

1 Limoges porcelain, amber crackle glaze,
2011, Ø9.5cm

The Beauty of the Bowl

Dr Walter H Lokau discusses Ipek Kotan's journey to ceramics and resulting minimalist vessels. Translation by Sabine Goodman.

A well-known saying states that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. This expression also holds true for the ceramic vessel: it does not need to be reborn, as a history of human civilisation is unimaginable without the presence of this usually inconspicuous, but nevertheless universal, object of practical use. Yet while the wheel has been traditionally wed to the masculine aspect of human development, the connotations associated with the vessel are the exact opposite. Collecting, preserving, protecting, and dispensing constitute the essence of the vessel. The hand-crafted vessel embodies the principle of femininity.

The vessel need not be reinvented. Accepting this immutability represents a commitment, for if a ceramist embraces the absolute formal qualities inherent in the vessel, his or her work becomes an exercise in patience. Indeed, it develops into a very personal, even humble, meditation on the essence of the vessel, a practice that is limited and infinite at the same moment. The works created by Ipek Kotan eloquently exemplify what it means to passionately ask oneself, again and again, the question: 'What is a vessel, here and now, for me?'

DESIRE TO CREATE Kotan was not predestined to become a ceramist. To an outsider at least, there was no indication that she would embark on a career as an artisan, let alone that of an artist. Growing up in Istanbul, Turkey, and constant exposure to ceramic artefacts in its numerous museums and daily life was perhaps the planting of the seed that would bear fruit so many years later. During her last year studying Media Arts at Boston's Emerson College, USA, a chance encounter led Kotan to take a short vacation in Bali, Indonesia. Soon after graduating from college, she returned to this sunny island, started a small import business and became a successful designer and distributor of bamboo, silver, and teak wood homewares that she commissioned local artisans to produce. While she enjoyed designing and took pride in her business acumen, it was watching her own ideas being transformed into beautiful objects by others that awoke her desire to create art.

In 2005, after having lived abroad for ten years, she moved back to Istanbul and started working in the corporate world. A few years

Collecting, preserving, protecting, and dispensing constitute the essence of the vessel

1

later, although on a successful career path, Kotan nonetheless developed a strong sense of ennui and could no longer deny her creative urge. In 2007 she made the difficult decision to abandon her work and decided to attend a summer programme at the renowned Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the USA. She enrolled in two classes that she hoped would fulfil her need to work with her hands: ceramics and metalsmithing. After only two weeks at the potter's wheel, she realised she had found what she was looking for. A visceral sense of connection to the femininity inherent in the ceramic vessel overwhelmed her. This initial passion continues to grow and is still the source of an overpowering urge for her to create vessels. Impressed by her dedication and approach to her work after a short six-week session, her instructors permitted her to bypass the official application process and begin the fall semester in the ceramics department immediately. After completing the foundation year at RISD, during which she studied drawing, design, art history, and aesthetic philosophy, she felt ready to get back to the studio.

In 2008, Kotan moved to England, the 'motherland' of studio pottery, and studied ceramic design at Staffordshire University in Stoke-on-Trent, where she graduated with a master's degree two years later. She became acquainted with the international ceramics scene; was continually impressed by Japanese ceramics and classic forms by renowned figures such as Lucie Rie and Hans Coper; admired the great contemporary vessel-makers including Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Thomas Bohle, or Kirsten Coelho; and worked as an assistant to Pieter Stockmans and Julian Stair. Though she undoubtedly learnt from and was influenced by other ceramists, Kotan nevertheless cultivated her

With all her rigor and stringency, Kotan creates variation upon variation of her minimalist vessels



3

2 Dark stoneware, celadon crackle and oxblood glazes, 2012, Ø21 cm, Ø19cm, Ø11 cm 3 Limoges porcelain, white-blue-violet psychedelic glaze, 2013, Ø18 cm; acquired by the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, The Netherlands 4 Porcelain, satin matt light green crackle glaze, 2013, Ø34cm

She subjected this basic form to an ongoing process of formal purification, which represents a delicate negotiation in several respects: how much can a bowl be pared down to its essential shape and functionality, while remaining inimitably original? What needs to be preserved, and what is merely incidental? Kotan performs this balancing act with old-fashioned circumspection and a confident hand. While the trend towards minimalist forms represents one of the major and, in many cases, ultimately annihilating modernist developments, it is precisely Kotan's tenacity to her premise and attachment to the bowl that prevents her from lapsing into any form of avant-garde excess. Her sincere thematic focus and respect for the rules of her trade are in fact the paths of purification for her works, which do not permit any 'cleverness' or imperfection, and reject any embellishments. They eliminate the foot and eradicate any notches or grooves, and herald the epitome of the ceramic vessel: the perfect bowl, the pure vessel, the quintessence of what humans have used for thousands of years.

