



LERETS MAGI

Interview
Karen Harsbo, Alexander Tovborg
& Mads Damsbo

Liberty Paterson

Let's start at the very beginning, at the inception of the idea. Can you describe the moment when you first decided to propose an exhibition of contemporary artists using clay and ceramics, and also say a little about what prompted you to make the proposal?

Alexander Tovborg (AT)

For quite a long time – from the very beginning of my studies at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, actually – I worked with ceramics as a natural part of my practice. At the Academy's Ceramics Laboratory I collaborated for six years with Ass. Prof. Karen Harsbo, who, with her great knowledge and experience of ceramics, was a fantastic motivator. So it seemed very obvious for me to ask Karen if she would like to help curate an exhibition on ceramics in contemporary art.

The idea came from a study trip I made to Germany, where I noticed an increasing interest in working with ceramics among my colleagues abroad. The idea – and the desire – to present interesting artists who work with ceramics came to me as soon as I returned from my trip.

Karen Harsbo (KH)

The chance of focusing on how ceramic material is a part of contemporary art seemed to me to offer an interesting perspective. I am fortunate enough to be able to work with this every day at a local level at the Academy and as a consultant for practising visual artists. I have previously been involved in Academy projects that illustrate various aspects of ceramics, such as 'The White Gold' (artworks made at Royal Copenhagen) or 'Østerhøj' – permanent ceramic art on a large scale.

But, once Alexander – and later Mads – were involved in the exhibition, it quickly gained an international perspective, with a focus on recognised artists who incorporate the ceramic aspect into their practice in highly different ways.

Mads Damsbo (MD)

I really liked the idea from the start when Alexander first

presented me with the proposal to organise an exhibition with ceramics in contemporary art. In recent years, I've made a mental note of ceramic works by a number of excellent artists, and it felt exactly the right moment to bring precisely this medium into focus. What's more, the exhibition seemed ideal for Gl Holtegaard, for like ceramics it combines delicacy, the historical perspective and a present topicality.

'The Magic of Clay' could be described as a project rather than purely an exhibition. Can you say a little about some of the activities planned?

AT The exhibition simply took off once we had passed on the idea to Mads and Gl Holtegaard. This also means that what we now have is a non-typical exhibition that can boast no less than three location-specific works, and with a large number of works that have been produced especially for the exhibition. This is the case, for example, with the British artist Clare Twomey, who relates directly to the history of Gl Holtegaard, as her work has a former excavation at the museum as its starting point. At the excavation, plates and other ceramic bits from a former age were discovered. Clare creates her work close to where the excavation once took place. Here she installs new plates and cups which will leave traces about our culture for the future to explore. This is a beautiful work which, in a both poetic and absurd way, unites and recreates history.

KH Linda Sormin is another example. In connection with the exhibition, she has been granted a DIVA Residency (Danish International Visiting Artists Programme), which enabled her come to Copenhagen and utilise the Ceramics Laboratory to realise a complex site-specific spatial installation at Gl Holtegaard. She combined her own ceramic artworks with objects found in Denmark and installed them in a construction through which the public can move. John Kørner also made

a site-specific work for the exhibition, one that interacts with the intimacy of the room in an installation that operates with sacred, spiritual space. In addition, we hosted a seminar at the Academy in connection with the exhibition, with contributions from some of the participating artists, who explained more about their projects and their reflections on them.

How did you choose the artworks for the exhibition and how did Gl Holtegaard's history and location influence your curatorial decisions?

AT The choice of artists and their works has been an incredibly exciting and important part of the exhibition process. Ever since we got the idea for the exhibition it's been important for both Karen and me to include interesting and striking ceramic artworks. So it was also a fascinating task locating precisely the artworks we wanted to have, taking into account that they were to be able to enter into a dialogue with the fine and at times slightly overpowering rooms at Gl Holtegaard.

