

NEW CERAMICS

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The Pure Vessel

On the ceramist **IPEK KOTAN**



Small sculptural vessel in Limoges porcelain and satin matt metallic glaze with gold crystals, 12 x 3 cm, 2015

by
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One cannot reinvent the wheel, as the old saying goes. What is true of the invention of the wheel is equally valid for the ceramic vessel – it cannot be invented all over again, and historically it has a significance that cannot be overestimated. The history of human civilisation is inconceivable without this usually unobtrusive but universal object of daily use.

Whereas the wheel can be assigned to the field of technology in human development, to the expansive, war-like impulse, and thus represents the male principle, the connotations of the vessel are entirely opposed to this. Gathering, preserving, containing and giving define the character of the vessel. The handmade vessel represents the female principle.

Ipek Kotan was not preordained to become a ceramist. From the outside, at least, nothing pointed to a career in the crafts, let alone the arts, for her at her birth in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1977. In retrospect, however, it seems as if the impressive nature of prehistoric vessels of the Mesopotamian culture in Turkish museums had implanted a love of ceramics in her as a child who was always attracted by fine art – an early influence, perhaps, that was later to bear fruit. Ipek Kotan's horizon then became international, and her search for what she wanted to achieve in life global. In her early twenties, she studied media at Emerson College in Boston and was awarded her B.A. there in 2000. She rejected a career in advertising of the media in the knowledge that it would not really be what she wanted to do. Instead, she was successful in Bali, Indonesia, with the sale of bamboo and teak products which she had designed herself and commissioned from small workshops. Yet in spite of the attractions of the sunny South Seas, the apprehension that she was in the wrong job would not abate. The business world remained external to her, inwardly she was uninvolved. The need grew in her to work with her own hands. Finally, she took a decision that was by no means unconsidered... she would have to continue her search. From 2007, she returned to her studies at the renowned Rhode Island School of Design in Providence on the east coast

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Low and wide sculptural vessel in Limoges porcelain and crystal metallic glaze with corona pattern, 15,5 x 3,5 cm, 2015

of the USA. And it was here, where she studied drawing, painting and wrought iron work as well as aesthetic theory that Ipek Kotan almost immediately discovered ceramics as her medium. It was not the teachers who whetted her appetite, it was ceramics itself that now truly called to the seeker: it was not just that for the first time she felt the deep sense of satisfaction provided by working with her hands at the wheel. She was both astonished and enraptured when she felt how the theme of the ceramic vessel touched her deep inside and she noticed that it related to the core of her person in a way she had never experienced before. It was a radical turning point in her life, the beginning of a passionate relationship with ceramics that has lost none of its intensity today. It has become a necessity for her to make vessels.

Finally, in 2008, Kotan went to England, the “motherland” of studio pottery, to study ceramic design at Staffordshire University in Stoke-on-Trent, where she graduated with an M.A. two years later. She got to know the international ceramics scene, was impressed by Japanese ceramics, by the classic makers Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, admired the great contemporary exponents of the vessel, Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye, Pippin Drysdale, Gwen Hanssen Pigott, Thomas Bohle, Kirsten Coelho; she gained work experience with Piet Stockmanns and Julian Stair. Yet although she learned from the others, the great names and the contemporary artists, strangely, these influences passed her by without a trace. For herself, she adopted the ethos of impeccable craftsmanship – copies or combinations of other people’s styles were out of the question for her. An attitude of extreme independence defined her own work, and this is what it was all that concerned her: doing her own thing, the vessel.

It was during the preparations for her final assignment for her M.A. when a crucial clarifica-

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Deep sculptural vessel in Limoges porcelain and satin matt metallic glaze, 24 x 11,5 cm, 2016

tion slowly crept into her work and a trait set in that still defines her work. The young ceramist's focus narrowed to the prototype of all open ceramic forms, infinitely old and eternally young: the bowl. And this prototypical form – the ceramics world is familiar with many bowl forms – was subjected to a formal cleansing in a gradual process. This was a tricky balancing act in several respects: how far can form and function be reduced to still produce a vessel and yet finally to be something unmistakably individual? What must be retained in substance? What is merely a negligible embellishment? Kotan set to work with an old-fashioned sense of circumspection and with a sure touch. Whereas the process of the reduction of form is one of the great but ultimately obliterative gestures of Modernism, it is precisely thematic persistence, the bonding with the vessel, that prevent the avant-garde excess of dissolution. Nowhere in her work are the foundations of form, thematic boundaries or the rules of craftsmanship violated – on the contrary: it is precise-

Foto - Miquel Gonzalez



Ipek Kotan was born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1977, Kotan studied media arts at Emerson College (Boston, MA, USA), followed by foundation studies in art and design at Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, RI, USA) and received her master's in ceramics from Staffordshire University (Stoke-on-Trent, UK). In 2010 she established her own studio practice and since then has been working full time as a ceramic artist, exhibiting her works in Europe and the United States. Public collections representing her works include the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Netherlands), Dresden Museum of Decorative Arts (Germany), Landshut Museum (Germany) and the Presidential Art Collection (Turkey).

IPEK KOTAN

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ly the insistent concentration on theme and rule book that forms the path of purification, renouncing playfulness and sloppiness, banishing flourishes and distractions, isolating and smoothing the foot or a groove, ultimately to bring forth the perfect bowl – the pure vessel – the essence of what has been in careless use for thousands upon thousands of years – the idea of ceramics itself.

However captivating the notion of this ideal, platonic vessel may be, the ideal vessel fortunately does not become real. It would be the end of everything else. Whatever becomes real is not *the* vessel – it is *a* vessel. And it is followed by another, and then another, and so on ...: How else could it be? For all her rigour and stringency, Ipek Kotan creates variations in her minimal vessels, variants that repeatedly modulate the remaining surplus differences within a vessel that are still there after all the steps to minimize complexity, placing them in new relationships with each other, recomposing them. Beauty, after all, is a matter of relationships and their harmony. Even after all the previous steps towards sublimation, Kotan takes momentous decisions, laying down an approach that brooks no alternatives: whether a vessel is thrown in dark stoneware or pure white porcelain defines its appearance – if the height, the curve or the thickness of the wall of a vessel is changed, its relationship between inside and outside is altered – with the size of the vessel, the relationship of the body to these two elements also differs totally – and if the interior of the vessel is glazed, how it is glazed or if it is not glazed at all awaken different feelings. What counts are details, precise details, imponderable details – and the interminable interplay of nuances after the idiosyncratic rules of the ceramist's personal preferences and aversions.

Ipek Kotan has not reinvented the vessel, but with her own, unmistakable voice, she has answered the question, "What is a vessel?" We see and touch her vessels and perceive a special, idiosyncratic sound that speaks of a gentler culture than the dominant technical civilisation. We look forward to what is still to come, gladly awaiting that this personal voice will grow ...

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