

Arne Ase - Painting with Light - Article by Tania De Bruyker

For an interview with arne Åse, a number of questions were prepared. These included: Why did you choose to work in clay? What was your start? And how did you develop your work until now? What would you like to express with your work including your source of inspiration and your intentions. Does the working process unique to ceramics, that is, using exclusively clay as material, forming and firing, have any particular significance in the making of your work? Do you consider your work to be craft (applied art) or sculpture (fine art) or pictorial art or none of these? I also suggested that Åse should feel free to give his idea or opinion on Japanese ceramics, either in the traditional (tea ceramics) or the avant-garde (more sculptural trend), as it related to his own work. In replying Åse began with some general comments.

Arne Åse replies: First, people of my generation are not too fluid in English. We didn't grow up with English-language films, soap operas, songs or the internet. Because of that you will have to excuse me for not being able to formulate my answers as precisely as I could in my own Norwegian language. The problem in giving this kind of interview is that it always has an element of building up one's own image. I will try not to do that. I know it is important, but I think artists are too keen on building images. Staying in the art scene for so many years, talking to so many people, about art philosophy, about concepts, that has many aspects. I think I know the 'right' answers to most of the questions that are asked and discussed by artists, journalists and art historians. I will not do it in that way but try to answer in a simple and understandable way. And I don't like big fat words. The paradox is that an image can also be not to have any image. I just want to be a person that has general professional respect in the world for inventing original artistic expressions.

Like a scientist in his field. A scientist doesn't need an image, he needs results.



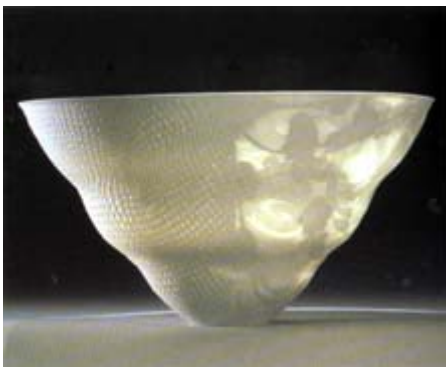
To answer your first question, I never meant to become a ceramic artist. It happened by coincidence. The plan was to study architecture, but I was not accepted. When I applied to the art school there was the possibility to make a second choice. I put my mark on the ceramic department and was accepted (I had never seen clay before). I remember I thought that this would be fun because I had always liked to make things, draw and paint. But my parents did not like it: 'How are you going to feed your wife and

children?' They would have liked me to become a doctor or a lawyer or something like that. That was what well- educated young men did in Norway in the early 1960s.

The first years (in the mid and late 1960s) I was working in an abstract expressionistic style, mainly expressing the material in a traditional modernistic way: rough clay, finger

marks and so on. I was looked upon as a modern (trendy) ceramic artist, and made sculptural works. Looking back I am sure that I did what I thought a modern ceramic artist should do, being 'correct' as an artist. And I had success in Norway. I used to say that I was one of the first that jumped down from the potters wheel and one of the few that climbed up again. I became tired of the brown rough clay and wanted to work with clay that did not have such a strong identity. The identity should belong to me, not to the material. So porcelain became my material. It is just like a sheet of white paper. And clay is what I am an expert at. The art historians often say that I am representing a kind of minimalism. That may be true, I prefer to express it in a different way: I am trying to create complex visual expressions and experiences out of nothing, painting with light. I have thought about it for a while; it may be that the next development, concept or project will be 'making as little as possible out of something', become fuzzy, just disappear into smoke and fog but still be visible and then just disappear but in my way. Another paradox: When the noise is too strong and heavy, the way of being seen is to become a whisper. That may be to stay in harmony with life.

The question about what I am expressing through my work I find difficult to answer. It is said about poetry that there are only three main topics: life, love and death. I regard my work as visual poetry or, more precisely, visual music. It should be the same for the eyes as music is for the ear. This is not an original thing to say, but why should it be? I am trying to create and communicate an emotion in the same way as a composer is trying to create and communicate with his music. And it is done in an abstract way in both cases. The audience should have the possibility to interpret, mainly within frames defined by me. I feel like a jazz musician playing around and improvising on self-composed themes. It does not really mean anything, except for the feelings it creates. And as a famous jazz musician, I think it was Charlie Parker, said: 'You never get more out of the horn than you are putting into it.'