An important choice for me was, for example, Ai Weiwei's fantastic work with vases on bamboo sticks. It is a work that at one and the same time turns the entire way one reads a work of art upside-down and yet is capable of self-containment, with a subtle critique of (China's) history, culture and politics.

Another interesting contribution to the exhibition is by the Georgian-born artist Thea Djordjadze. Thea's consistently unassuming presentation of her works draws the onlooker inwards with its minimal gesticulation and anonymous artistic idiom.

KH It has also been engrossing to select fantastic artworks that underline the broad spectrum of expression where clay and ceramics are used in contemporary art. The many associations clay has are involved. The vase form is used by Grayson Perry in his 'Guerilla Tactics' series, where his beautiful vases contain strong and often horrifying stories of violence,

loneliness and exploitation – motifs that in surprising fashion are often smuggled into our consciousness via the unassuming form of the vase, a form that normally has associations with domestic security and civilised values. The connection with the earth and creation can be seen as another theme in Alexandra Engelfriet's video-performance, where she refashions with her body large areas of muddy ebb-tide landscape on the Dutch coast. She both triumphs over nature with her will and choreographed dance and is at the same time swallowed up in and made insignificant by the infinity of the landscape.

MD It was soon obvious that the exhibition and the selected artworks would be capable of articulating a number of Gl Holtegaard's special qualities as well as the composite nature of the baroque as a period in general. The 18th century is both a highly physical century, where power and ideology coalesce in the monarch. At the same time, it is a highly feminine and playful century, where interior design and costumes could simply not be too sophisticated. For me, the choice of works had to do with trying to capture this composite nature – and think we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. The exhibition has the whole palette. From the most physical and dirt-ridden aspects of earth as an element to the ethereal, almost supernatural beauty of the finished ceramic artefact.

What are some of the interlinking themes we can expect to encounter at the exhibition?

KH One of the themes is 'The domestic', which can be found in artworks by Grayson Perry and Hylton Nel, who both work with familiar ceramic forms such as vases, dishes and plates and make use of our being lulled into a sense of security in order to surprise us – Hylton Nel with humorous and often homosexual motifs. 'Frailty' can be experienced in works by Thea Djordjadze, in her unfired clay sculptures and meticulously composed works, and in a video by David Cushway

where tableware is seen to slowly fall and disintegrate – an experience most of us have stored physically and therefore can relate to with the senses. A third theme: ‘Life/Death’ can be found, for example, in the works of Jonathan Meese.

AT Curating means composition, emphasis and drawing attention to things. So it clearly involves working with one or more themes in order to create an actual framework or common context for the participating artists one selects.

From the word go, there has been a large common interest in creating a thread that runs through the exhibition, one that enabled all the works to enter into a dialogue with each other despite all differences of all the work-forms, modes of expression and methods that are represented here at ‘The Magic of Clay’.

MD: One of the most attractive things about ceramics for me is precisely its mythological reference as a raw material for life itself. We are formed from the dust of the ground and will return to it, and in the midst of this process of becoming and re-becoming eternity is to be found. A wonderful quality of clay as a material is that it is both so close to our everyday lives and yet possesses divine connotations. I hope that the public will see the connections between the familiar and the far-off as they pass through the exhibition.

It seems that more and more visual artists are incorporating clay and ceramics into their practice. Why do you think that is?

KH I’ve no idea if more and more artists are doing so. Ceramics has always been there in art. Perhaps it has been somewhat neglected in favour of the ceramics we most notice in our everyday lives – applied art. Perhaps the increased interest in the material can be ascribed to the general perception of ceramics as simple and physical, in an age where the technological and virtual are increasingly taking over. In such a situation,

clay can possibly function as a counterweight to – or touch on – a need for intimacy or physical presence.

Ceramics has always been there. Something which the title of the exhibition also alludes to in ‘The Magic of Clay’. Ceramics has a fantastically long history behind it, all the way back to primitive cultures. And it also includes the subsequent interest of alchemy in the mystery of porcelain. Nowadays, one can meet it in such varied contexts as *The Earth Room* by Walter de Maria and as a material used in ceramic body prostheses.

