

Paula Bastiaansen Porcelain



THE TAMING OF PORCELAIN

Paula Bastiaansen has been working with porcelain since her study at the academy. In those days she started her quest into the possibilities of manipulating this difficult material to her satisfaction. From the beginning she envisioned three dimensional, thin, transparent shapes.

At the time, in the late seventies, using porcelain as a ceramic material, was not particularly encouraged at the art academies in the Netherlands. The use of porcelain didn't attract the attention of ceramists until 1970. This was partly due to the fact that porcelain was difficult to get. The kilns for private use, especially the electric kilns, were not fitted for the special requirements of firing porcelain on a large scale.

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In ceramics there are moments at which the artist has to let go the process. The first moment is when drying the work. Each shape requires its own specific care during the drying process. Shapes are wrapped in this stage of the process: in wet newspapers or wet cloths, or in thin plastic, depending on the shape and material that has been used. If a shape survives this process, then the exciting stage of the first firing in the kiln starts, followed by glazing, working on the outside layer and a second firing in the kiln. In realizing the required shape it is difficult enough to master these three stages with the common ceramic material itself. To achieve the same result in porcelain is much more difficult.

Whereas it is standard with clay to account for shrinkage of 5 to 7 percent, when applying porcelain the loss of volume is even much greater. To get the thin, transparent porcelain Paula envisages, she has to take into consideration a greater loss of volume. No wonder that starting ceramists are asked whether they are sure they want to take on these difficulties, because mastering this material requires much practice and discipline.

Since 1980 Paula Bastiaansen has been trying to conquer the technical requirements of the material in such a way that the end result does not show the struggle at all and the viewer only has to marvel at the created shape.

In 1983 she graduated from the Koninklijke Academie voor Kunst en Vormgeving (Royal Academy for Art and Design) in 's-Hertogenbosch with a series of amphorae. Originally an amphora is a bulbous vase or jug with two handles used by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Looking for a floating, ethereal shape that could become detached from the earth, the amphora seemed to be the most suited shape at the time.

Instead of two handles we see wing-like protrusions on the sides. These are created by allowing for some space on closing the mould into which the shape is poured. However, there should not be too much space otherwise the casting slip will run out.

These protrusions reach a thinness of the material that was not possible in the casting technique in those days. The wing-like shapes emphasize the floating effect.

The porcelain used for the amphorae is Limoges.

After the academy she worked in the Europees Keramisch Werkcentrum (European Ceramic Work centre) for some time. At the time this was in Heusden, currently in 's-Hertogenbosch. In Heusden she came into contact with Bone China porcelain for the first time. This porcelain is whiter and more transparent than the Limoges porcelain. It could only be bought as a casting material at that time.

In 1983 she experimented a lot. She examined how the thin, transparent wing-like shapes, attached to the amphorae, could exist as independent shapes in space. All kinds of installations were created that gave the impression as if transparent little leaves were swirling down and ascending as wings. The results were stunning.

Back in her own studio the desire grew to recreate what happened in space in a more concentrated moment, in a shape. It became a long quest. In the beginning cylindrical shapes are created ending in thin strips of porcelain of a few millimetres. The shapes are made up of these strips.

Separated strips of Limoges porcelain are lying next to each other on a flat surface. She pours a thin coloured mass over them to be scraped off later. The colour remains behind in the cracks and at the same time connects the strips.

Then the slab of porcelain created in this way, is wrapped around a cylinder for a short period. It is removed again quickly preventing it from becoming stuck during the shrinking process. During the firing process the required movement is generated in the object. Transformations take place due to the fact that at a temperature of 1260 degrees Celsius the porcelain will soften for a moment.

The moment that the kiln, after a long process of cooling down, can be opened is very exciting. From experience Paula knows what can happen during this process, but in what direction it develops, will always be a surprise.

Later she returns to the amphora. The shape is now thrown with coloured porcelain. The 'wings' that were on the sides originally, are now on top of the object. Built up from thin strips of porcelain, a freakish organic composition has been created contrasting with the geometrical basis to which it is attached.

Around 1994 she starts to make works that will form the basis of the specific and authentic language of Paula Bastiaansen's creations. They are sculptures that, at first still clearly recognizable as a bowl or plate shape, in separate fragments initiate a dialogue with space. The first creations are simple bowl shapes that are broken open. The bowl has been built up from thin strips of porcelain in a dynamic pattern. A small, little steel construction keeps the shape upright. Here, Bone China porcelain is used for the first time. From this moment onwards this will be her material. As casting slip she had used it before, now she has discovered it as a solid bulk of clay.

Soon, free standing objects develop from these 'bowl shapes'. From a bowl-shape a whirling movement expanding freely into space is created.

Before she starts working with the porcelain a drawing of the geometrical pattern of the object is made. Slabs of porcelain, as thin as possible, are rolled. Small strips are cut from these slabs. These strips are then put on the drawing in such a way that they overlap by a millimetre. This constructed slab is picked up carefully and in the mould the sculpture gets its shape. The final object is composed, after firing, from different basic elements.

