Complicated Simplicity
The Porcelain of Lut Laleman

Article by Frank Steyaert

In recent years, Belgian ceramist Lut Laleman's work has repeatedly attracted attention. In 2004 and 2006, she became a laureate in Belgian ceramic contests. In 2005, Laleman was selected for the international ceramics contest in Kecskemét, Hungary, and in 2007, for Aragon, Spain. Also in 2007 she received an honourable mention at the World Ceramic Biennale in Korea and took part in the 'First European Triennial for Glass and Ceramics in Mons, Belgium. In 2008 the City Museum of Dendermonde, Belgium, devotes an important exhibition to her work.

Laleman's objects seem simple, yet upon closer inspection, they reveal an unbelievably complex structure. One realises this kind of work must be extremely time-consuming. Her work reminds us of delicate lace and basket work because it is made up of
thin threads of clay. Her ceramic shapes are simple, strong and modern, devoid of decorative elements.
Laleman's work is made of extremely thin coils of porcelain clay which, through superposition, form a wall. She builds the walls intuitively, without using a mould or a template. The coils themselves establish a pattern. White porcelain alternates with black in the fine walls. Some coils are attached in a way so as to create a feeling of depth.
Because porcelain forms can change during the firing when reaching maturation, Laleman chooses a design that distributes pressure equally in a natural way. This is an architectural principle. A bowl absorbs the pressure of its own weight in much the same way as a dome would in a church or a mosque. If a dome becomes too flat, it could collapse. Strength increases with depth. Laleman's work is similar to the narrowing walls of windmills, water towers or constructions that have to withstand great pressure. The affinity with brick architecture doesn't end there: the multiple layers in Laleman's work are reminiscent of rhythmical brick connections.
The artist has chosen to use only black and white porcelain because it stresses the interplay between transparency and utter denseness. Her minimalist use of colour and her simple division of surface create a maximum of expression, and a full use of the intrinsic properties of porcelain. Laleman explores the limits of matter. Her pots are nearly weightless because the walls are so thin. One more step and the work would become intangible.
In Laleman's work, 'light' means both translucent and of little weight. Making such objects is no laughing
Two Cups. 2007. Coiled porcelain. 15 cm/h.

matter. As in any kind of ceramic work, every gesture happens at the right moment. Laleman cannot interrupt her work because the fine walls dry out quickly and one cannot continue building on top of dry porcelain clay. Laleman cannot create pots in dry weather either because she cannot work fast enough to counteract the drying process. That’s why she works continually, from early morning until late evening.

This requires careful preparation. Even the midday meal is prepared beforehand as Laleman cannot be disturbed while working. She is also active as a part-time pharmacist. Accuracy and precision are part of her personality, as becomes apparent in both her ceramics and her work as a pharmacist. “Ever since I have been involved in ceramics, I realise I no longer have any ‘hobbies’. My life is dedicated to my job and my art. I have not chosen the easy way, but the results give me great satisfaction and stimulate me to go on.”

This continued dedication to her work gives her life continuity.

Group of Bowls. 2006. Coiled porcelain. 12-15.5 cm/h.
Each work of art is the key to the next creation, to new solutions, different variations. “I store the things around me that offer inspiration in my memory, so that I can use them at the right moment.”

Laleman’s latest works consist of two layers and are therefore no longer translucent, but the treatment of the surface has become all the richer. She no longer uses porcelain coils lengthwise, but cuts them into 1-2 mm long pieces, and attaches them to a basic form so as to obtain a greater precision. By alternating black and white dots, an infinitely fine pattern emerges that is reminiscent of tufted tapestries or fine fabrics where numerous coloured dots make up a uniform surface. The whole surface emits a mathematical rhythm which makes the work shine, as if it were the iris of an eye, the structure of a shell or the microscopic cross-section of a plant stem. This new work was shown in the exhibition Mathematical Ceramics in 2007 in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands.

The major exhibition of Laleman’s work, in the City Museum of Dendermonde, offers a survey of her work from the beginning, about five years ago. Besides her own work, the exhibition shows a selection from international present-day ceramics in Belgian private collections, primarily work that has an affinity to her own. Most of the work on show is small, mainly in black and white with a spiritual affinity; a limitation is actually interesting and which gives the exhibition a feeling of unity.

Laleman’s favourite objects include a bronze-coloured vase by Lucie Rie with fine white sgraffito lines and the work of Bodil Manz, who makes inner and outer patterns correspond by means of the transparency of her porcelain pots. Major works also include objects by Paula Bastiaansen and Wouter Dam, which govern the surrounding space by their spiral movement, and the trompe l’oeil pots of Elisabeth Fritsch. Belgian ceramic works include the delicate light-coloured bowls of Mieke Everaert and the inventive work of Piet Stockmans. The exhibition Lut Laleman and her choice from ceramics in Belgian private collections ran from 13 April to 25 May 2008 in the City Museum of Dendermonde, Belgium.

Frank Steyaert is a ceramist and a collector. He has been running a gallery and private museum of ceramics in Ghent, Belgium, since 1999. He was curator of the First European Triennial of Ceramics and Glass organised in Mons, Belgium, in 2007. Photography: Koen De Muynck. Translation: Carine Verleye.