

Hand, Material, Thought

Bodil Manz is one of the most significant figures on the Danish ceramics scene of the past 50 years. She began her education at a time when the School of Arts and Crafts in Copenhagen (now the Royal Danish Academy, School of Design) still had a ceramics department. In her early career, she created beautiful, refined utilitarian objects together with her husband, Richard Manz, and even designed a tableware service for the now defunct porcelain factory Bing & Grøndahl. Bodil Manz's main breakthrough came with the geometric stoneware and porcelain pieces that has been at the core of her practice since the 1980s. They have been exhibited around the world and are represented in the collections of leading museums in Asia, the United States and Europe, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in Texas, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, to mention just a few.

The first time I was truly affected by Bodil Manz's works was as a young artist, when I saw an exhibition of her large sand-cast pieces created around the turn of the millennium. Powerful, rough, expressive, these intensely colourful vessels felt as if they had been created with a force I had not previously seen in her work. The objects had a profound impact on me; I felt that Bodil was speaking to me through her treatment of the material. To me, the objects seemed like frustrated, belated poems; their words metallic oxides, slips and brush strokes, which found their resonance in the unpolished texture and firing of the porcelain. They felt like a renouncement of everything that I had associated with porcelain. They spoke to me.

Later, I learned that she had created the pieces shortly after the death of her husband, Richard, but at the time, I was unaware and simply felt that this was an artist who commanded the full register of her material. Something profound was at stake. Bodil had tapped something elemental and universally human. She was able to make her world conceivable to me across differences in age and life experience. This was a human who could speak through clay.

Bodil Manz understands the scope the ceramic vocabulary, and her ability to employ it is beyond compare. Her thin, meticulously crisp and impossibly delicate porcelain pieces that form the core of this exhibition are veritable textbook examples of how the interplay of idea, process, experience and material mastery can be elevated to produce sublime results.

Bodil Manz's preferred shape is the vessel, which in itself is an archetype. The pot, the container: a form that has, for millennia, enabled us to store and preserve. The mother of all utilitarian objects. It is an everyday object that has accompanied human life on earth for millennia. Typologically, the form is at once unassuming and eternal.

The artist and writer Edmund de Waal has described the vessel as 'a line around a shadow'¹. A form that catches light and creates space. In Bodil's works, the relationship between the inside and the outside has been dissolved. Space is distorted and blurred. The vessel itself has sharp, well-defined outer edges, which are mirrored on the inside but in a smoother, more fluid form. The inside of the vessel feels soft and inviting. On the outside, the contours are crisp and precise.

By contrast, the markings, patterns and colour fields that make up the composition of the objects follow a different logic: they are sharp and strictly balanced on one side. However, because the porcelain walls are so thin, the light shines through, causing the lines and colours to be visible on the other side of the body in a diffuse form, visible only as shadows due to the translucency of the porcelain. These relationships between light and composition play out on both the inside and the outside of the objects. Together, they form a coherent whole as taut meets soft, the inside becomes outside, light turns to shadow, and the form is blurred. It becomes difficult to discern where the exterior begins and the interior ends, the two aspects varying with the changing light throughout the day and across the seasons. New elements and connections emerge when the viewer takes their time and allows the light to pass through.

In Bodil Manz's works, idea and process are conceived as one. They are not opposites but instead enhance each other. The relationship between form, material and composition is precisely balanced. The individual piece feels like a house of cards, where each element keeps another in place. They reflect a deep understanding of the possibilities afforded by the porcelain and a clear grasp of when the different effects should be applied. If a single component were to be removed, the entire composition would collapse. The objects have no beginning, no end – everything is there to be taken in at once. They are small miracles.

