

POETRY AND GRAMMAR: THE WORK OF MARTIN BODILSEN KALDAHL.

By Alison Britton

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Martin Kaldahl is very good with words but his titles, such as ‘Sculptural Vessel 1996’ are understated. He says that he has tried to write titles but can’t find words that keep the meanings open enough – and the wrong words close down possibilities.

Words are not allowed to seduce the eye from the bald encounter with form. His current forms are rigorous and precise, making geometric sorties into contained and suggested space. Dense dry surfaces have an almost metallic ring of high vitreosity, sharply defined edges, clean planes that are monochrome or striped with cool unwavering bands. It is work that relishes contrast, and makes a play between the two and three-dimensional.

But for Martin words do flow, in more than one language, in enthusiastic discourse about all kinds of art and design. Since 1990 he has been teaching, first at the Vestbirk Folk High School, then the Academy of Fine Art in Aarhus, and now at the Danmarks Designskole in Copenhagen. He has been involved as a curator and consultant at the Grimmerhus Museum since its early days. Last year this museum showed the extensive exhibition of the work of thirty one artists in ‘British Ceramics.2000.dk’ which Kaldahl was proactive in setting up and also co-curated. He contributed an essay and much of the translation for the catalogue. (1)

This year he is the international part of the jury for the prestigious UK applied arts award the Jerwood Prize, to be given this autumn for ceramics.

Beyond the evolving story of his own work with expressive abstract form and the container, he has in the past few years put his energies into production design as well. His last exhibition at Galleri Nørby in 1997 included his own faience prototypes for industry. Royal Copenhagen picked some out but as yet have not produced them, and he has been engaged in a subsequent project with them.

(1) Harrod, T.Kaldahl, M. Seisbøll, L.British Ceramics.2000.dk Published in collaboration with Keramikmuseet Grimmerhus. Rhodos 2000.

Also, in 1997 he had a collaborative show, which toured to Milan, called 'Black Space' with Hans Thyge Raunkjaer, the industrial designer. Kaldahl's sensual forms for tableware in stoneware and glass were seen alongside furniture prototypes in a suspended black tent. 'It is very obvious and natural for me to work in both directions. I find the difference in processes inspiring . . . '(2)

There is such a bank of good forms and powerful geometry in the studio tradition of Danish ceramics, as well as the industrial framework of a utopian modernist outlook in which factory and studio have fruitfully interconnected. It is undoubtedly a confident and sustaining culture to have grown up in as a potter in the second half of the 20th century.

But Martin Kaldahl, much as he has been fed by his ceramic forbears and colleagues, has always had an eye out for what is going on elsewhere. Since he reestablished himself as a ceramist in Denmark in the early nineties he has travelled a good deal and exhibited his work in Amsterdam, St Petersburg, Milan, Munich, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, and in the newest London gallery, Barrett Marsden.

Clearly he is interested in the response he gets in different countries. People in Denmark, he has felt, are looking for fired earth rather than form. The great ladies of 20th century Danish studio pottery, Gertrud Vasegaard (born 1913) and Gutte Eriksen (born 1918), set a tone that was profoundly domestic and full of the essences of that movement, with its anglo-oriental basis of ideas about the pot's proper language.

Danishness, in ceramic terms, was probably something that Kaldahl at first wanted to get away from, he felt his work was better received in England. More recently he has been recognising the positive strengths of the context of Danish ceramics. In my view his choice of colours shows an emphatic Danish sensibility – olive, mustard yellow, lots of black and white and good strong contrasts.

(2) From a letter to author Feb 17 1999

Martin's outgoing sensibility is rooted in his early attitudes to learning about ceramics and its wide-ranging culture in the world. An adventurous internationalism drew him to Britain as a young man in his twenties. As the exception - the only arty child from a large family - he had liked his English teacher in high school, he liked the English music scene of the time, he was interested in the residue of the Leach tradition, and thought that the level of craftsmanship here must be high. He worked for six months in Jane Hamlyn's salt-glaze pottery as a thrower, and learned a lot.

He also worked for a while in potteries in the south of France and, some years later, with a group of fellow Danish potters was in the habit of selling production work in craft fairs in Switzerland and Norway on a regular basis. His batch production of the usual things - mugs, bowls and teapots - were made in decorated earthenware, and he was running a viable business with the twice-yearly focus of the foreign sales.

