

## Porcelain Another Way

What follows is the catalogue essay to accompany the exhibition Porcelain Another Way. Films discussing the artists own creative process are to follow:

There is something about porcelain that ignites curiosity in a viewer, causes a disruption in our encounter of anything made of this material. Rather than simply accepting the qualities of an object - a plate, a bowl or figure – our gaze is compelled toward the material itself. It is almost as though we refuse to believe that mere volume and contours have the capacity to evoke that peculiar sense of beauty, refinement and fragility. We are drawn to look further still, to find account for our experience from the properties of this molten, translucent ‘white gold’.

As we look at a porcelain object – made by hands that understand its short plasticity, its tendency to warp and shrink and can push its properties to their limits through form and firing to achieve translucency – it not only becomes a remarkable object but palpable evidence of man’s ability to transform, to take dirt and create light. It is a magical and mysterious substance, reflecting and resonating. It almost *speaks* to a viewer, responding to their bodies as they move around a work, bringing the play of light from one vantage point to another. Perhaps it is this interaction that holds our attention, as if to truly experience porcelain is to become a part of it, to see ourselves transposed, the movement and shadow from our own body directly informing our encounter.

Experiences like this elevate the status of porcelain, allow it to move beyond mere form. It can conjure poetry, a wealth of metaphor, from the earth-bound connections of skin and bone to more ethereal things. In fact, it is startling quite how often porcelain is used in illustrating ideas, offering an exemplar of beauty, elegance and purity, summoning psychological states, commenting on life’s fragility and mortality.

Perhaps this multiplicity, its ability to describe so many things, began with the re-invention of porcelain in eighteenth century Europe. For by the time we mastered its exquisite alchemy, its most basic connection to house and home was all but removed. It was elevated to a heady and unique position, becoming synonymous with human ingenuity, man’s conquering of nature, a product of cultural exchange and economic endeavour. It was immensely desired, the epitome of wealth, intelligence and etiquette, a history that still resonates through the plainest cup to the most embellished and decorated Sevres ware.

Artists choose to create in porcelain for all these connections, these histories. As with each new shape formed the material is invested with new meaning and the stories regenerate. And herein lies its challenge: to harness the potential of a vocabulary so rich and expansive demands skill and courage. To establish innovation in porcelain demands true creativity. The symposium ‘Porcelain Another Way’ presents a unique opportunity for artists to test out their abilities. Its location in Walbrzych, Poland allows artists to work in the heart of a European porcelain industry, in one of three factories in the area, subjecting their practice to the particular firing temperature and routine of each.

The thirty fourth symposium in 2010 brought together sixteen International artists from a broad spectrum of ceramic practice. This catalogue essay introduces each artist through their final exhibition of work and explores the ways in which they have exploited the potential of this Arcanum material.



You cannot help but be drawn into the serene and contemplative world of **Agata Radomska's** figures. She harnesses porcelain's fluidity, not simply in the casting of liquid slip from molds, but in retaining the liquid perfection of milk, making the figures appear as though they have only just been formed in front of our eyes, like figures emerging in a dream. She speaks of a point in their construction where the figures become separate from her, stand outside of her control and she allows them to suggest their own composition; how they might fit together, stand apart or incorporate other motifs. Perhaps this is where the enchantment truly begins, an engagement between the artist and her work that is reenacted by the viewer as they are drawn to look closer. The resulting forms are delicately and intuitively placed in relation to each other, achieving a subtle combination of childlike simplicity and exquisite adult sensibility.



**Monika Patuenska** actively seeks out difficulties posed by working in porcelain, difficulties that often cause ceramists to stick to tried and tested ways of making. She wants the problems, she literally sets herself tasks that are so challenging she needs a plan B and C to fall back on. Her experience of porcelain factories led her to the conclusion that perhaps those seams and edges from the casting process, those that we strive to remove yet so persistently re-appear, are in fact an essential part of the clay, its tendency, its want. So, like the antithesis of a porcelain factory worker she sets about smashing the moulds, sawing them into shards, then piecing them back together to create new formations, to make new molds. She actively seeks the seams, edges and broken textures to create dynamic and fluid forms. The process is like fitting together an awkward, jutting jigsaw. That it works, that the porcelain cast survives with contrast in thickness and texture is perhaps in part due to serendipity but more essentially, to an exceptional knowledge of the material.



**Piotre Fiadro's** work is not created to sit on a plinth and be viewed directly. His subject matter is about what lies in the periphery, what happens when objects slip from our attention and become a part of something else, transforming, evolving into other contexts, other possibilities. In the studio, he explored mass produced objects – car parts, children's toys – which he combined in curious formation, retaining elements of their origin and at the same time enabling them to occupy other more ambiguous worlds. The objects in the exhibition are surveillance cameras. The porcelain enables sharp replication but Piotre leaves the seams and edges from casting so they appear to be growing or mutating out of their original form. They feel unpredictable, organic,

unruly - frightening qualities when you recognize the red light still flashing inside and remember their intended role. This work is a kind of ceramic graffiti, a commentary on society, a warning perhaps about gradual change and what can happen when you stop looking.