Despite conjuring a fascinating image of this ideal, platonic vessel, the absolute vessel will never become a reality – fortunately, because otherwise this would obviate the need for any future resolve. What becomes a reality is never *the* vessel but always a vessel, followed by another and then yet another... With all her rigour and stringency, Kotan creates variation upon variation of her minimalist vessels. Even after all of the steps to reduce complexity, each piece exhibits a new modification to inherent fluctuations; each features a new interrelation between these differences in an entirely new orchestration. And even after stages of sublimation, Kotan still makes consequential decisions

own unique style. She has adopted their ethos of impeccable craftsmanship, but her own oeuvre is suffused by an attitude of extreme independence.

POINT OF FOCUS While preparing her thesis for her master's degree, Kotan began to narrow her focus on the infinitely ancient and eternally new archetype of all open ceramic vessels: the bowl.



4

5 Limoges porcelain, bronze glaze, 2012, Ø51 cm; acquired by the Dresden Museum of Decorative Arts, Dresden, Germany 6 Dark stoneware, celadon crackle glaze, 2012, Ø11.5cm 7 Limoges porcelain, bronze glaze, 2012, Ø23 cm
Photography Frigesch Lampelmayer

Forthcoming exhibitions & stockists See website for details
Email studio@ipekkotan.com; dr.walter.lokau@swbmail.de; mail@sabinegoodman.de
Web www.ipekkotan.com;

Dr Walter H Lokau is a German art historian specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary ceramics. He was a curator at the Ceramics Museum Staufen and research assistant at the GRASSI Museum of Applied Arts, Leipzig. He now lives in Bremen as a freelance writer

What unites them all [the vessels] is their restrained, dignified beauty



5



6



7

and resolves that a vessel must be 'like this and not different.' What counts are these very details, and one's attention to them; they are part of this ceramist's perpetual play with nuances in accordance with her idiosyncrasies. Kotan governs a vessel's appearance by the material implemented, whether dark stoneware or pure white Limoges porcelain; she varies a vessel's height, the angle of its rim, the curve or thickness of its wall, which results in different relationships between inner and outer space; she recognises that how the inside of a bowl is glazed will create different sensations when viewed and touched.

ELEGANT & EXPRESSIVE There they are: Kotan's elegant, elemental, and timeless vessels; familiar yet endlessly varied, quiet yet resonant, perfect but full of character, and irresistibly appealing. Some are created using the finest Limoges porcelain clay, while others are made of dusky-brown stoneware; some of them are very small, like a special kind of intimate 'worry stone', some are flat like discs and with an even flatter recess, while others measure up to fifty centimetres in diameter and many dimensions in between. All,

however, are wheel-thrown and eminently expressive: thick-walled, featuring a gently curved body and a clear-cut broad rim resting on a generous base without a foot, matte and velvety to the touch on the unglazed exterior. Most of them feature a warm, rich contrast between the bare clay body on the outside and the finest glaze inside, fired at a high temperature in the reduction kiln: celadon with deep, dense craquelure; amber-coloured transparent glazes with delicate crackles; skin-like, rippled bronze glazes; saturated oxblood glazes; or matte crystalline glazes. What unites them all is their restrained, dignified beauty, created by a singular personality yet deeply rooted in the anonymous history of humankind's vessels.

Ipek Kotan has not reinvented the vessel. But she continually answers the question 'What is a vessel?' in her own inimitable manner. When we look at and touch her work, we hear a unique, distinctive sound that tells us of a culture far gentler than today's technological civilisation and wait for what lies ahead while eagerly anticipating the crescendo of this particular tone. □