

THE KILN

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I have driven to Vestfossen to pick up an unfinished piece of work from my storage container. On the box it says, «Unfinished Glazed Slab, EKWC 2012».

Oslo National Academy of the Arts, January 2017. I open the box and unpack the slab in my office. It is not in one piece but divided into ten to twelve pieces. As the pieces are unpacked from the bubble wrap, I put them on the floor. It is a puzzle that has to be assembled. But one piece does not fit; it is too big because it was not fired.¹ I had been pressed for time when the last things I had fired had to be packed, and I overlooked the piece that had been laid out to dry on a hot kiln. I took it home anyway, so it could be fired at another time. The glazed slab was nowhere near being finished anyway; it was an experiment that had not been completed. I walk down the stairs to the Academy's firing room to reserve a kiln. The kilns are different in both size and type. Some use gas; others, electricity. They can do different things to suit different needs. I choose one that runs on gas because I want to do some reduction firing², and I write my name and the firing temperature in the calendar hanging on the wall.

The kiln is the only tool a ceramist cannot do without. It is in the firing that the clay's physical properties change, and

the material transforms from a water-soluble, relatively brittle material, to one that is hard and fossilised. After firing, the clay only deteriorates by mechanical abrasion. It is also in the kiln that the glaze transforms from being a layer of mixed powder to being hard, melted glass. All of this happens in a closed chamber where the ceramicist's most important task is to determine the temperature and the atmosphere required for firing – the factors that, at the last moment, determine what the final result looks like.

Now, after some deliberations, followed by a few hours of work at the glaze laboratory, the ceramic slab has been glazed and is ready to be fired again. It has been six years since it was fired the first time, and although a lot has happened since then, it feels like it was yesterday. The glaze slab was made towards the end of the stay, and perhaps because it was not finished, it was so easy to get into the frame of mind I had at that time.

In 2012, I applied to the European Ceramic Workcentre (EKWC)³ to work with glaze. The time at the centre was intended to be a research period that was based on the questions «Why had the glaze disappeared from my ceramics?» and «How could it (possibly) come back?» I had always liked working with glaze chemistry, and this was something I really missed in my work. But, as I was no longer working with functional objects, and was not interested in using the glaze as a decorative, artistic element, it was simply very difficult to understand what role glaze had to play in my work.

EKWC, the Bosch in the Netherlands, May 2012. Ten to twelve people are sitting around the long table in the com-

munal kitchen. Some of us are artists; others are technicians and assistants. We all come from many different countries, and the conversations go off in many different directions in several different languages. An artist tells us that if we want to see the Netherlands at its most beautiful, then it is now while the tulips are in flower. In a few weeks they will have withered. She also explains that this season has always been special to her. She comes from Haarlem, one of the country's main areas for flower cultivation, and her parents are tulip farmers. After dinner, I find a map and plan a trip; I borrow a bike and take it on the train heading in the direction of Haarlem. From there I can ride alongside the fields and out to the coast. The excursion is psychedelic, almost unreal. The land is flat; the horizon line disappears in a point reminiscent of a caricature perspective drawing. There is a powerful scent; rows of flowers in every direction in all the colours of the world crisscross the landscape as far as the eye can see. It is fascinating to see these patchwork fields, like soft carpets over the flat landscape. There are many visiting tourists; they are on the roadside and are photographing one of the country's most iconic motifs. I do the same thing. First with a camera, standing still, then at speed from the bike's luggage rack where the camera is set on the self-timer. The photographs are blurred, and it is on purpose. They should render the feeling of moving at speed through a field of colour.

In my temporary studio at EKWC, the photographs from the tulip fields hang on the wall, both those in sharp focus and those of the blurry landscape. They made me think of a particular porcelain vase made in Royal Danish porcelain with a realistic landscape motif⁴ – the one my parents inherited from my grandmother but was hidden in the

wardrobe because they did not like it, and they could not throw it away either. My association was related to the motif, but mostly to the tactility of the water-coloured qualities. The workmanship on the vase was so well executed and elaborate: hand painted and glazed.

