

Grete Huus

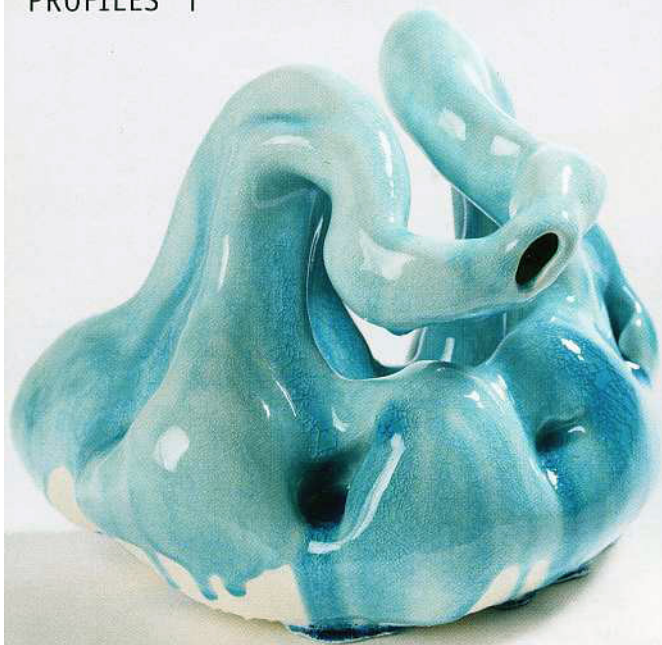
I have for a long period of time followed Gunilla Åkesson's ceramic objects of art – at a distance. Now that I am to going to write about them, I find that this requires an intimacy that is challenging. I have read the words of other reviewers, and also her own, about these unique ceramic works which for an onlooker may appear both beautiful and repulsive at the same time. One may spend time contemplating them, and they may install a sense of peace. At the same time, through their organic expressiveness, they may have a disquieting effect as well - do they breathe, are they alive? Gunilla has herself written about her works, also using poetry. Through language, she has actively sought to initiate us into the codes of her own artwork. "Now, there is not any longer such a need for explanations", the artist says. "There is no longer a mental or rational creative process, it is now rather intuitive". Communicating with her works, one would also probably be better off using the senses rather than a distanced, intellectual approach. The works are ambiguous - but I will listen to them, and try to understand.

ENIGMATIC ENERGY

First, I would like to look at Gunilla's work as a ceramist from the perspective of time. She relates her story about personal development, and the connection between that and her artistic expression is interesting. She has become brighter, lighter – and through this, form, structure and surface have taken new directions, while, simultaneously, her technique has changed. Massive forms of rolled out clay, built layer by layer, with dry barium glaze in dark nuances, have been replaced with a modelling, coiling technique, which results in hollow and light objects. The glaze is no longer dry, it is shiny and dripping – and in abundance. The last sculptures are also strikingly feminine, this being emphasized by a light shimmering glaze with the characteristics of mother of pearl. The female aspect was also present earlier, but not as evident as in her

ILLUSTRATION -

"Shell III" - 2007 - low-fired stoneware/porcelain - h 15 x l 66 x w 50cm



later works. Many of the forms are directly, erotically sensual, with the blood-red glaze flowing.

The partly biomorph objects can give associations to some of the small nineteen-thirties sculptures by surrealist Jean Arp, like "Human Concretion" or "Hybrid Fruit Called Pagoda". But my mind also turns to Frida Kahlo's pictures of the detached organs from her own body on the operating table. Because Gunilla's small sculptures often resemble something that we may think we have seen before, they represent something familiar, but at the same time we are not able to describe what it is.

The forms suggest something emerging from the interior, or are they reminiscences of a distant past – washed ashore from the ocean? To me, they appear most clearly as organs belonging to a humanoid body: hearts, lungs, bladders and whatever that may be found inside. They are living – and breathe by themselves. Some of them are beautiful, others turn one's thoughts to mutilation and death. They have suffered and writhed in pain as they have been torn off from their origins, and one feels some sort of compassion towards them.

