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Against the neutrality of form: the work of Morten Lobner Espersen - by Ian Massey

Ceramics Arts and Perception #75 March 2009

Morten Lobner Espersen makes vessels, many of them cylindrical; a form he describes as "the simplest of shapes ... harmonious, precise and neutral". In 2000 he mounted his first show of cylindrical vessels in Stockholm and five years later, while continuing to experiment with various other forms, decided to concentrate predominantly on the mute simplicity of the cylinder. Within this self-imposed limitation, Espersen has forged a large vocabulary from the proportional relationships between opening and height. At one end of the scale are circular bases with walls only marginally higher than those of a lily pad--at the other are slender tubes over 50 centimetres high.

With this formal neutrality, Espersen weds something altogether more expressionistic, as he describes, "I let the glazes invade the simplicity, and the numerous layers of glaze create the chaotic surface in all varieties and textures." Thus, he strives quite deliberately for 'undesirable' effects, welcoming craters, pinpricks and bubbles--a recent small dark green pot, for instance, contained huge pustules of glaze like a witch's cauldron in miniature.

Espersen makes great play of this admixture of chaos with purity. Some of his surfaces appear to have been attacked by an exotic virus, blossoming in fleurs de mal deformations, mixing floridity and disease, as compelling in their liquidity and colour as infected wounds. In some pots it is as though the organic forms of an Axel Salto 'budding' vessel have entered an advanced state of decay: in others, as though a hallucinogenic microscope has massively magnified Lucie Rie's volcanic surfaces.

Espersen was born in Aalborg, Denmark in 1965 and his fascination with clay began as a schoolchild. He recalls finding himself spellbound when his teacher threw pots on the wheel and he chose ceramic classes while his friends were involved in rather more prosaic activities, such as bicycle repair classes. From the outset he found working with clay great fun and his grandmother formed a collection of the things he made from kindergarten onwards. When she died he was able to review everything that he had made as a youngster.

After school, Espersen underwent six months of general art training at the School of Graphic Arts at Aarhus, from where he went on to study ceramics at the School of Applied Arts in Copenhagen. This he remembers as, "Very demanding, lots of tuition, many teachers, and a full programme. Days started at nine and lasted until five. Often I stayed

and kept working. The two first years were full of technical courses, throwing, modelling, plaster mould-making, slipcasting, glaze making and firings." Although there were classes in pattern and decoration at the school, the overriding ethos was of form, following function in the Bauhaus model. Bente Hansen, Jane Reumert and Ursula Munch Petersen were among his teachers whom he feels were of great importance to him, crediting each of them with a "powerful and personal approach to clay".

After two years in Copenhagen, Espersen went on to study for a year at Duperre Art School in Paris, where he enjoyed classes in ceramic art history and where he took night classes in modelling. Importantly, he began a lasting friendship with a fellow student four years his senior, Yoshimi Futamura, who already held a diploma from Japan. He remembers that she challenged him enormously and she effectively became his best teacher at Duperre. Espersen first visited Japan in 1997, when he held a three-month artist's residency at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. In 2004 he returned to the country, this time with Futamura, staying at Ohi-Cho on the north coast for three months. The two visited renowned ceramists together, Futamura acting as interpreter. "With Yoshimi the whole country became accessible," he recalls of the privileged access he gained there.

Espersen continues to travel widely, seeing this as his greatest source of inspiration. At the time of this writing, he had recently been in America where he held a residency at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia and where he also took part in a discussion on contemporary Danish ceramics with the curator Wendy Tarlow Kaplan as part of the 2008 lecture series at SOFA in Chicago.

The body of an Espersen pot consists of approximately 45 percent English stoneware clay (there is no natural equivalent in Denmark as there are no mountains), while the rest is comprised of sand and grog, plus an amount of earthenware clay which adds depth of colour and an increased amount of iron with which the glaze interacts. This combination gives material strength and a particular physicality to the work. All of Espersen's pots are handbuilt. He loves the meditative and responsive process which this allows, often losing track of time when working. "Focusing on steering the clay's softness, giving shape to the amorphous, deciding what to make; and sometimes just letting the clay loose and seeing where it takes me."

Drawing is an important subsidiary activity; he draws in order to change his working tempo, enjoying the speed of drawing as a contrast to the slower process of clay. For a period during the autumn of 2007 he made a drawing of flowers every day and these--line drawings in the tradition

of Matisse and Ellsworth Kelly, both artists he much admires--were subsequently exhibited alongside his petit fours (small porcelain vases from 2004).

In terms of influence, Espersen cites a modernist tradition, among which the Danes Thorvald Bindesboll, Axel Salto, Christian Poulsen, Gutte Eriksen and Richard Manz are especially important to him. To this list he adds Bodil Manz and Alev Siesbye, describing both as great sources of inspiration. At points during his training and career he has found relevance in the work of a range of ceramists from different cultures and traditions. During his time at Duperre, his heroes were Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, and the 16th century maker of 'rustic pottery', Bernard Pallisy, whose sinuous flora and fauna one can imagine submerged within Espersen's recent, more Pompeian surfaces. Back in Copenhagen, he focused on looking at Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, whom he describes as representing, "Nothing to add, and nothing to remove. Which is where I want to be as well."

