

THE JOY OF MAKING OBJECTS

Dialogue between JeanBaptiste Bernadet and Eric Croes

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet : Ceramic, unlike lots of other mediums with which the hand produces an instantaneous result, or very nearly, is a very long process, with several crucial technical stages (drying, biscuit firing, second firing of the enamel, and so on) which are capable of profoundly modifying or even completely ruining all your hard work. Can you talk to me about that and, if it's the case, how do you manage to avoid accidents? How do you manage to protect yourself from them or, failing that, incorporate them?

Eric Croes : The more clay sculptures I make, the less I break. I can anticipate accidents and make the pieces in such a way that I avoid them. Afterwards, some parts of a sculpture can always explode (because of an air pocket or because they haven't dried out sufficiently), in which case, I make the broken piece again and re-glue it to the enamel ready for the second firing at a high temperature which will seal the two pieces. I keep all the pieces of broken sculptures and place them in a large bowl. Then I pour enamel over them so that, after firing, it becomes a new sculpture. I call these pieces "Garbage", and there is one in every exhibition.

J-B.B : More than sculpture in the strict sense of the term (let's say, the direct and irreversible carving of a block of marble or a block of wood) where the mark of the tool is visible and is a direct extension of the brain by the hand, a little like drawing, ceramic is rather the product of modelling, which in my opinion means it has more in common with painting (composing, adding, taking away, removing, etc.). In your case, even, and you spoke to me about the votive hands dedicated to Sabazios (hands which are bearing snakes, fir cones, and other divinities), and the Palissy plates which, like still lifes, are an accumulation of objects, we can also speak of assemblage. So I suppose my question is the following: how do you conceive ceramic in relation to other mediums? Is it specific, and in what way?

E.C : I think I put ceramic together like a drawing for the modelling and like painting during the enamelling without the borders between all the techniques being particularly clear in my head. The work begins with preparatory drawings. Then, to create a sculpture, I define a large base upon which other objects will be grafted. This process could also be compared to collage. I never know what the final piece is going to look like because when I start gluing other parts I try to ensure that all the parts touch or are intertwined. I want a new story to be told and I want there to be an interaction between the elements. I stop once I feel like the sculpture has achieved a balance and, for the moment, this balance resides in the fact that the piece is almost entirely covered in other patterns. That's why I referred to Palissy plates or votive hands.

J-B.B : And so, do you mean that the form is largely determined by the technique, and that it is particular to ceramic because of the large number of constraints? You have to balance the weight, ensure there is a means of grabbing hold of the piece, etc. I can see that you get better from day to day because, little by little, you are managing to free yourself from these constraints or, at the very least, render them imperceptible... by, for example, placing a piece which looks "heavy" on top of another which looks "light"... What are the next boundaries that you want to push back?

E.C : In my case, yes, I'm dependent on the technique and the size of the oven (my works are often made of several assembled pieces). It is easier to make ceramic vases than sculptures. What I like about ceramic, aside from the deep colours, is that it enables me to give free rein to my hands and let go. I would like to make totem poles that are higher and higher and increasingly intricate pieces. When I see stools made of Chinese porcelain, I get the impression that ceramic can take a lot of weight. In the coming months I would also like to investigate new recipes and new colours of enamel.

J-B.B : A significant element of your creative process is your preparatory sketches, which are important to you in the sense that they are reproduced in the catalogue which accompanies the exhibition, but neither framed nor exhibited. Can you tell me about the role this preparatory research plays and what remains of it in the finished work?

E.C : The idea of the alphabet primer project came about when I began to sew the big patchwork made of our old pairs of jeans and embroidered with "additional pieces" which will also be on display in the exhibition. Over the course of a year, I filled a notebook with drawings of objects beginning with each letter of the alphabet. Rather than numbering the pages I used letters instead. I looked in old dictionaries, on the internet, in encyclopaedias, for these words that I then drew in order to have a first filter and move the representation in the direction of a "cliché", a joint representation of the subject. When I create the sculpture I have to choose from the drawings, and a second filter is used in the transformation into a three dimensional object (taking all the surfaces of the drawings into consideration).

