

‘Conversation with Friends’

An installation work in ceramic by Tina Vlassopulos

Introduction

Or, ‘What is This We See?’

The viewer is faced with an arrangement of 14 vessel shapes made of clay, each composed of multiple parts, arranged as in a table setting. This is a departure for Tina Vlassopulos who is known for her one-off hand-built burnished ceramics in soft colours, imploring silence and always exuding quiet elegance. The work is entitled ‘Conversation with Friends’, and is, by sharp contrast, an unambiguous encouragement to the viewer to ‘listen in’ on a dinner party where there is, very likely, the noise of crockery and cutlery, chatter, and laughter.

And with this, an open invitation to the viewer to wonder whom these objects represent, how they represent these people, and what the relationship between them is. The clues are cryptic and subtle.

We also feel we are intruding, as if we’ve walked through the wrong door, and we become aware of our own bodies suddenly.

There are several precedents in the world of ceramics employing the idea of table-settings, the most famous and most complex among which is ‘The Dinner Party’, by Judy Chicago, a feminist socio-political howl at the world and at patriarchy in ceramic and textile. Made in 1974-1979, and permanently housed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler

Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, it is a large ceremonial banquet arranged on a triangular dinner table comprised of 39 place-settings, each of which is appropriate to, and symbolic of, the individual woman in history being honoured.

Tina Vlassopulos' 'Conversation with Friends', on the other hand, is a more intimate and personal, work that invites an utterly different kind of viewership. Here we see arrangements of objects at the centre of each of which is the clay pot. They are gentle and subdued in colour, smooth of surface, of a particular size, with rims that undulate and 'travel' in a way that is reminiscent of the ceramics of the Art Nouveau/Jugendstil. Some shapes are closed.

Perhaps these constructions are phenomenological abstractions of Tina's friends and their individual psychologies/personalities. Or equivalents of feelings that Tina has *about* these friends, and the feelings they have about each other? At the time of writing we do not know who these people are. In the exhibition, however, they will have names, and one character will have the name 'M'.

A way at looking at these objects is to see them as portraits with 'attributes' in the sense that saints and wealthy donors were painted with *Attributes* in the religious and other works of the Renaissance. Think St Catherine and her wheel, think St Ambrose and the bees, and think St Benedict and the broken cup. Perhaps these 'attributes' Vlassopulos offers us are an entry into who these people are and what they might be saying to each other.

This exhibition

‘Conversation with Friends’ was made for ‘Collect Open 2019’ at the Saatchi Gallery. It is an installation work consisting of, in Tina Vlassopoulos’ words, ‘fourteen abstracted portraits of friends, representing their character, disposition, and psyche in a subjective and symbolic way’. She also went on to say that ‘this work was made in defiance of the cacophony of the digital age, challenging the prevalence of one-way communication’. And that it was ‘a celebration of friendship and the spirit of the individual’ and ‘thoughts on dialogue and the importance of conversation.’

About Tina Vlassopoulos and how she works

Tina was born and raised in London, where she still lives. She studied at the Bristol Polytechnic, 1974 to 1977, where her tutors were Gillian Lowndes, Walter Keeler, Robin Welch, Gordon Baldwin, and Mo Jupp. Their Head of Department was George Rainer, for whom she has much praise. When pressed further about that period, which some consider heralded a golden age, she continued: ‘We were moving away from functional ceramics at the time. In fact I think it was one of the few courses called ‘Ceramics’ – and I remember that hardly anyone knew what the word meant in those days! Symbolism was a big thing and I think that stuck with me’.

Tina’s relationship with clay is unusual. She cannot recall that transformative moment so often felt by makers when they first touched clay, and her devotion is more firmly directed at the idea and the end result rather than the material and its means. Her eye and heart are captured by art exhibitions, galleries, opera, ballet,

contemporary dance, and classical music. She continues: 'I have pared my working methods down to burnishing stoneware clay so that I can concentrate on the ideas and how to achieve them without having to worry about the technique'.

What about her main challenges? 'I have always found clay to be a challenging material. I'm not a 'natural' potter but I do like the unique flexibility of the material. My greatest challenge is coming up with new ideas. Sometimes it is very difficult.

She has just recently moved her studio back home, and works most days. Her materials are mainly stoneware clays, which, as the pieces harden and dry, are burnished - a time-consuming process. About this, she says: 'while my primary concern is the concept behind a piece, the aesthetics of the form and the tactile qualities of the burnished clay are crucial. The gentle pressure marks created by the burnishing tools and the tonal variations that result gives the finished piece depth – I find it a pleasing and sensual surface'.

Discussion

Many ceramicists, as well as many who deem themselves 'potters' more specifically, have resorted to the idea of 'installation' in their desire to achieve scale, discursiveness, and to be considered serious artists by galleries and collectors. Some have presented us with multiples of (very) similar pots arranged in rows on table-tops and plinths, along building ledges, on mantle-pieces, on antiques, in cabinets, and in glass or Perspex boxes, calling these works vitrines. Where the similar is done in relation to a specific room or place or big house, this action has

been referred to as an 'intervention'. Mostly, however, these groups of ceramic pieces, known as installations, float entirely free of their context, or any context, most of all social or political, beached on plinths in galleries. Sometimes these works are accompanied by texts, including poems, or given 'meaningful' titles. It is rare that these ceramic works appear aware of the social and political intentions and *history* of Installation Art and its undoubted source in early days of Minimalism, site specificity, journalism, and identity art.