The works in this exhibition were recently made but are the result of a decades-long, open investigation. Long, because ceramics take time. It is a broken-up process, where the results of the artist's efforts only become clear after weeks and months. Open, because the ceramic process requires the ability to grasp the possible in the unpredictable and develop ideas in response to the paths that emerge in an endless attempt to control the unwieldy clay. In Bodil's works, both qualities are evident – she has exceptional mastery of the porcelain and is able to achieve the seemingly impossible but also maintains an open mind throughout the process, letting herself be guided by the possible permutations of individual ideas. That brings a sense of continuity to the exhibition, as it develops and explores the interplay of form, colour and materiality. It appears effortless, and she generously shares her process, allowing us to see how the themes vary, step by step, over the 35 pieces in the exhibition. But it is far from effortless.

¹ Edmund de Waal: *A Line Around a Shadow*, Lakeland Arts Trust, 2005.

Bodil Manz often chooses not to work in clay as she develops her objects. Many works are initially created in paper, plaster or other materials and thus involve meticulous studies, exacting measurements, proportions and colour balances. The models are informed by her ceramic experience and would not make any sense without it. They serve as proxies that visualize the relationship between the interior and exterior of the vessel, the translucency of the porcelain and the appearance and interactions of lines, colours, patterns. They offer a shortcut, bypassing the month-long process from wet clay to finished object.

Mit daglige liv med hændelser i ler, gips, papir og andre materialer (My daily life with events in clay, plaster and other materials) which was part of the 2018 exhibition *Keramiske Veje* (Ceramic Paths) at the CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark in the town of Middelfart offers a rare glimpse behind the scenes of Bodil Manz's artistic process. The installation consists of a large table sectioned into 132 squares, each one framing an object. It includes found objects (some manmade, others natural), geometric plaster blocks, paper skeletons and porcelain models and shows a wide spectrum of her studies of form and material effects ranging from dyed clay to line drawings to colour fields (horizontal, vertical, diagonal) and loosely wheel-thrown forms, tightly tensioned spirals, spheres and many other elements.

Mit daglige liv allows the eye to pursue the infinite developments of ideas as they branch out or dead-end. The viewer follows Manz's leaps among the many elements that constitute her process and work and senses how the relationship between inspiration, idea, form, composition, colour and techniques unfolds. The piece shows how colours are handled (dyed, drawn and/or applied as transfers) and how forms are created (casting, free-hand modelling, slab techniques and other methods) and makes clear that these choices, while based on techniques, qualify the relationships between form and colour, inside and outside, transparent and opaque.

The installation represents a labyrinthine path through Bodil Manz's artistic process that leaves it up to us to connect the individual items and to discover resonances with other known works from her hand. It demonstrates how absurd it is to assume that the artistic process can ever be linear, even when it is grounded in something as technically challenging as ceramics.

At its core, this process is an interaction of hand, material and thought that relies on the idiosyncratic properties of materials and the artist's ability to manipulate them. If anything, *Mit daglige liv* demonstrates the art of the possible as well as the impossible. We recognize the unending struggle with limitations of the material and sense the revelations when the inner logic of the materials suggests new, unexpected possibilities. *Mit daglige liv* is a study of the physical and aesthetic extremes of materials and processes that inform Bodil Manz's oeuvre. Thus skill, artistic exploration and idea development go hand in hand and cannot be understood separately. Her material selection, techniques and in-depth knowledge of the materials should be incorporated into our understanding of the works rather than simply be disregarded as mere craftsmanship.

Bodil Manz's body of work can be viewed as a life-long exchange within a Venn diagram of idea, matter and process. At its core, it is a study of the vessel form and of the relationship between inner and outer space which is grounded in a profound understanding of ceramic materials and firing techniques. The infinite variations unfold within these parameters, brought forth by Bodil's determination to see, invent, adjust and try over and over and over.

Thus, it would be simplistic to view her works as ideas imposed upon a material, the point being that this is not simply a process where the artist manipulates the clay – the material responds, throws up surprises and enriches the artistic practice. We cannot fully understand her work without this exchange. It is an ongoing dialogue that takes time, focus and humility to understand and appreciate. In Bodil Manz's case, this conversation has provided the momentum for a more than six-decades-long artistic practice unfolding in an intensive exchange of technique, matter and concept.

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