Throughout the years of working as a 'proper potter' it was clear to him that form was the part that interested him most, and eventually the joy of repetition and self-sufficiency was wearing thin.

In 1988, at the age of 34, he took up a place at the Royal College of Art in London, which is where I, as a part-time tutor in the Ceramics and Glass department, met him first.

In the UK it was still an expansive and colourful time for reforming the definitions of ceramics, from the 1970's and on into the 80's. Reference to this work as 'The New Ceramics' was endorsed with the publication of a book of that title by Peter Dormer, our dominant critic, in 1986 by the most prolific of Britain's art publishers (3).

The Crafts Council, with the British Council, was energetically sending exhibitions of such 'new' ceramic work abroad. Crafts Magazine had been edited by Martina Margetts from 1979 - 1987, who commissioned challenging authors and raised the level of argument and criticism, and a nascent sense of theory. The salerooms such as Christie's and Sotheby's had started to see the value of contemporary work and prices at auctions were rising, which had an effect also on galleries.

(3) Dormer, P. The New Ceramics. Thames and Hudson. London 1986

Martin was part of a very strong year group at the RCA which included Lawson Oyekan and Susan Halls, and another Dane called Marie Bønløkke Pedersen. Being at the college changed him for good; straightaway he stopped throwing and started tackling a much larger scale, making handbuilt sculptural forms to occupy architectural space.

These new pieces were less obviously ‘ceramic’ in their finish than his former work. It was not easy to launch himself into new territory, and the freedom to make any kind of form. ‘...I made endless series of glaze tests at the same time as I found it increasingly hard to apply them to my pieces. . . . I picked on the ornament in a rather modernistic way : i.e. integrating it completely into the form itself, making all my finishes, edges and rims into the ornament itself.’(4)

In this retrospective description he aptly expresses the mood of the moment for the body of artists, mainly but not only in ceramics, who had been investigating the vessel. Martin made excellent use of his time on the MA course and engaged with characteristic energy, seriousness, and good humour, in interaction with the student group.

‘During my first year at the RCA (1988-89) I spent quite some time investigating how I could influence form through ‘big patterns’ in all sorts of ways’(5). He researched war-time camouflage techniques for battleships at the Imperial War Museum in London.

Winning the Eduardo Paolozzi travel scholarship in 1989 took him to Africa, where he photographed adobe (unfired earth) architecture in Mali – which could be seen as large scale ornamented clay forms in an exterior space. As a student he ardently wanted to put great things in front of the public in spacious interiors. Only later he came to realise that artifacts don’t always have to be big to make an impact in architectural space. And ultimately the only pattern he found he wanted to use was the stripe, the quintessential delineator of form and contour, and the dazzler of surface.

(4) Artist’s statement 1999

(5) Letter to author, March 2001

One of the large pieces made at the RCA is a powerful twisting vessel form (image 9005) with a dark interior and a dry stony surface. It has a sheer flat regular edge that is slanted, and a patina rather than a pattern on its rippling surface. From a British perspective, I would say that these early works occupy a similar territory to Gordon Baldwin's. Perhaps the culmination of these developments in the large scale anthropomorphic forms, with a more serene and column-like stature, was in 1994 in a series of dark graceful glazed pieces around two metres high that were shown at the Charlottenborg Efterårsudstilling in Copenhagen and later exhibited at the Grimmerhus Museum.

If there are two book titles that adhere themselves to my thoughts about Martin's work - just for their words really - they are 'The Poetics of Space'(6), by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and much treasured by an abstract sector of the contemporary ceramics world; and then a hundred years earlier 'The Grammar of Ornament' (7) by Owen Jones. This was a kind of National Curriculum which listed do's and don'ts for successful design. Jones' Eighth Proposition states that 'All ornament should be based on geometrical construction'.

It always appears, in looking at Kaldahl pieces, that the way their surfaces are painted has been rigorously considered, pared down, rules justified, and then precisely executed; after a thorough analysis of the impact of the forms. Poetry and grammar, the one mysterious, metaphorical, and multi-layered; the other positing a workable structure and an understanding of constituent parts, are well paired as perceptual tools in looking at Martin Kaldahl pots.