J-B.B : So you choose to show these preparatory drawings in the catalogue, and to some extent the titles you give to your pieces reveal your method...Why would you reveal the source rather than leaving people to try to lose themselves in the works and discover what it is for themselves? Is that out of modesty? Or the fear of being misunderstood?

E.C : Since the very beginning, rules have played a major role in my work as a sculptor. The exquisite cadavers were produced from drawings with four hands, the Chinese portraits stemmed from the sketches I had made of answers to a questionnaire. All of that was going on inside my head and, in the end, the sculpture was the only thing of any importance, even though the history and the process are explained. Here again, I didn't consider exhibiting the drawings, but when I began the sculptures and I chose some objects to construct them, I realised that a lot of them and other assemblages had remained in the notebook. The notebook also tells its own story and I also think it has an artistic quality. That's why I decided to make a facsimile of it. As far as the titles are concerned, that has never been of much importance. For me it's above all a way of making an inventory of the works. It's true that the title gives the spectator a bit of a clue. It's not difficult to understand in any case. The rules of the game are simple, it's a pretext to construct forms and I like the fact that the work is simple but it doesn't stop you dreaming. Of course, it's not quite as simple as the rules of the game, the choice of the alphabet primer comes from its history, that can often be found in red cross stitches in kitchens.

J-B.B : I would also like to talk to you about your artistic training. You did "Fine Arts" at the sculpture workshop of La Cambre. If I'm not mistaken, before that you did a traineeship in a resin workshop. I remember just after you finished school, and for several years after that, you turned your hand to a bit of everything: watercolour, acrylic, ink, plaster and wood sculpture, adding figurines to models, videos, installations etc. I seem to also remember you experimenting with bronze and ceramic at art school. But it was only a few years after you finished art school that you began learning about ceramics in evening classes, in other words classes that were more suited to amateurs. Can you tell me what motivated you to go back to school at the time? And, also, do you remember how you felt when you started to get satisfactory results? How is it that you seem to have found your own voice thanks to ceramics?

E.C : Roberto Ollivero and I experimented with polyester sculpture from 14 to 18 years of age. At La Cambre, where we had six-week "modules" for each medium, I once worked with bronze. I did a bit of ceramics with my brother, at the youth club in my village which I went along to once a week, and I did all I couldn't do at La Cambre. I did "Mickey's" (figurative things), but there weren't many materials available and I didn't do any enamelling, just modelling.

After La Cambre, I tried out all kinds of materials; I was looking for a medium which suited me and was never truly satisfied. In 2012, after a final exhibition, I decided to take a bit of a break (see Roland Topor's book *Jachère-party*) whilst continuing to participate in group exhibitions here and there but without any real conviction. I had a day job that paid the rent and, in the evening, I went to the ceramic studio at the Academy in Etterbeek, to relax in an environment of amateurs far from the milieu of contemporary art (I am not saying that I don't like this milieu). It reminded me of the joy of creating objects without thinking about what would happen to them afterwards (if they were exhibited, what would they represent etc.) and, little by little, I began to find forms which really spoke to me, and started to experiment with enamels. The glazes finally provided me with the depth of colour I was looking for in my painting. As regards the form, the technique of working with clay had enabled me to let go of objects that were too finished at the time, as it isn't possible to control everything from the beginning to the end of the process. In the summer of 2014, I purchased my oven and created a small ceramics studio in my cellar. That's where I began to regularly produce and really concentrate on enamels. I began to get a feel for the infinite number of possibilities and experiments I could carry out; it had become like a drug. Even today, I feel excited every time I open the oven! Little by little, a new vocabulary was taking shape and continues to develop today. I work in an empirical manner, almost like a craftsman, each new sculpture leads to new discoveries, shapes and colours, which can be used for the next one. Now, it's as though a composition is coming directly from my hand and it can't be changed, unless you cheat that is. I think that's why I enjoy this work, it suits my character and it's close to what I've always liked and what I've always been looking for (even if the search doesn't stop there).