When I was a student in Kolding, I became acquainted with several different glazing techniques during a visit to The Royal Porcelain Factory in Copenhagen.⁵ After we had finished our guided tour of the factory, an employee from the factory came and taught us the basic principles of brush decoration, underglaze colours and overglaze. We got to borrow a specially cut brush made of marten hair, which could «hold onto» the cobalt blue underglaze colour. The shape of the brush was crucial in order to be able to draw long lines without the brush sticking to the surface. Painting on an absorbent ceramic surface is something quite different to painting on a piece of paper or canvas. We practiced on factory seconds, serving bowls and dishes. The thing that interested me the most was the development of the transparent glazes - those that were applied over the brush decoration and would, during firing, “conjure” and distinguish the character of the underglaze. The brush stroke that had been a razor-sharp drawing before firing, could, after firing, look quite different. It could still be sharp, but it could also come out of the kiln as a blurred watercolour.

It was like developing a photography. And it was that I was reminded of when I saw the pictures from my bike ride along the tulip fields in the Netherlands.

What we learned about glaze from The Royal Porcelain

Factory was necessary for being able to understand the difference between how a painter and a ceramicist use a glaze - as a starting point.

One of my role models when it comes to glaze work is the Japanese artist Jun Kaneko⁶. He is known for his large, monumental, minimalist sculptures covered with rigid geometric shapes in strong colours. I am especially fascinated with how his glazes escape and pull the rigid shapes slightly out of control. This makes them “cry” blurred areas following the sculptures form and the forces of gravitation.

I started as a painter when I was 17 and continued doing that almost full time until I was 21. But then I moved to California in 1963, not really knowing anything about what was going on, and at the time America contemporary ceramics had just started.⁷

A significant thing that distinguishes a painter's and a ceramicist's work process is that the painter can follow all the phases with his or her eyes; the ceramicist can not. This is because the colours and properties of the glaze are first produced in the kiln during firing. During a longer conversation with Marit Tingleff⁸ we talked about this, and I honed in on a sentence she said:

... that it is a maturing process to learn to appreciate to sense, rather than to see...

In ceramics, the kiln has the last word. Until it also is challenged.

¹ Common to all clay types is shrinkage, which begins when the liquid or plastic clay starts to dry and then ceases after firing.

² Lynggaard, Finn (1976). *Keramisk håndbog [Ceramic handbook]*, 2nd edition, Copenhagen: J. Fr. Clausens Forlag, p. 212–213 (... on reduction) «What happens if you set fire to a piece of paper or wood? – it burns, of course, or one can say that there is combustion. The carbon in the paper or the wood combines with the oxygen of the air during the combustion and the product of this reaction is carbon dioxide and heat. Expressed by the chemical symbols $C + O_2 \rightarrow CO_2 + \text{heat}$. If there is not enough oxygen (O) for the combustion, some carbon and carbon monoxide are released - the combustion will smoke and ooze. If one thinks of the same process inside a closed oven space, a corresponding deficit of oxygen will occur ... and the released carbon and carbon monoxide will try to retrieve the required oxygen from any available sources. And since it will mean the source is derived from the things that have been put into the oven in the form of clay and glaze substances, there will consequently be a change of these chemical compounds. This change through oxygen loss is what is called reduction and such reduced chemical substances will change the colour.»

³ EKWC, European Ceramic Workcentre in the Netherlands is an international resource and research centre for ceramics, where I had a work placement from May – August, 2012.

⁴The Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Factory in Copenhagen.

⁵ Study tour with Kolding School of Design in 2001.

⁶ Jun Kaneko (1942), Japanese artist who lives in Omaha in the USA.

⁷ Dorfman, John (2014). *Artist profile: The Space Between, Art & Antiques*, March 2014, p. 48-53

⁸ Marit Tingleff (1954), Norwegian ceramicist.

⁹ Marit Tingleff, excerpt from a telephone conversation November 13th 2018.

Translated by Christine O'Hagan

Supported by Oslo National Academy of the Arts

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ISBN: 978-82-7038-402-0