Gunilla seeks to go deeply into that meeting with her self,

she wants to go back – to doors that have been closed – and to open them again. She has experienced that processes have come to a standstill. She has met hindrances which took a long time to work through or get past, before she could enter new rooms. In the poem "Movement in Standstill", she says:

*I can not get any further
The hands are being paralysed
The direction is lost
The movement...
It is nothing
Nothing
Absolutely nothing
The silence is silenced
The movement is silenced
Freezing.*

("Movement in Standstill"; G.M. Åkesson 2001)

Gunilla describes the creative process as a kind of hermetic circle – where she always returns to the same point, with new insight, and proceeds from this point into new circles. The connections which have been gathered over time are actually visible, now she creates links between several of the objects - they are interconnected through tunnel bridges, penetrating each other. The forms are even more perforated, light can enter through openings, and if we want to, we may take a peek inside.

These openings are not perceived as part of an ornamentation, they are rather the necessary consequences of the animal functions which the organisms need in order to live their own lives. Ornamentation is not a part of this artist's way of

ILLUSTRATION

above l. to r.
- "Movements I" - 2007 - low-fired stoneware - porcelain - h 30 x l 23 x w 27 cm
- "Movements VII" - 2007 - low-fired stoneware - porcelain - h 32 x l 23 x w 12 cm

below l. to r.
- "Black" - 2005 - low-fired stoneware - porcelain - h 38 x l 15 x w 12 cm
- "Movements IV" - 2007 - low-fired stoneware - porcelain - h 53 x l 38 x w 22 cm

opposite page
- "Red" - 2004 - low-fired stoneware - porcelain - h 8 x l 20 x w 15 cm

expression, the surface character is created by how the glaze gets its colour variations and thickness in the interaction with form and material.

It is the breathing aspect of her objects which is the most challenging for me as an observer. They are silent and enigmatic, but still communicative – and they will not let me pass without being affected. Because there is something human about them, they appear in a way as somebody or something, and these somebodies or somethings demand to be taken into consideration. They make me suspect that they know something about life that I don't.

*For your inner eye
The truth is standing*

Do you dare

To see it?

You are being watched

By

Your own truth

It is standing there

Always

Waiting...

For you.

("For your inner eye"; G.M. Åkesson 1999)

A strong determination towards self-confrontation, based on an interconnectedness in the world which stems from a common origin, appears to be Gunilla's motive power in her making of art. Such a meeting requires courage and honesty. Her objects of art are not indifferent, either, in fact, they demand of you that you take a stand. I catch myself attributing to them deeply purposeful traits. Through their sensual enigmatism, they stimulate me to contemplate interpersonal relations in the widest sense. Here it may be in order to take them out of their object context and into the field of art, this last refuge in our "demagified" existence, where everything is not yet completely stagnant – where wonder and awe still play important roles.

"Art is our only hope, the single possible field of communication between people standing ready to kill each other, between "we" and "them"", American director Peter Sellars commented in a recent interview. "Before anything can be changed politically, we have to understand that we belong together. The field of art is the arena where this may take place. An artist may choose to go to the very cause, and not begin with the consequences", he says. "Because back there, at the roots, you will see that it was possible to make directional choices, and sooner or later you will have to consider what is good or bad within yourself. In the mirror image you will meet yourself, and later the others – everything must begin there. By understanding oneself one may begin understanding others. Art is part of a total ecology. It can not replace social, economical or

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Gunilla M. Åkesson - studied at National College of Art and Design, Bergen, Norway from 1987 until 1992. Since 1990 solo and group exhibitions in Norway, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands. 2006 The National Scholarships for artists, travel and study (N), 2005 The County of Sogn og Fjordane, (N), 2001-2004 The Craftsmen Fund's 3 year Scholarship for Artists (N). Work in public and private collections. Publications in Catalogue, "Enigmatic Energies" by Grete Huus (2006), *Neue Keramik, "Geist und Materie"*, by Nina Malterud (2001), *Kunsthåndverk "Indre meditative rom"* by Øystein Laundal (2000).



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political actions. But it can open up for new ways and actions where there have not been any previous connections. It is all about being able to imagine wearing other people's shoes".

Art which is deeply rooted in a craft may also result in expressive objects which ask important existential questions. These ceramic objects represent works which are "ripped out of one's very heart" and which demand to be existential in character. Earlier, such works used to be the very characteristics of good craft. "Art is a fruit that grows in man, like a fruit or plant, or a child in its mother womb", said the previously mentioned Jean Arp, a description that I find very fitting for this artist's serious attitude towards the birthing process of every single object. Her ways are inscrutable, because it seems that she carries in her deeply embedded powers for exploration and change.

Grete Huus studied art history and other subjects at the University of Bergen and is a freelance curator and lecturer. She is a member of NK, the Norwegian Association of Craftsmen.