‘The Thinker’, is a series of six busts of Lenin re-created from a plaster mold discovered by **Guy Michael Davies** in the Walbrzych factory. His casts display all the refinement and craftsmanship associated with porcelain production-ware, a level of attainment significant to his work. Whatever subject he creates in this tradition embodies this history and summons the achievements of the industrial revolution, the social veneer and enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The discovery of a subject that in-itself brings a wealth of meaning, combines with this to create a complex collision of thoughts – the character of Lenin reframed by the values of the material and the material enriched by its relation to Lenin. Davies entwines histories and builds layers of potential meaning. The addition of the harlequin pattern literally adds another tier of interpretation. It is a motif that deconstructs and alters across each head; perhaps it is the thinker at work, rearranging possibilities, not unlike the artist himself.



**Michael Flynn** is a storyteller and, if you are alert, open and able, then his ceramics can unravel tale upon tale and lead you down a rich and colourful path. If you are of a mind to allow this to happen, what you experience is not mere illustration, a mimicry of what can already be found, but a bringing together of characters, symbols and scenes from across oceans and histories. These characters combine to create new threads for tales that haven’t yet been written. The work relies on associations that encourage the viewer to build meaning and extend the tale and to achieve this Flynn has created a language that both intrigues and inspires. Verisimilitude would be too closed, too fixed and certain in its representation. Instead the work gathers impressions and suggestions, nuances and ambiguities to reel you in, to make you look closer, to find the plots and subplots until you too are invested in the tale.



**Gabriella Hain** has been working with porcelain for over 25 years and is still overwhelmed by the feeling of discovery it brings. Her interest lies in the specific possibilities of this clay, with what it can achieve beyond any other material. So she exploits its semi-translucency, creating layers so fine they appear like windows of light set within her forms, and employs its strength to create vessels supported by only the thinnest outlines of a shape. Her practice takes tremendous patience, a process of cutting or gradually carving out fine layers. It is repetitive and meticulous, demanding constant judgment of how hard to push and how far to go. Perhaps there is no other material that can convey with such subtlety the mottled light and rhythm of nature; Gabriella’s inspiration translates through the porcelain, to create the most peaceful and tranquil of forms.



**Nicole Thoss** presents a series of wall-mounted, printed ceramic canvases that contain a quality of line and colour that evokes a peculiarly calming effect. Perhaps it is their simplicity that achieves this, with scenes constructed in an almost theatrical manner, creating a depth of field that draws you in and a sparing use of colour that directs your eye and pulls focus. But there is a subtlety that is lost in merely describing their visual appearance. The work has an almost audible quality, at times loud and clear – in the outlined figures stepping out into the foreground – and at other times a whisper – images barely defined by the play of light against an untreated or glazed surface. But this is not simply an exercise in new printing techniques. Once the realization strikes that the images captivating you are images of Auschwitz, these values become powerfully resonant, conveying the persistence of that history, no matter how distant it may now appear.

**Adam Abel**'s films explore the notion of transformation, the way in which objects in the world around us change from one state to another. These points of change, usually imperceptible to the eye, are here awoken and exemplified. They become lucid, mobile, evidenced through the various states of the clay. The use of film enables Adam to suspend time and to shift the usual order of things, to push the very act of transformation to the fore. There are no traditional cycles of life and death here, no commencement and conclusion. We are moved swiftly between events, in fast-forward, in reverse then forward again. A ceramic insulator is smashed against a wall and, as if summoned by the same hand, its shards fly back together and the piece reformed. The ceramics plays a poignant role in demonstrating change. We are drawn into a heightened mode of awareness with every point of transformation, the momentum of the film carrying us, capturing us in the uncertainty of its flux. For this is not simply a film of ceramics being smashed. It allows access to something far more profound, revealing aspects of the artist's process, the act of creativity itself.



**Norio Shibate** works in a methodical and measured way, perforating the skin of his figures with an almost rhythmic continuity, until they are as empty as they are solid, as much the room in which they are being displayed, as an outline of the human form. And as you move around the figures, a rather beautiful phenomenon occurs. The relationship between what is or isn't there appears to change, as if under constant review, as light filters through holes that align and then flickers out again. As the title states, the work is about 'What It Is To Be Human', and they can appear to gently move in front of us, to breathe. To be corporeal is to have skin that absorbs and emits, as the figures surface reveals, to be at the same time part of the environment that surrounds us and separate, alone.



There is a latent power in **Satoru Hoshino**'s ceramics. The work reflects the often-precarious balance between man and his environment by exploring the intimate relationship

between his hands and the clay. It is an approach to ceramic practice that Hoshino developed after finding his studio annihilated by a landslide, pushing him to recognize the clay not simply as a material for his ideas, but as nature; an unruly, overwhelming force with which we live, side by side. He began to allow his hands to feel their struggle with the clay, to feel the form emerge as his hands and the clay collided. And it is precisely this interaction that causes his work to animate. As he builds in layers, rotating the sculpture as it grows, the impression of his hands becomes an inextricable part of the form. The pattern causes the spiral sculptures to vibrate or pulse, an effect heightened further by viscous glaze as it drips into indentations and pools. The work appears as if rising upward from the ground, barely containing its potent energy.



