Terres Extrêmes – Four Artists

Article by Michel Batlle

The Maison de la Céramique Contemporaine de Giroussens, France presented four artists where a part of their work is to have pushed clay to the limits of physical possibility, to the most extreme state of fragility, exuberance and rupture.

*Terres Extrêmes* could be the keyword for the preoccupations of today’s artists, going to the limit, totally assimilating technique in order to forget it and, at the same time, develop a new language for new forms.

Although a long time ago, Bernard Dejonghe followed another direction in his work with glass, he never abandoned clay and his habitual stoneware: rectangular, ovoid, round and flattened shapes, made his reputation at the beginning of the ‘70s. They still emerge from reduced copper as Chinese reds. That which we named ‘tortoises’ yesterday, are today, *Neolithic axes*, entitled *Areshima*. This is not a Japanese word but Touareg, the name of an area north east of Agadaz, Niger, where the caravans begin their journey into the vast Tenere desert to collect salt at Bilma, a distance of 750 km. In this region Dejonghe discovered fine, regular and rare green jasper stone discs in the oval shape of the rising or setting sun, for which their use is unknown. Everywhere axes, arrows, grindstones, our habitué of the Sahara, while searching for a mythic meteorite with Theodore Monod in Mauritania saw, with intuition, life as it was 5000 years ago when everything was still green. Just like these objects of antiquity, his works are the milestones of his life. He wrote nearly 30 years ago: “The link between my life and my work has become more important than a simple plastic motivation... my goal is not, under any pretext, to make that which one calls beautiful objects, to flatter the eye... it is to arrive at a strong, silent presence which no longer has need of myself for their
existence and which touches something inside the spectator...”

It is in the density of the story then, where the work of Dejonghe is to be found, that of humanity and his own. Each of his works is like an essential summary. Thus this shape with which he speaks, halfway between the shell of the golden crab and the axe, carved and polished in hard stone, is not only about combat but also the philosopher’s stone, between stele and tomb, mute but radiant form. These Areshima become, in their turn, not only mysterious questioning but also tools for meditation.

Practising art and the desire to overcome technical difficulty has led certain artists on to paths of which they had never even suspected their existence, towards revolutionary experiences. Some remain concentrated on technical feats, others, as Arnold Annen, go beyond this and reveal refinement and the infinitely fragile, a raw force of light.

Porcelain itself never doubts the limits of its capacity to be stretched, pinched, overheated “to show off on parade like a great lady in her wedding dress.” Following the example of Richard Sera where certain of his sculptures play with or make fun of danger, that is to say, their smallest point of equilibrium is a vehicle of emotion. Annen presents large bowls as thin as eggshell where the blowtorch has overheated certain areas, creating translucent haloes and perforation. Sorts of milky witches’ mirrors worn by centuries of wind, protective envelopes, smooth or prickly porcelain gourds, bleached skeletons of those pure mechanical objects of our industrial era; cones which have the power of stone or concrete; when set on the ground, are they archaeological objects or futuristic apparatus?

These volumes, some which evoke the transparency of a sunfish, that poor animal sacrificed for luminaries to enliven the home, could be linked to the ‘new English sculpture’ movement which in the beginning of the ’80s had led to a new vision of volume, humour and technology, breaking away from immobility and the vertical. But here the monumental is always present even in the infinitely small, in nature too no doubt, which possesses the most mysterious kind. These prickly shapes, are they viruses or chestnut burs? The authentic life of form is thus born from this playfulness between force, fragility, alteration, construction and mobility.

A movement of clay leads us to the heart of a sculpture which could seem to be the report of a natural
catastrophe and indeed, how not to avoid evoking those of Pompeii or the eruption of Vesuvius fossilising human corpses forever. In this way the draped forms of the Norwegian artist Torbjørn Kvasbø are they not shrouds of magma protecting an unknown ritual for another world? These groups of clay shapes piled up like funeral pyres or heaps of stone to protect human remains from the voracity of jackals and hyenas. Each sculpture is the theatre of an intense event, but firstly, is it not that of creative forces interweaving with life?

These piles of clay, like madrepore' launched upon the dark waters of the Styx for an uncertain after-life, these altars or recumbent statues due to leave for a long journey seem to question us before the last great leap, they are saying goodbye to us with soothing words.

As with the earth's crust which is a permanent mineralogical force, in each of his works, Kvasbø leads us towards the rudiments of his creation, here it seems absolutely apparent, the movement imparted to the clay slabs allows us to follow step by step the creative act. Out of these compositions emerges a powerful force emphasised by their surface roughness which catches the light conferring to the undulations a touch of violence and elementary power.

Forever in quest of experimentation, Joan Serra puts clay to the test; we should say clays, because he blends different types each with their tectonic specificities. From a repetitive cubic form, a range of textural variations are employed as in different styles of handwriting and their groupings, signs which seem to be born from the hazard of climatic change but
which are, in reality, contraction and retraction, dislocation and puckering of the different clays which Serra has set in opposition or adhesion.

It is alchemy in the noble sense of the word, the fruit of knowledge which wasn’t transmitted but discovered by the artist himself. We have the habit of defining the ceramist in the potter’s craft with cups, bowls and vases. For Serra, it is a solid cube, which during firing pushes out its walls from the interior until fracture and shrinkage result, there is nothing but density which brings out the black glazes that open on to clear interiors or the opposite. A back and forth between inside and outside.

These cubic eggs would bring little into the world if they weren’t made of fired clay; they are stillborn petrified moments. These stoneware domus on which gold sometimes flows, seem to push their furniture until their walls crack, minor planetary catastrophes which move along only three trajectories, with their eroded angles, their six sides split, holding in tension a transformed impenetrable materiality.

REFERENCES:
1. Madrepor – a type of coral.
2. Domus – habitation (latin).

Michel Batlle is a painter, sculptor and writer on the arts from France. Translation by Martin Barnsdale. Terres Extremes was realised by Terre & Terres, association of ceramists from the Midi-Pyrénées region, France, which organises each year an itinerant exhibition of contemporary ceramics. This exhibition was held at the Maison de la Céramique Contemporaine – Giroussens, Tarn, France (15 April – 15 July 2007), Museu Del Cantir – Argentona, Spain (1 August – 1 October). www.terre-et-terres.com. terre.terres@free.fr. Photography copywrite: Jean-Philippe Arles.