

Exhibition review by Kate Wilson

The Expressive Vessel

Mirka Golden-Hann

Curated by Mirka Golden-Hann

Bath Spa University

Corsham Court

Wiltshire

SN13 0BZ

26th September-24th October 2012

Mirka Golden-Hann and myself briefly shared a studio during our time as MA students at Bath Spa University. Subsequently I have been very interested in her work, not only because of her development of colour with stoneware and salt glazes, but also in the way she offers her work for consideration. This is as much an appreciation of Golden-Hann's pottery as it is a review of her exhibition.

The body of work sets out to explore my personal concerns with colour and the ceramic vessel, and the potential for extending boundaries beyond utility and towards the metaphorical, the narrative, and the countertransferral.
(Exhibition notes)

Corsham Court's Skittle Alley is a long, overly narrow corridor with barely a shaft of natural light. Housed in the bowels of the 400 year-old stately Methuen family seat, it presents a challenging space for exhibiting any kind of work, although flagstone floors, white walls and sympathetic lighting do their best to create some semblance of a gallery space. It is here that the potter Mirka Golden-Hann has temporarily occupied this ancient cellar with an intriguing exhibition *The Expressive Vessel*.

On arrival the audience is met with an abundance of colour: a range of blues, bright copper reds and soft celadons, canary yellow, pinks, rich glossy browns and a stunningly speckled black, reminiscent of a star studded night sky, fill the space from one end of the gallery to the other. The use of such bold bright colours with a high fired clay body challenges perceptions of traditional ceramics and has become synonymous with Golden-Hann's work, dictating form and display. Apart from a set of tall, hollow tubes, every

other object in the exhibition is a thrown bowl (this is a space brimming with bowls), including the wall mounted 'layered' vessels and a fascinating animated film-a collaborative piece exploring the relationship between music and colour.

This is not a stroll around and gaze at type of show, there is an expectation of interaction: for two of the works there are headphones to listen to music and for a further three one is required to select, rearrange or write a response, the consequence being that many of the pieces are constantly in flux, there is no right or wrong way to display, just shifting thoughts and ideas where the artist has relinquished responsibility. Its evidence gathering evokes a psychology laboratory collecting data for analysis but it soon becomes apparent that another overriding feature of Golden-Hann's show is the very personal and intimate nature of each component; colour becomes visceral and the vessel form intensely female, this is a life story narrated via the humble bowl and demands more than a cursory glance.

The focus on the bowl form implies a level of competence, an assuredness of material and process and a heart of a self-declared potter. Golden-Hann arrived in the UK from The Czech Republic in 1993, aged 19, graduating from Harrow with a BA (Hons) in Ceramics in 1999. After setting up her own studio and building a salt glaze kiln, her fascination for colour and salt glaze formed the basis for her MA research at Bath Spa University, completed in 2009.

There is a sense of freshness about Golden-Hann's approach; her work is imbued with craft values in the tireless search for the right colour in her glaze research and use of the thrown bowl form to contain it, and to some extent in the way her work is 'offered' in the tradition of a hands on craft fair. It is no coincidence that some of the bowls are a size to fit neatly into a cupped hand; the connection of fired clay on skin is primeval. However, by shifting the encounter into a gallery context the sense of this connection is perhaps heightened.

I am fascinated to the point of perfection by the processes involved in working with clay. Mastering the material and the technology is very important to me. Eventually there comes the point when as a maker one reaches a level of expertise

where one can use the accumulated knowledge to express ideas without the burden of having to think about process. In order to be able to work on the ideas selected for this exhibition I had to have reached a certain point of skill and knowledge that I felt was important to reflect in the execution of the pieces.

I believe that it is vital to continue displaying ceramics in unfamiliar ways in order to keep the visual art audience interested in a discipline that is very heavily set within its historical context. This is also why I chose to allow members of the public to touch and interact with my work. I wish to compromise the traditional perception of functional hand-made objects, rather than it being the other way around. For example I sell my 'palm bowls' as a part of my 'bread and butter' body of work singularly. However when 99 of them appear as an installation and the audience is encouraged to interact with them.
(Mirka Golden-Hann).



Enquiry 99
Artist's own image

Enquiry 99 consists of 99 thrown bowls glazed in 33 different glazes. At the start of the exhibition the bowls were uniformly arranged on a long low plinth in 3 rows, thus allowing the audience to view from above; people are invited to choose a favourite colour and then place it on a set of adjacent shelves. Although intended as a data collecting activity, ascertaining the popularity of certain coloured glazes, the more interesting consequence is the constantly changing formation of bowls shifting from plinth to shelf

and back again-an extempore arrangement that only exists as long as it takes the next person to interact with it.

This seeming choreography is echoed in the animated film *Back on the Overgrown Path*, fleeting images of varying arrangements of bowls ‘dance’ to Janacek’s *The Tawny Owl Has Not Flown Away Yet*. Golden-Hann describes these vessels as *nesting bowls* and in the process of stacking them she began to visualise them as chords. Between the ages of 6 and 18 she had been impelled to play the piano-the Janacek was a piece she remembers practicing as a 15 year old. It is not such a leap of faith to assume that, although inflicted, the process of becoming an accomplished pianist must have had some bearing on her desire to make objects to a high level of skill. Her attitude to music appears pragmatic and matter of fact, whereas her love of colour displays a true passion. Creativity in her childhood was music and singing which was subsumed by art training on her arrival to the UK as a young adult.