For **Anna Malicka-Zamorska** there is a language between people who use clay that enables them to share experiences and knowledge without the need for words. For her, it is the clay itself that is sociable, that has feeling, is responsive and willing and perhaps it is this that prompts a similar state of mind in the artist. And this potential universal language is also a theme evident in her practice. For Anna's animals, figures and birds trigger almost archetypal connections. Her amalgamations of birds and dogs feel strangely familiar, as if tapping into a subconscious knowledge, the source of many childhood fables and fairytales. The work in the exhibition is a pair of laced, heeled golden boots placed onto a black clay platform then high onto a white plinth. Looking at them evokes the uncanny experience that you have seen them before and once recognized, they can begin to re-inhabit their fantastical world and a wealth of potential narrative builds swiftly around them.

The process and activity of making is an essential aspect of **Daewoon Kim's**



ceramics. His work conveys its own history, like a timeline, its surface bears evidence of the beginning, middle and end. Using his heel and the weight of his body, Daewoon first wedges the clay underfoot, creating a radiating pattern. As the vessel develops, this formation is echoed in the action of his fingers as again the clay is pushed outward and formed into a circular shape. From here, the intuitive, responsive relationship between the artist and his material takes over, working between inside and outside, adding and blending clay as the form grows. In its making, the vessel moves from the artist's hand, to the floor, to his knees where it begins to close in again. And as you walk around the final pieces, there is a sense in which the rhythm of their making carries you, urges you to move from the front to the back, from the outside to inside, a gentle echo of the activity of their creation.



**Anne Mercedes'** work utilizes the movement and flux caused by the transformation of materials in the firing process. She uses a combination of different elements that respond to heat in different ways, melting to different consistencies, moving various distances and often showing the trace of that activity once the firing is complete. Her work conveys the energy of natural phenomena that are rarely actually witnessed, like geological shifts and fractures or glacial retreat and it shares the tensions, the violence and beauty of these physical traumas. Human experience is simply caught in a different scale of time to these processes of nature taking place in the ground beneath our feet. And there are many such different scales of time and space, as Mercedes explains: 'what I am trying to convey is the thought of how we are connected to other things in the universe, to the present, the past, or the future'. Her work creates other worlds, small worlds of experience where these differences are rendered more palpable, so that we might become aware of our position in the universe and enjoy it, as she does, with equal measures of wonder and fear.



**Tyler Lotz** works within the realm of abstraction, creating sculptures that are vivid, bright, humorous and intriguing. He works with forms that appear either naturally occurring or industrially manufactured, and explores the consequence of their interaction. At times the groupings remain ambiguous, and at others, the meaning is more direct in raising issues about the environment and man's intervention. For this exhibition he cast porcelain 'blob' shapes the meaning of which was difficult to ascertain until placed in combination with other materials, when their dynamic emerged. The blobs provide a central form around which shards of metal wrap themselves and from which bright coloured tubing juts. The porcelain blob appears passive, almost naïve in relation to these materials. The work maybe abstract but the act of violation can be felt. Fueled by underlying concerns over the environment, the potential incongruity of material relationships serves this subject matter extremely well.



**Tomos Schmit** described his experience of the symposium in terms of an energy generated by a collective. It was the heightened observational energy and awareness of surroundings, not of specific sites or occurrences but of histories, evidenced through walls and through the qualities of materials. It reminded him of what drew him to clay in the first place: its ability to record every mark made, those purposely imposed and those out of our control. His exhibition work is an exploration of history, specifically the point at which change takes place. Schmit's grid of undulating wall tiles conveys an historical landscape, a unified field of white tiles denoting a continuum, with the exception of one, still placed within the grid but of a different colour and texture. This tile signals change, an apparent instantaneous happening, of chaos within a system, the act of something emerging in-itself, evidenced through material before causes or consequence are known.

The 2010 'Porcelain Another Way' symposium enabled sixteen international artists to come together with the time and the space in which to create a body of ceramic work. They each spoke directly about previous inspirations and achievements but what is more intriguing perhaps is the impact or influence of working in Walbrzych itself. As Schmit stated, there is an energy

contained within the walls of those factories, within the buildings and ancient forests of Poland, that enables you to simultaneously reach backward and forward in time, to be – if only for a moment – an observer of history; an incredibly inspirational and creative position for any artist. Perhaps simply moving away from the routine and familiarity of the studio and being given time without distraction would have produced the same results. But what cannot be overlooked is that the majority of artists here explored meta-narratives, explored structures that comment in some way on the fabric of all existence, and every one of those narratives was accessed through the trace of histories and transformative abilities of the material of porcelain.

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