MD Ceramics has a sounding-board of physicality and something organic that we are unaccustomed to today. We are surrounded by the body, but it is more of an image, not life and death, presence and transience. I can imagine that many artists are attracted by the malleability of clay and the moment of magic when clay becomes transformed into a ceramic artwork. There is a line of movement involved from the imprint of a hand to something finished and shiny that all of us have been fascinated by as children. Why shouldn’t artists excel in precisely this material?



Photo Anders Sune Berg

Linda Sormin
Born 1971 in Thailand.
Grew up in Canada.
Lives and works in Providence,
Rhode Island, USA.

Linda Sormins abstrakte, labyrinthiske installationer af ler er skabt til, at man går på opdagelse i dem. Sormin sætter lerets bæredygtighed og udfoldelsesmuligheder på prøve i tynde og skrøbelige konstruktioner. Flere af hendes former skabes af leret selv under brændingen. Hun går stedsspecifikt til værks og udfolder ikke kun udstillingsrummets muligheder, men inddrager også elementer fra hverdagskulturen og stedets historie i sin opbygning af værkerne. Således fylder hun hele rum ud med fantastiske, farvestrålende former, der synes uden ende.

Linda Sormin var i januar-februar 2011 på DIVA (Danish Arts Council's International Visual Arts) Residency i København, hvor hun arbejdede på værkerne til udstillingen på det keramiske værksted på Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi. Sormins installation tager udgangspunkt i hendes ophold i København, og man kan som beskuer gå på opdagelse efter de typiske danske keramik-klassikere, som f.eks. juleplatten, der gemmer sig i værkerne. Ved hjælp af en gangbro ledes beskueren gennem en farvestrålende installation, der både fokuserer på detaljen og det overvældende helhedsindtryk.

Linda Sormin's abstract, labyrinthine installations of clay have been created for the viewers to explore. Sormin puts the bearing capacity of ceramics to the test in thin and frail constructions. Some of her forms are created by the clay itself as it moves during firing. She conceives works specifically for particular locations incorporating the architecture of the exhibition space and includes elements from everyday culture and the history of the place. In this way, she fills out the entire space with fantastic, brilliantly coloured forms that seem endless.

In January-February 2011, Linda Sormin worked at the DIVA (Danish Arts Council's International Visual Arts) Residency in Copenhagen, on works for the exhibition at the ceramics workshop of The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Sormin's installation is based on her stay in Copenhagen, and as an onlooker one can set off in search of typical Danish ceramics collectibles, such as a Royal Copenhagen dish, that are contained in the work. With the aid of a gangway, the onlooker is led through a brilliantly coloured installation that focuses both on intimate details and the overwhelming spatial experience.



Linda Sormin
Howling Room (detail), 2011
Ceramics and mixed media
Photo Anders Sune Berg



Linda Sormin
Howling Room, 2011
Ceramics and mixed media
Photo Anders Sune Berg

LINDA SORMIN

Linda Sormin
Howling Room (details), 2011
Ceramics and mixed media
Photo Anders Sune Berg

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LINDA SORMIN

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”The site looms above
and veers past, willing me to
compromise, to give ground.
I roll and pinch the thing into place,
I collect and lay offerings at its feet.
This architecture melts and leans,
hoarding objects in its folds.
It lurches and dares you to approach,
it tears cloth and flesh,
it collapses with the brush of a hand.
Nothing is thrown away.“



Linda Sormin
Stow(detail), 2009
Ceramics and mixed media
6 x 8 x 10 feet
Photo Rob McLennan



Linda Sormin
Stow, 2009
Ceramics and mixed media
6 x 8 x 10 feet
Photo Rob McLennan



Linda Sormin
Sounding Retreat, 2008
Ceramics and mixed media

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