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Photos: Kris Campo

Kris Campo,

A pas-de-deux of ceramics and dance

When she was a girl, she dreamed of a career as an actress or dancer. When she was finally faced with having to choose a career, she realised that she was not good enough for these professions. Treading the boards, however, remained attractive and designing scenery appeared to be an option. She ended up at an art school where she got her first taste of the pleasure of working with clay. Kris Campo became a ceramist. After years of hard work, she suddenly found a specific way of expressing herself in the form of stacked geometric shapes consisting of bands obliquely cut from cylinders and cones: a veritable pas-de-deux of ceramics and dance.

In her workshop in Hingene, situated between Antwerp and Brussels, shelving has been fitted along a long, blind wall. Vases created by her at the start of her career stand on the top shelf. Other items are set out chronologically the further one goes down. Her most recent work is on the floor, packed in boxes and ready for transport and ready to be seen. Robust shapes, weathered skin and earth colours dominate the top shelf. As far as Campo is concerned, this is perfectly clear: start at the basis, totally assimilate all the aspects of a cylinder or cone and learn to master them. A vase or pot with a lid, how can this be solved? Campo tries out various solutions. A similar shape but smaller can serve as a lid and also as a stopper. Two vases on top of each other which have ended up a bit skewed.

She has to laugh when I say that based on the photos on her website, I get the impression of a cheerful kitchen where plates, saucers and dishes are piled up willy nilly as if we are looking at her draining board full of washing up after a particularly successful party. She likes a bit of humour in her work, a particular lightness, without it having to be so heavy and serious.

Chinese adventure

In the beginning, she worked with rough clay, earth colours and robust and solid shapes. She acquired a sound craft basis. Her work started to be noticed. Invitations to take part in exhibitions followed. Thanks to teaching jobs, she can determine her own rhythm. In 2004, she got the opportunity together with a group of ceramists to travel to China in the framework of the exhibition *1,000 years of porcelain*. "This was a real eye opener for me, not only for my art but also at the socio-economic level".

She returned to China four years later. "In 2008, I was resident ceramist in the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, the city of porcelain. There I discovered that the local porcelain is not easy to work with and that this was not a suitable medium for my own work. For this reason, during this period I went in search of what would be interesting for me and my work. In this way, I went through the whole chain of producing a work of art. Bringing a design for a dish to the potter's and the link between the various steps, shaping, moulding, casting, glazing, firing until a finished product is produced. This was not for me. You are only involved in design and coordination".

What she does find attractive are the traditional decoration techniques. She followed various lessons in China in engraving, white and blue decorations and various methods of glazing. She also took a whole load of Chinese transfers with her when she returned home. Producing objects on the spot does not really interest her. She has now understood that this is not the road she wishes to take to fulfil her specific needs. These decoration techniques are as she puts it "My thing". "For this reason, I would like to go to China again to improve my knowledge of the techniques. Then with a western approach, I can use these techniques and incorporate them in my own work".

In the meantime, she works with T material, a pure white firing clay with a fine, sandy structure, easy to knead which is, in her own words, "marvellous to work with". Stacking items up willy nilly, to use common or garden language, requires very precise preparation. She sketches every item and then makes all the components. She chooses the basic colour for every component in bone china mixed with pigment and fires them at 1,240°C. This is followed by glazing at 920°C and lastly the decoration with transfers and additional painting and a final firing at 750°C.

A dancing type of ceramic

The most important source of inspiration for her work is her discovery of the Triadisch Ballet, the great work created by Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943) and premiered in 1922. It was exceptionally repeated in 1988 in Antwerp. Schlemmer was a teacher at the famous Bauhaus in Weimar and later in Dessau, and found himself in the middle of the most exciting period in art that Germany has ever known. The mixture of all types of music, theatre, the plastic arts and handicrafts were paid a great deal of attention. Schlemmer combined colour, geometric patterns, movement and space. On the one hand, his dancers were limited in their movements due to the impossible cylinder and cone-shaped costumes that they wore and on the other hand, the geometric structure of their movements within the space were clearly articulated because of this limitation. This was an eye opener for Campo. It was exactly what she wanted to portray with her ceramics. Colour, space, movement, characteristic relationships and rhythms. In other words, a dancing type of ceramics. In order to obtain this dynamism, she makes use of shapes such as concentric circles, diagonal, spiral, sharp corners and asymmetry.

Some years later, the dance series was followed by a theatre series. Still inspired by Schlemmer, she concentrated on the space where the dancers were performing. Famous theatres all over the world have their own shape and character. Campo's objects are constructed from the stage, a round disc. At the top and at the bottom, rings, bands, spaces and walls rise up and often the object can also be placed upside down. The colours and decoration are magical. The Chinese transfers used for this are hardly recognisable. Cut and paste, move, turn, reflect, all possibilities of the pattern design are usable. In her most recent project, these will go on to lead a life of their own.

Family portrait

After fulfilling her earlier young girl's dream with her ceramic work, an additional personal orientation was an obvious next step. For the last two years, Campo has been working on a special family portrait which will be presented for the first time in a pop-up gallery in Antwerp in November 2012. Entitled *Me, my family & I*, she combines 14 objects, 14 wallpaper designs (prints of enormous sizes) and a soundscape, her own *triadische* performance. Fourteen times a characteristic interaction of ceramic-geometric shapes, fourteen silhouettes, fourteen different colour worlds, fourteen very diverse patterns. Using digital techniques, she has developed mini portraits of various family members. By "mixing" with existing material from China and the UK and applying an intensive cut and paste process to the portraits, she has created a special cut-out decoration for each individual relative.

The abundance and repetition of shape elements, the interplay between reflection and inversion, the keen colours that are woven into the granular ceramic skin thus produce a very particular impact. This approach placed her in a new direction. Campo photographed details of the completed objects, rearranged them and obtained the material for her prints on large sheets of rice paper which as wallpaper prints accompany the presentation of the ceramic objects. The result is a rich layer of shape and content. The granules of the ceramic skin detracts from the sharpness of the photo. The rhythm of the recurrent photo fragments resonates with the process of memory. Just as we know the people close to us, always the same, and yet always a little bit different. A family portrait but one where the traditions of the painted and photographed family are processed and incorporated into a form that literally fits into her ceramic work. With *Me, myself & I*, Campo has created her own *triadische* monument.