The objects are sometimes completely white, sometimes black and sometimes black and white. Colour is used strategically and well balanced. Her own, very specific style of working and sculptural language are developing steadily.

THE ETERNAL MOVEMENT

Over the years Paula Bastiaansen has been increasingly able to achieve what she envisaged from the start: creating objects in porcelain that are, by way of speaking, as thin as paper. It is an exciting process of development to continually find new limits of what is practically and technically possible as far as material and firing is concerned. If the porcelain is to acquire the transparency she requires, then the kiln has to be used optimally. It is a process of trial and error, of success and disappointment.

Anticipation when the kiln is opened after 24 hours and the result is disappointing.

Shapes can have collapsed, undesired deformations can occur. It is possible that due to all the tension that is generated during firing and cooling cracks will occur. Unanticipated effects in the skin can arise.

To master all the technicalities of the process at such a level that they do not interfere anymore, demands a special mentality. Without a strong discipline you will not succeed with porcelain. Perseverance, going on stoically, day after day, even if the result is disappointing, is necessary. In addition, an endless patience and a willingness to master the process via infinite retrials. A special sense of touch has to be developed, making it possible to incorporate all the technical knowledge.

It is no wonder, therefore, that many ceramists, after having worked with porcelain for a while, return to types of clay that are easier to work with.

After porcelain became available in the seventies, many ceramists started working with it. Many of them have stopped in the meantime. You only persevere if you really need this unruly, but refined material in the sculptures you ultimately would like to create.

Since 1997 she has completely mastered the finesses of working with this stubborn material. She has developed the 'sensitivity' needed to process the porcelain.

She can manipulate the material to her liking and, more and more, it becomes visible to us what she envisaged all the time.

The objects that are created are of a captivating beauty. They are bowl-shaped forms, but due to their three-dimensional plasticity she gets away from the bowl shape.

A whirling, thin, transparent porcelain layer is formed around a void centre. By the way this is done, she renders the void centre acceptable and that incomprehensible void in to something we can bond with. It seems as if we come into contact with a centuries-old, perpetual energy. Her objects, both fragile and strong, evoke visually the same feeling that we can get aurally when we put our ear to a conch shell to hear the perpetual sound of the waves.

At this stage of her work many people get associations with shells and coral shapes when they look at the sculptures, but they are lighter, more transparent and more absurd.

They are found in pure white porcelain, in black and in black-and-white patterns and in temptingly applied colours. There is a period in which she is inspired by the colours of the bark of the plane-tree. Volcanoes and hurricanes determine the shapes, colours and movement for a number of years. At a certain moment pictures of outer space and our galaxy can be found hanging in her studio. For a number of years she spends all summer in a beach cottage at the seaside near Flushing. The movements of the waves and the splendour of the colours of the rising and setting sun play an important part at that time. The works have magnificent shapes, not an illustration of their source of inspiration but spirited with it.

The fragility of the wafer-thin material is almost frightening and breathtaking. This is even emphasized by the fact that the shapes flow out to an almost disappearing end. Thin, pointed feelers are whirling out. Yet, together with this sense of transience there is a sense of power. This is due to the material. Porcelain is brittle, but does not perish. Porcelain shards do not disintegrate by the elements: weather and wind. Moulds and bacteria cannot affect it. A shard of porcelain withstands centuries. That power is perceptible.

However divers the shapes may be in the period between 1997 and 2006, they have one thing in common: they have a centre from which the shapes develop outwardly.

A centre from which the movement rises, to which sometimes she refers back. Although this happens in an increasingly unpredictable, more bizarre and overpowering way, this centre remains intact.

In early 2006 this centre suddenly disappears. In retrospect, this is a logical development, but when it took place it was quite a drastic change. Instead of a physically existing centre, the space itself has become the centre.

Strips of very thin porcelain whirl and take shape in a curling way around a void. They curl like waves breaking against a breakwater. Then this is followed by reaching for the sky. At the end of the strip a thin blade of porcelain remains that curls back again.

This last shape takes place during firing, but it is anticipated; this is a case of 'guided coincidence'. It remains a surprise, because it takes place behind the closed doors of the kiln.

These objects also come in white, black-and-white and with fragments of colour. The difference with earlier work is that the black-white total does not work in a graphic way anymore. The black falls away against the space, the black and white interplay emphasizes the three-dimensional effect. The colour fragments, royal blue, azure, celadon, turquoise, cobalt blue, chartreuse green, each go their own way.

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They do not follow the composition anymore, they go right through it.

The shape of these objects is difficult to describe. The eye cannot grasp them anymore.

Where do you start looking when there is no centre anywhere, when there is no front or back, no left or right?

The only thing that is clear, is that they touch the ground; even though you experience a somewhat disorienting perception, sooner a 'fata-morgana'-feeling, than the feeling that they are really connected to the earth by gravity. The eye keeps wandering around, never stops looking. We are looking at a purely dynamic shape. We see concentric whirls without a beginning and an ending, without a centre-point. There is not one viewpoint from which you can best look at the object. All 360 degrees show a completely new reality.

These objects are part of an eternal movement. We are looking at a perpetual mobile.