Another music related work is the installation of tall ceramic hollow tube forms entitled *The Memory of Sound*. This is a time specific piece beginning at the opening of the exhibition and continuing until its close. Each of the biscuit fired tubes stands vertically, one end submerged in its own coloured liquid and over a period of time the tubes absorb the pigment. In the process Golden-Hann challenges the concept of how liquids are ‘contained’, conventional containment representing the conscious and ‘the interstitial...representing the unconscious. With time particular memories may fade but affect dispositions remain’. (Exhibition notes)



The Memory of Sound

Photo: Kate Wilson

To accompany the tubes is a further sensory stimulus provided by headphones playing the chromatic scale of C on the piano (another childhood reference)-13 notes for 13 tubes and actually quite difficult to simultaneously digest. The slow pace of the notes being played becomes a distraction from contemplating the results of the absorption of pigment. (Intriguingly towards the end of the exhibition mould has appeared on a few of the tubes).

This experimental piece is clearly metaphorical but somehow detached from the experiential of the more interactive work in the exhibition.

Interactive Colour consists of 36 small bowls contained within the confines of a shallow box. Produced as an autobiographical piece in 2010, each bowl represents a year of Golden-Hann's life, each colour having symbolic meaning for her. Again members of the audience are invited to rearrange the bowls within the confines of the frame in an attempt to explore individual approaches to colour, how it is perceived and how it is 'used'.

Colour is intimate: different colours have different meanings for us-some fixed to memories or experiences, some conditioned culturally, some perhaps innate.
(Exhibition notes)

Colour and Memory is an installation of seven bowls placed in a row: each interior is glazed in a specific colour representing particular memories of the maker. Adjacent to

each bowl is a matching coloured pencil and the wall behind a space for the audience to write or draw a response. Words, phrases, dates and randomly, a few written bars of music, appear somewhat timidly scribbled on the sea of white as if exposing a secret. This is not purely an invitation by the maker to share a memory, but is the ‘sensory trigger’, evoking personal responses.

This may consist of examples of synaesthesia, or of memories of a specific item or occasion, or of something more elusive.

(Exhibition notes)



Colour and Memory

Photo: Kate Wilson

There are also a series of framed wall mounted stacks of bowls entitled *Target Practice*-a literal description of the manifesting bands of colour emanating from vessels in diminishing sizes, a more theoretical exploration of the juxtaposition of colour.

However, despite the profusion of colour, sitting quietly to one side are three purely contemplative arrangements of notably more muted toned vessels.

Single Mother comprises of a large, tall bowl with a pale celadon glazed interior alongside two smaller vessels, one glazed a deep blue on the inside and the other a very dark green. The title is self-explanatory and a situation the maker has found herself in. The vessel form comes into its own here-impossible not to anthropomorphise when given such a title, but its simple arrangement is tender and poignant.

Elizabeth Williams was inspired by a headstone of a 17 year-old woman, who died in childbirth in 1622, which can be found in Gloucester Cathedral. Consisting of two bowls, the larger is thrown in buff-coloured stoneware, the interior glazed with a speckled satin

black and the exterior lightly burnished with a thin band of white slip at the rim. Her baby is symbolised as a small porcelain vessel with a celadon interior; the contrast between the two clay bodies, their scale and glaze, becomes a narrative of death and ‘unrealised’ new life (the baby is buried alongside the mother).



Elizabeth Williams

Photo: Kate Wilson

Indian Twin consists of two almost identical vessels, both of which have the same two glazes applied, but differently. Whilst cooling after the glaze firing a small crack appeared in one of the vessels-these objects represent a deep longstanding relationship between two women who are both dealing with hardships-the crack could represent either one of them.

The bowl form has been exploited almost beyond exhaustion in Golden-Hann’s exhibition but it has been the ideal vehicle for the expression of colour and emotion individually contained within each vessel. Not only a practical solution for varying arrangements and colour analysis in the interactive work but also for the three contemplative pieces. As the maker states herself,

Because of the subject matter these (pieces) are feminist statements and the vessel form of the bowl along with its iconic and metaphorical connotations is the perfect matrix for these studies.
(Mirka Golden-Hann)

Amidst such a hive of interactivity the fact could easily be overlooked that each vessel represents hours, days if not weeks of painstaking research in the quest for a specific colour. The results are at times breathtaking, the depth and richness of colour, the mirror surface of a glossy glaze, the infinite array of blues and the achievement of oranges and yellows must not be ignored. But the overriding theme of *The Expressive Vessel* seems to be the searching for or an affirmation of identity, through physical relationships with family and friends or more abstract notions of memory and association.

For a long time I felt affirmed as a maker with a British identity. Paradoxically, the longer I live here the stronger the affiliation I feel for many aspects of my culture of origin. I think that my colour installations have a strong relevance to Czech folklore and to the way that I saw colour being used during my childhood. Whilst I do not often question my cultural identity as an artist, I do think that many of my current pieces are introspective studies. This work is created with a dual-cultural mindset in which the need to challenge paradigms is definitely the Czech trait and the skill and knowledge coming from my British experience.
(Mirka Golden-Hann)

Although Golden-Hann's forms reflect an awareness 'of the weight of traditions and historical contexts' within ceramics, she is also conscious that such ties can hold one back. *The Expressive Vessel* seeks to push boundaries and explore new ways to interpret those traditions and historical contexts, producing innovative ideas without compromising her craft as a potter.

Mirka Golden-Hann is the Artist in Residence at Salisbury Arts Centre.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13VCRtGB0VM>