Or would it be wiser to steer away from all that inherited vocabulary and pretend that I'm totally free?

Two questions only an ex-potter can ask. An artist discovering the creative possibilities of clay is only too happy to initially ignore the cultural weight of ceramic's history and just busy himself with the difficult business of mastering the matter so that he can realize works that correspond to his intentions.

Yet, on the decision taken, much depends. Too much evidence of an attachment to a historical tradition can easily be seen as a constraint on innovative expression, while too little or none could well mean that the artist now intends to abandon much of what is so specifically and preciously attached to the delight of expressing ideas in clay.

In bringing together these four artists for this exhibition, our intention was to illustrate the exceptional strength and wealth that is to be found in the work of artists who, although trained as potters, or even worked for a period as potters, have now moved on to the altiplano of pure plastic expression while often incorporating remembered elements or features of what previously constituted their daily studio practice. In fact, as we shall see, in certain cases, the use, or exploitation, of these cultural quotations can easily become the artist's central preoccupation.

Wouter Dam trained as a potter at Amsterdam's prestigious Rietveld Academy before setting up his own studio to make among other things, subtly altered Neolithic urns. Just as we can sense the seriousness of a man who decides to root his expressive language in the most primitive of origins, Wouter could also see the limitations. Increasingly alienated from containment as a central concept but unwilling to abandon the formal delight that so many early forms offer, he stumbled on his great invention. Throwing

his pots without bases and then unravelling the profiled walls to use them as constructional elements for his exquisitely elegant sculptural compositions.

It was a huge and radical step. Wouter's pots as baseless containers gave birth to a series of evocative ribbons of clay that, when woven together, created sculptural propositions that were entirely new while the individual elements were each marked by the cultural charisma that is associated with the souvenir of a previous use.

Turi Heisselberg Pedersen trained as a ceramic artist on the wide-ranging five

year course at the Kolding Design School in Denmark where the students were introduced to many different mediums and techniques. On graduating in 1990 she set up her own studio and concentrated on the production of one-off vessels, many of considerable size. Although a competent thrower, much of her work, because of its scale and because of her wish to explore increasingly dynamic shapes with lively surfaces, was made by slab building or coiling.

What is interesting is that all her pots were all constructed as potential containers, as though it was important to fulfil

Anne-Marie Laureys



BITTE UNTEN HINTERGRUND
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some unspoken obligation to echo a use that would no longer be imposed. "We are vases, but not for flowers" every new creation seemed to say! Realizing the contradiction, it was in 2012 that she started to systematically close off the openings at the top of each piece, transforming her large dynamic pots into increasingly imposing sculptures. Since then, her work has evolved further, becoming formally more affirmative, more resolved. It would seem that the final closing of the upper aperture was her definitive goodbye to the world of the pot. But even with the pot behind her, there is still much in her current vocabulary of forms and surfaces that pay tribute to much of the great Scandinavian ceramic tradition of the past fifty years, when pots were, quite literally, the ceramic sculptures of the day.

Monika Patuszynska also had a brief spell of studies in Denmark

Turi Heisselberg Pedersen



before returning to the Academy of Fine Art in Wroclaw, Poland for their five year ceramics course. Monika's speciality has always been slip-casting, a discipline whose applications are essentially industrial and whose main advantage is its capacity to repeat perfection. Outside the factory world, where production needs are colossal, its use is less evident, particularly in small studio potteries where diversity and small quantities are often the key to success. Seeking a structuring theme for her own work, and fed up with her pursuit of the flawless, she found her inspiration by concentrating on the imperfections of the process, initially exploiting the rough-edged casting lines on the freshly unmolded raw ware before finally inventing a system for reassembling broken or disused industrial molds so that she could produce her large and very impressive composite pieces. Here, the reused relics of an industrial past provide an essential cultural contribution, a time-frame rich in pathos and a material complexity that is arresting and uncommon. The technique is intriguing, the results impressive.

After completing her ceramic studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Anne-Marie Laureys set up a studio making a whole range of thrown pots, many of them richly decorated. But the moment came when she saw that her pots, fine as they were, were incapable of transmitting the emotional complexity that now increasingly interested her. The decorative had eliminated the expressive. In her own words, she needed to push beyond the idiom of the pot to make ceramic sculptures that would "give physical shape to metaphors of feeling". To succeed, her battle would be to develop an original and consistent language that would infuse each work and also lend unity to the whole of her opus.

And this is what she has done. By concentrating her clay working skills on the exploitation of her clay's natural plasticity, whether on or off the wheel, and by deforming and combining the different thrown elements in such a way that we end up completely forgetting their whirling origin, she has constructed a uniquely recognisable formal language that appears to be both sensually and physically polyvalent.

Garth Clark, even suggested in an article in 2017 that her sculptures establish an analogy to the "mechanical body, muscles and hands; the sensual body of touching; the emotional body as the treasure chamber of experience; the human body being a human among others; and the thinking body ventilating ideas." Garth's imaginative analysis may have rung true in 2017 when much of her work seemed inspired by billowing viscera, but more recently Anne-Marie's field of reference has clearly expanded way beyond the narrow confines of the human body to embrace the whole phenomenon of organic growth. Her sculptures now seem to be alive, just pausing for our pleasure, before dilating further or reaching higher. It's as though, beneath the throwing and stretching marks which lend such an uncanny muscularity to the surfaces, a sentient organism dwells.

This is fine boundary-expanding work, which, like that of the other three artists, declares openly and proudly its artistic heredity and its place of origin, the potter's studio!

NIGEL ATKINS

is the founder of gallery Le Don du Fel, France.