Unlike most art forms where process is evident at every stage of facture, ceramics is unusual in that the end result only becomes truly apparent with the opening and unloading of the kiln. The only comparable parallel is with darkroom photography in which the alchemical also plays a part. For Espersen, experimentation is of great importance and he strives for an element of surprise in every firing. Sometimes such surprises are of a subtle nature, such as in a recent pale yellow pot, whose nacreous surface carries a whisper of emerald-green like the bloom on a peach, caused by its serendipitous proximity to another pot in the kiln. He welcomes such accidents, encompassing them as part of his process.

Espersen always makes many vessels of the same size, in order to seek out new possibilities of colour and surface within the same set of proportional relationships. It is rare that a pot is satisfactory after a single firing; seven is the most so far, and by adding more layers at each firing, a pot can hold anything from three to 20 different glazes.

Because of the nature of this process, the success rate is about 50 percent. The failures are those pots which become so shiny that glaze will no longer adhere to their surfaces or those which simply collapse or crack under duress. These are then smashed, their fragments sometimes commingled with the grog content of new pots.

Each pot has an unobtrusive black base, not unlike the foot of a yunomi, which serves as a point of transition between the cylinder and the surface on which it rests. In those pots whose glazes have set in globules below the base of the cylinder, this band of black acts as a

kind of foil, an in-built plinth. The base of each pot is impressed with a number, from which Espersen can track the glazing process.

The author first became aware of Espersen's work early in 2007 in the pages of *Ceramic Review* magazine. In an article on colour in ceramics, a double-page spread was emblazoned with a photograph of an installation of his pots at Galleri Norby in Copenhagen. (1) The intensity of colour and beauty of surface textures stood out as rare in contemporary ceramics: one pot was a gloriously bright orange; another coated in gold lustre; there were thrilling combinations of shiny and matt, in an overall aesthetic which appeared to wed belle epoque opulence with utilitarian formal purity.

The colour in Espersen's work has increased in pitch and variety during the past six or seven years. His work of the 1990s used a predominantly earthy tonal range, though with regular excursions into a subtle use of primaries. The trigger for a more intense palette came in 2002, when he was awarded an important commission to make work for a library at Hillerod, north of Copenhagen. The initial brief was to make one monumental jar, but Espersen decided to make a sequence of nine and to position them, not on the floor as had been the original intention, but on a high shelf above door level, closer to the skylight within the large space in which they are now housed. Espersen realised that he needed to exaggerate both colour and texture in order to increase the visibility and drama of the work--as he puts it, he felt the need to be 'louder'. Regularly spaced in a line, uniform in size and shape, the jars form a kind of musical cadence, mainly of hues of grey and blue--except for the last, a gaudy orange, which acts as an emphatic full stop. Since that commission, Espersen has moved into a new territory of colour, in which hues appear less naturalistic, and more manmade and artificial, as if inspired by the colours in a sweet shop and especially by those sweets our parents would rather we did not choose, the ones that are bad for our teeth, unwholesome and laden with additives. There is something immensely, sensuously seductive in the importation of this particular kind of colour into the field of ceramics. Yet repulsion also plays a part and engagement with Espersen's work asks that we reconsider and reappraise our notions of taste. There is a play with kitsch in certain glaze effects and combinations of colour. He brushes on his glazes with the authoritative freedom of an abstract painter, his hues often applied in expressionistic abandon. It is the combination of earthy textural materiality and sensuous exploration of colour that makes his work so exciting--sometimes closer to the primal energy of CoBrA ceramics than to Danish modernism.

Texture has always been important in Espersen's work, though, like his colour, it has become more exaggerated over time, as he has tested

different glaze applications. In a blue-grey pot from 2002 (#994), gorgeously encrusted in flakes of white, the texture results from the application of a very porcelain-like glaze, sometimes referred to as a Japanese shino, here evenly spread over other glaze layers. The glaze flakes off during firing, with unpredictable results, reacting differently depending on how much of it is brushed on, and on what lies beneath or on top of it.

Another pot (#1432) uses the same type of glaze, here applied as thickly as yoghurt over an initial layer of white. In the firing, the glaze creates protruding 'teeth' and a subsequent layer of powdery sulphurous yellow has been fired at a lower temperature in order to ensure that these teeth remain, along with intensity of colour, on its marvellously coagulated surface. The result is a pot which might have been dredged out of the sea, barnacle-encrusted, washed and rubbed by many tides.

The surface of Roserubis, a remarkable pot made in autumn 2008 and subsequently shown at Galerie Carla Koch in Amsterdam, employs a type of shino glaze which runs like candle stearin, resulting in a gloriously unctuous surface. The intensity of hue, emphasised by the pot's high sheen, comes predominantly from earthenware glazes. Espersen describes the colour here as, 'very juicy and present', a clear indication of his own appreciation of the sensual qualities of his work.

Within Espersen's recent work, there are pots whose glazes appear to have run riot. In his show at Puls Contemporary Ceramics in 2008, one pot had something not unlike lacquered pesto sauce smeared over it; another, of lurid lichen green, appeared plagued by orangey rust. This play on combinations of organic and non-organic, with its attendant tensions between the ugly and the beautiful, is central to Morten Espersen's aesthetic. His expressed aim is to create beauty while challenging his own conceptions. "Beauty is my aim in all my vessels but I try to challenge my own preconceived ideas of what is good or bad. Every work must contain both."

FOOTNOTE:

(1.) "Pleasure Palette," Claudia Clare, Ceramic Review, issue 223, January/February 2007, p.42-43.

Ian Massey is a writer, artist and lecturer based in Manchester, England. His book on the British artist Patrick Procktor will be published by Unicorn Press, London, in November 2009.