

# The Clay

Jan Bäcklund

2013-09-15

Short texticle for the exhibition The Clay, curated by Katja Serber in Albrechtsen's Bunker, Kgs Have, Copenhagen, september 2013.

Contrary to exhibitions of most other things, exhibitions of formed and fired clay leave the spectator with a certain feeling of something incomplete, of something not yet received, that is, of something which have been left hidden and occult for the vision of the observer. This ceramic occultism or incompleteness is, I believe, not an incidental sensation, but rather an inherent quality of ceramics as such, a quality which makes ceramics to something very different from painting, sculpture and architecture, the three disciplines that have formed our concept of the fine arts.

The most obvious cause for this feeling of incompleteness is that any mere visual perception of a ceramic piece is thoroughly inadequate. Standing and looking at a ceramic work is analogous to hearing a description of a painting; an art of poetry in itself, evidently, but still essentially unrelated with any painterly sensation. Any ceramic work must of course be visual as well, and tiles and enamel painting are preeminently visual. But when admiring tiles, who can restrain from touching it? And isn't enamel painting precisely made to be touched while looking? This is the point: ceramics is only encountered when you hold it in your hands, and furthermore: it is not so that the eye guides the hand, it is the other way around: the hand guides the eye. The perception of ceramics is tactile to the degree that what is seen is determined by the sensuous touch. This is probably why ceramics is so out of joint with the concept of fine art: intimate, rather than public, tactile rather than visual, to be seen in reflected light rather than in direct light, and its marvel is that it might come alive, resurrected from the earth, when in the hands of its recipient.

This resurrection of matter into sensuous experience has its physical root in an other, less obvious, occultism; an occultism ceramics share with the other arts of the fire: enamel-painting and glass-making. The transformations of the matter is effectuated in the closed space of the kiln. It is in this sense ceramics is a philosophical or scientific art, giving form

to creation in its most profound sense. But as this creation or transmutation is hidden in the kiln, the artist's "tools" are the elements: the proportions of earth and water, and the administration of fire through air.