

to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition

Meditations on a Hobby Horse

In their first exhibition, *Nature Morte*, the artist group *Versus* set out their stall, leaving no doubt about their intent to challenge accepted ideas about what ceramics can be. In their new exhibition, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, they strengthen their challenge. Not only have they invited two guest artists who work with other media, some of the five members have themselves wholly or partially departed from their medium. Yet they haven't done so in order to reject ceramics – on the contrary, the ceramic works on show display both technical mastery and a thorough knowledge of the medium's history and received ideas about it – but in order to explore as fully as possible their artistic interests, and to set ceramics as a craft firmly in the context of art.

Addressing both the title of E.H. Gombrich's classic essay on a personal level and the essay's argument as a conceptual tool, they have at once investigated their own artistic expressions and the relation of them to the medium. Rather than let the traditional ceramic forms dominate (forms which, we must remember, are even more deeply culturally and socially embedded than landscape or portrait painting) they repeat with Gombrich that for children, toys don't have to look like what they represent in order to fulfil their function.

While Lea-Mi Engholm and Sissel Wathne have chosen to focus on ceramics, their meditations have caused them to take the medium into the realms of abstraction and chance. Lea-Mi Engholm combines two types of clay which react differently, causing unpredictable forms to be created, forms which, though abstract, lead us to think of creation and destruction, and the constant cycles and processes of nature. Sissel Wathne has collected humble white plates and bowls and subjects them to the rules of chance, a phrase which is here in no way oxymoronic – she deploys chance via two carefully constructed and regulated machines for the production of pattern, one for making circles and dots, the other for lines and stripes. Mass production and the unique collide in the functioning of these machines, which in spite of themselves never produce the same pattern twice.

Mariko Wada's life, as any expatriate will recognise, is more subject to numbers than most. In the work *me*, various numbers relating to aspects of her life are printed on business card-sized cards, which ascend in a vertical line up the wall from a pile on the floor. In *Arrival*, she has quite literally got to grips with some of these numbers by forming them by hand in clay. A pile of earthenware numbers lies on the floor, and next to them, a giant '1' is tied to a handcart ready to be towed away, or perhaps along with her. Numbers, these most abstract of elements in our lives, are processed and given tangible, weighty form.

Ane Fabricius Christiansen's abandonment of ceramics for this exhibition coincides with the idea of searching in the works themselves. A silver ball, throwing back warped reflections, traces circles on a black mirroring surface, an over-proportioned balancing bar is suspended in the space, while behind it on the wall a small photo of a road sign at an anonymous junction reads 'Idyl'. All three works bear the title *Path*, and are complemented by *Knot*, a length of seatbelt joined at the ends and thus endless, tied in a Windsor knot. It appears that safety is restrictive, while the new paths embarked on don't necessarily lead anywhere at all, the path itself, perhaps, being what is important.

In a similar vein, Camille Rishøj Nielsen's departure from ceramics is caused by an interest in the mask. The paradox of the mask is, of course, that it simultaneously covers up – indeed, masks – and allows things to be revealed – the wearer can play another role, different from that which social context or convention might demand, and thus experience greater freedom. In meditating on their various hobby horses, the members of Versus have likewise questioned the role of the 'ceramicist' in order to practice art with the freedom of medium which has become commonplace for those schooled in fine art rather than a craft. Something a little different from the practice of the contemporary fine artist may be argued to occur, however, as the members of Versus naturally carry their training with them, crafting objects which are formally resolved and display a high degree of attention to the properties of even previously unfamiliar materials.

The desire to challenge their own methods and medium is demonstrated by the choice of guest exhibitors. Katrine Villadsen is a musician and sound artist who has contributed an edited and abstracted recording of a train, which periodically invades the space, adding a different dimension to the exhibition and expanding its scope not just beyond ceramics, but beyond the visual arts. It might also be understood as a representation of the passing of time quite different from the meditative revolutions of the silver ball on a black square. Morten Søndergaard is a writer who has also worked with sound, visual art, and the exhibition format itself, and has contributed a text which, characteristically, explores both the image-conjuring potential of language and poetry's roots in the play of sounds in oral tradition.

These seven different personal expressions are integrated through a conscious use of scenography: a focus on black and white in the work of each artist; a site-specific relation to the striking yellow doors of the exhibition space; and the introduction of site-specific collaborative pieces, consisting of the central bundle of cables from which single wires snake out to the atmospheric lighting, and a screen of black chains hung from the ceiling. These partially obstruct our entry into the scene of the exhibition, forcing us to relate to the physical presence of our bodies, and perhaps prompting us to find the tactility characteristic of the ceramic medium elsewhere too. They also produce a sound of their own as people enter or leave, just as the train arrives and departs. The necessarily personal interests and forms of expression brought about by the Meditations on a Hobby Horse are thus bound together by the collective scenography, which plays off against the individual works.