This is not what Tina Vlassopulos has done. What we see is a group of complex and varied pieces, each a portrait of someone with his or her own internal life, and each relating to each other and to the gathered group. And to Tina. Each of the 'portraits', and the gathered pieces as a whole, invite us to apply our own narratives to what is happening before us. And it is indeed an active and engaging scene open to our individual selves. We fill in the gaps, finish the thoughts, and complete the sentences. And we are invited to sit down.

Tina is known for her simple, elegant, pale vessels and vesicular shapes whose right to their place in the world resided entirely in conventional concepts of beauty which philosophers like Edmund Burke tried to define as early as the first decades of the 19th Century (he had very particular things to say about size, colour, proportions, and surface). In this she succeeded. She succeeded in limiting her practice to the vessel and its beauty unambiguously. As she has said above, however: 'Although I'm drawn to the vessel shape, it is the symbolism of the vessel that intrigues me most, rather than its function.' It is this, arguably, that links her previous work, without argument, to this installation, 'Conversation with Friends'.

And when asked how she knows when a pot is successful - and the same can be asked of this work - her answer is: 'It's very subjective but sometimes all the elements come together: form, composition, balance, movement, proportions and harmony. It has to sing and I try to aim for a 3D poem.'

She found early support for this endeavour, the pursuit of beauty and its transformative properties, in the words of Emmanuel Cooper about her work: *Within studio ceramic convention, objects defined as vessels are usually seen to have a distant, if sometimes faint, relationship to use. Yet, however loose this connection, it is a vital link to the broadly perceived but significant association of clay with its humanist history. Contemporary vessel makers who have appropriated territory for their own purposes while retaining references to the container, may make work that takes on more metaphorical or symbolic qualities – the vessel as signifier, container of meaning and of ideas. Such work occupies territory between the pot and the object, asserting its independence and authority with expressive forms that have freed themselves from any explicit function, but which engage the eye and the head through material, idea and shape. Tina Vlassopoulos's carefully hand built forms are containers in a literal sense but the rococo lines and the sumptuous curves defy any simple definition in terms of use but take us into new worlds in which meaning is fluid and open.* ('Contemporary Ceramics', by Emmanuel Cooper. Thames and Hudson, 2009, p59)

It is possible to argue that Tina has indeed achieved what Emmanuel Cooper writes about, but has now, in 'Conversation with Friends' expanded her practice to achieve something that is social and interesting, and indeed still poetic.

Andre Hess

Dr Andre Hess is a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association and has degrees in Art History, Veterinary Medicine, and Public Health. He is a collector of ceramics and fine art, and is a terrier man.

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Some exhibitions in which Tina Vlassopulos has participated

2002 Selected member of the Crafts Council

1986 Selected member of the Craft Potters Association

1977 B.A. (Hons) Ceramics, Bristol Polytechnic

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2007 Structure and Form, Gallery K, London

2006 James Graham & Sons, New York, USA

2004 Hart Gallery, London

2002 Hart Gallery, London

2001 Contemporary Ceramics, London

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018 Bristol at Brixton, San Mei Gallery, London

2017 Sexy ceramics, Keramiekmuseum Pricessehof, Netherlands

- 2016 Shortlisted for 24ème Biennale Internationale de Vallauris, France
- 2014 Vessels: The Spirit of Modern British Ceramics, Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan
- Maureen Michaelson, Gallery, At Home, London
- 2012 Drawing the Empty Space, XXIIInd International Biennial of Vallauris
- 2011 Ceramics Now, Milton Gallery, London
- 2010 24 British Potters, Goldmark Gallery, Uppingham, Rutland, UK
- Ceramic Art London
- 2009 The 5th World Ceramic Biennale 2009, Korea International Competition
- Without Colour, The Craft Centre and Design Gallery, Leeds
- Ceramic Art London
- 2008 Short-listed for the 26th Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award, Australia
- Sculptural Ceramics, St Joseph Gallery, Leeuwarden, Netherlands
- Ceramic Art London
- 2007 The Pot, the Vessel and the Object, touring exhibition, Aberystwyth Art Centre, Wales
- Ceramic Art London
- 2006 Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool
- Gaffer Studio Glass, Hong Kong
- Uber Gallery, Australia
- International Biennial of Contemporary Ceramics, Vallauris, France
- Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramic Award, Shepparton Art Gallery, Australia

AWARDS

2009 Honourable Mention, 5th World Ceramic Biennale, Korea International Competition

2006 Award of Merit, Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramic Award, La Trobe University

2002 Soing Award, The International Festival of Postmodern Ceramics, The City Museum of Varazdin, Croatia

1992 Hellenic Foundation Arts Award

1990 Texas Instruments Arts Award

COLLECTIONS

Museu de Ceramica de L'Alcora, Spain

Keramikmuseum Princessehof, Netherlands

Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan

Shipley Arts Gallery, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear Museums, UK

Texas Instruments Arts Collection

Collection of Contemporary Ceramics, Varazdin, Croatia

La Trobe University Collection, Australia

Magnelli Museum, Vallauris, France

WOCEF, Korea

Website

<http://www.tinavlassopoulos.com/>