J-B.B : 've got the feeling that this change in medium, or rather the fact that you mainly concentrate on it, hasn't fundamentally changed your work. All the elements which were present in your vocabulary, at the time fragmented between different materials, are still there: the modesty is still there, because in the end it's "just" clay, the very simplest material, there is the demiurge aspect of the child playing with dolls and inventing new worlds, because like God modelling Adam from dust, you have direct and total control over the forms which are made and unmade in your hands, and there is also the magic of firing the enamels which allows for risk, surprise. There is also always a form of fantasising in the changes of scale between the parts of the pieces, which also corresponds to your taste for mixing elements of high culture and popular culture, the poetic elements and the most trivial

ones. The big difference that I can see, is that everything is now consolidated, unified, brought together and concentrated in a single object. And that this object, because technically it is much more difficult to achieve than your previous creations, and because it is a lot more durable over time, takes on a superior dimension. I remember that you even had trouble defining yourself as an artist, preferring to consider yourself as a sort of craftsman. I find it really interesting that it's thanks to ceramics, which in general is considered as a secondary art, half way between Fine Arts and Decorative Arts, or arts and crafts, that you have finally been able to find your place as an artist. Can you tell me, first of all, how you see yourself as an artist in the world? Then how do you see your objects living on their own in the world? Do they have a mission to fulfil, a role to play?

E.C : For Adam, there are two schools: some say he was made of earth, others of dust. But I prefer the story of Golem to the story of Adam. I define myself as a sculptor rather than an artist or a visual artist. The action of "doing" is very important to me, even more so today working with ceramics, bronze or wood. Because all the sculptures and their rules come from objects which surround me in my daily life, in my collection, from memories or from antiquities I've seen in museums. Doing this almost artisanal work and doing it for long enough enables me to give life to them, to make each one unique, to give myself the time to think about them and to try to achieve a new quality each time. I have the impression that my work is better understood now than it was when I first exhibited my sculptures in the *Ich bin wie du* exhibition at Rossicontemporary. I think they send out a message of optimism. From the start, I wanted a sculpture that was judged in a full-on, direct manner. When people look at one of my sculptures they see it all at once, but when they take a closer look they can see that lots of things are going on and it's covered in details. I tell part of the story, and I like to think that the rest of this story belongs to the people who will live with this sculpture in their place. Ceramic withstands time so well (that's all we find in excavations of lost civilisations), that I sometimes imagine that my sculptures will be found in thousands of years and that they could prove to be a real mystery for archaeologists.

J-B.B : Talk to me about Golem?

E.C : I started taking an interest in Golem when I saw a small ceramic sculpture that a friend had brought back from Prague. That was twenty years ago and even today, when I go to her place, this small statue continues to fascinate me. The legend that I know is the story of a rabbi from Prague who creates a being from clay from the river. He breathes life into it by slipping a parchment with a magical formula on it into its mouth, and the word "truth" is written on its forehead. Golem was created to defend Jews from pogroms. But Golem, like all monsters, grew bigger and bigger and more and more violent. The rabbi must stop the monster and, in order to do so, has to remove the word written on its forehead. As Golem has grown too big for the rabbi to reach his forehead, he has a ruse: he orders him to do up his laces so that he bends down, and then he can neutralise him. The moral of the story: Don't try to imitate God! Can you see a relationship with my work? These ceramic monsters which escape my control!

J-B.B : In any event, be it Adam or Golem, or votive hands, we always come back to magical objects endowed with supernatural powers. I also know that your sculpted wooden door frame, which will also be on display in the exhibition, was inspired by Gauguin. So I would like to suggest to you, by way of a conclusion to our discussion, this extract from a letter Gauguin wrote to Daniel de Monfreid: *"We say that God took a lump of clay in his hand and made all that you know with it. The artist in turn (if he really wants to make a creative and divine work) should not copy nature but use the elements of nature to create a new element. In the: "Increase and multiply", there's a bit of that. Increase, in other words, become strong. Multiply, in other words, add to creation with a new creation."* And then also this other magnificent passage from a letter to Émile Schuffenecker: *"What an artist, this Jesus, who sculpted with compassion!... For want of religious painting, what beautiful thoughts we can invoke with form and colour... We alone drift on the phantom vessel with all our whimsical imperfection. Infinity seems more tangible to us, when faced with something undefined"*

In discussion in Eric Croes' studio and via email in February 2017