Definitions of inside and outside remain very important as his work progresses, but in general, Kaldahl's formal route since the mid-nineties has been away from the organic, suggestive human shapes, towards a deeper exploration of geometric shape and the plainer subject of the pot or vessel.

(6) Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*. 1958. Trans. The Orion Press, Inc. 1964.

(7) Jones, O. *The Grammar of Ornament*. London 1856. Reprint Studio Editions, London 1986.

‘What do they (pots) visually consist of? That’s the theme. No more – no less’.⁽⁸⁾

The scale of his pieces has diminished but not their intensity. Perhaps his manipulation of ‘ordinary’ forms and references has become more subtle.

‘The vessel is a wonderful communicator. It plays a part in the material culture that is familiar to everyone. It is a powerful metaphor. The objectified void. . . .Form as meaning. And at the same time it is just a pot, a dish, a jug, a whatever. A truly open object.’⁽⁸⁾

In 1995 he made an exceptional black and white striped piece. (image 9501) The stripes seem to lift it from a prosaic connection with the table; it is an almost hovering, slipping towards double, pot form. He talks about liking ‘The signalling kind of stripes, not the soft and poetic ones.’ ⁽⁹⁾

Striping is a pure and basic kind of ornamentation, clothing the pot. Stripes disguise animals, contour the landscape, are woven into textile, or built into the marble walls of cathedrals. They define form and camouflage it, accentuating relief.

The repeated line is a fundamental decorative urge and rhythm, and done in Kaldahl’s case with exquisite precision. ‘For me, using the stripes is an attempt to match the form to an otherness – an ornament - aggressive and edgy, which is in a particular conflict with the soft and natural form or maybe even its surface texture. It creates a tension. It both frames and contradicts the form.’⁽⁹⁾

In 1996, in a joint exhibition in Paris with Karen Bennicke - whom he regards as his closest Danish fellow traveller for preoccupations with clay form - he experimented with other kinds of textured surfaces as ornament. One striking piece (image 9604) has a faintly striped interior, like throwing rings, and a fiercely blistered outer surface.

In 1997 a series of pieces explored doubleness, the poise of disparate parts. One that appeals strongly to me is one of the most pared down, in which two white conical forms are twinned, but they are not the same. One rests on its point while the other has a truncated flat base. The surface is sandblasted, chalky and dry. (image 9704)

(8) Artist’s statement in La Revue de la Céramique et du Verre no. 117, 2001

(9) Letter to author, March 2001

The ways in which pots contact, or may seem to hover over, flat surfaces goes on being an interest for Martin . (image 9717) In recent years forms are simplifying and condensing – often now he works with the circle as plan, which was the focus of his last show at Udstillingssted for Ny Keramik in Copenhagen in 1999, all shown on circular plinths. The circle is a perfect form but there may be some displacement or jolting going on, as in ‘Vessel’ 1998 (image 9803), or circles in rippling ‘concentric corridors’ as in (image 9807). The ellipse form is also used as representing a view of the circle.

Doubleness may mean one vessel hovering inside another, a striped lining of the inner pot pushing outwards contained in a severe black cauldron. (image 0001.)

Some very recent tall cylindrical pieces include a new kind of ornamental bump, like a lopped branch on a tree trunk, or a flat disc pressing through the skin from the interior. The striped versions of these forms, like the radiant black and white piece from Kaldahl’s most recent show in Paris, (colour snap no 1, image 0101), use these ‘growths’ frugally with greater impact. ‘I have taken the lumps a bit further in this series, trying to create more clearly the sense of new planes around the vessel.’(10)

Gesturing towards an invisible ‘other’ structure beyond the pot, Martin has refined his formal language to supreme articulacy with an increasingly narrow and concentrated vocabulary. For over a decade he has been clearing his understanding of an aesthetic manipulation of plain shapes, ambiguous surfaces, contrast, essence. The pot as a minimal metaphorical container with an inside and an outside conjoined at the crucial edge.

Kaldahl’s pots confront ideas of the handmade with an almost industrial blunt perfection, but they are not without mystery.