I do not have a love relationship with clay, but I know the material well. I know my speciality, my niche, better than anyone in the world. This fact gives my creativity a wide frame. I am examining my tools precisely, seeking for possibilities that serve the message, the expression, in the most optimal way. This message is also formed by the tool. It is a spiral. I could have used many other materials or techniques, whatever: glass, paper, flute, Photoshop and so on. But then I would have had to dive into new possibilities and study in detail new qualities, properties and characteristics. That would take many years. I do not have the time for it. Many artists say that the idea comes first, then the medium. You have to understand a computer program in order to use it. You have to know it well to use it in an advanced way. That doesn't mean that you have to know the craft of pottery to be able to use it in an advanced way. You do not have to be an old-fashioned master of your craft. But you do have to know your program. Whether it is a computer program or specialist knowledge like mine doesn't matter. As a curiosity I may mention that the technical aspect in my work is so little that everybody can learn it in

short time. But for familiarity, competence is needed. The challenge is what to play and how. I have also eliminated the need of expensive equipment as a criterion for my art. It is better to be a good poet with paper and pen, than a poet with an advanced computer and nothing to tell.

How do I consider my work? As I have said, I feel like a composer who is performing his own music. The music is made in a way that makes it possible to identify it without putting on a signature. It is a signature in itself, like handwriting. And everybody knows how many years it takes to develop handwriting. Good forgers are able to copy it after some training. They are craftsmen, dependent on other people's ideas. Quite apart from the fact that most of the arts, or all of them, normally are, let us say, 90 per cent craft and 10 per cent art and creativity. And craft, including performing art, may be looked upon as 95/100 per cent craft. Unsuccessful experiments cannot be regarded as art but they are necessary to create the values. I think it is like scientific research. I am undertaking research to create some small and (hopefully) valuable changes to human culture. That is why it is placed in museums. It is a part of the verification process that research in art needs. It is publishing through serious academic channels. I also write books, articles, give lectures and demonstrations on how I work. The most common question I get is this (a little simplified): 'Aren't you afraid of teaching other professionals all your secrets?' I have a standard answer to this question: 'Do you think the Norwegian violinist, Arve Tellefsen, is afraid of showing people how he is playing the fiddle or talk about it?'



Tellefsen is a performing artist, but I am also composing music, and I am the only person that can perform it. And it is impossible to industrialise it. My privilege is to be an individual person. I consider my work as fine art. If the criterion for being craft is that the result is useful and has a practical purpose like containing something, the definition of useful is narrow because it excludes most of the communication values. Apart from that the definition is wrong. We may try to define my bowls from that point of view. They are not practical bowls, they are too thin. The bases they are standing on are too small. It is not a bowl. It is the picture of a bowl or the symbol for a bowl. The bowls are painted; and the paintings have no practical purpose. The paintings are directly impractical, difficult to keep clean. The paintings on the inside and outside are the reality. They are not pictures. This reality is composed in layers with lines, areas, plain squares, squares that create optical illusions and more. Some elements are fuzzy, others are clear and defined (like music). There are themes and rhythms. If I take a photo of this reality, or draw it, it becomes a picture of the reality. Often art is the picture of reality, like a painting of a landscape. I am familiar with Japanese ceramics and the two traditions mentioned quite well. It is good for culture and for the traditionalists that they are highly respected and evaluated. You could say that traditional ceramic is more like performing art and that the 'avant-garde' wants to be a more creative art. That doesn't mean that one is more valuable than the other. I am not trying to be polite, I mean it. I have chosen to place myself right

in the middle of a tradition and am trying to find new ways from that position. From my point of view that is one of the most demanding challenges it is possible to choose.

From my own experience in earlier days I find it easier to create expressions that look new (and artistic) when I don't have to compete with sculptors which I should have done. I have talked to sculptors about this; most of them regard clay as an unpractical material for sculpture. There are some exceptions, but that is well known from history. Chinese horses for example, but these horses should not exist in the real world, they should stay underground. There is a good possibility to create large work from small elements. I think that it is more or less a mistake to stress the sculptural possibilities in clay (except indoor table sculptures). I am looking at modern ceramics from Japan. I find much of it interesting and highly qualified work. But from my point of view the less sculpture it tries to be, the better it is.

The Japanese/American artist, Jun Kaneko, as well as some Japanese living in Japan, are creating examples that show us that you need to be smart to find a solution that is acceptable from a sculptural point of view. Especially if the goal is to make large-scale work. It is limited if you don't use the painting possibilities. Some have done that. If it is a question of becoming more like the pictorial artists, I think the best way is to develop two-dimensional work in clay. But you know, most of the tile works in Italy and Holland were painted by professional painters, not by ceramists or potters. They did not have an adequate education and tradition. The question of becoming more like the pictorial artists is interesting. Who is becoming more like whom? If you take a look at Western European painting and sculpture from the past 500 years, it becomes clear that it has become more and more abstract, ornamental and symbolic as time has passed. Visual communication in general has been taken over by other media. These values or means are the most central in the traditional craft-cultures all over the world, independent of time, and it has been that way forever.