

ILLUSION

The International Ceramics Biennale in Kapfenberg

Astrid Kury

A glance at the exhibited entries to the International Ceramics Biennale in Kapfenberg shows that the title led the artists to think deeply upon the fundamental ambition of this competition: one of human history's oldest artistic techniques, linking up with local historical tradition in Kapfenberg, the old pottery town, is to be re-enlivened in future with new impetus and forms of expression. It is especially the traditional linking of ceramic objects with craft techniques and functional purpose that is often considered a problem for ceramics as an artistic genre. With the title "Illusion", the possibility opens up to subvert these mental paths in the visitors and to provide new perspectives and approaches through a self-reflective analysis of ceramic art.

The bowl, for instance, whose form has become deeply engraved in the archetypal memory of our culture, becomes an elemental sculptural form in this light, when

it is analysed in the context of creative decision making. This is put into practice in masterly fashion by the Japanese entries, e.g. from Chie Kobayashi. The basal structure of the bowl becomes the crystallisation point for a contemplative experience of nature, reflecting the beauty of a cloud form ("Kumo", the "cloud") or the narrative structure of water rings ("Hamon", "ripples"). Illusion is also touched upon when clay as a medium is taken to its technical limits, or sometimes even beyond. The distinctly earthy element of ceramic objects is often transcended in poetic installations to form something light and airy, or indeed illusionary. Both approaches are united by Valérie Buess (D) in her piece "Kein Gefäß" ("Not a vessel"). Visual perception does not supply images of reality, but it rather suggests itself that it is our perception which creates realities. And the artist here shows us a bowl which is not a bowl. Buess arranges a fragile

bowl constructed of countless porcelain particles suspended in precise positions, derived associatively from the concept of "matter" in quantum physics, which has so little to do with our experience of reality. But form only develops when the particles are at rest - if the installation is set in motion, the form becomes formless. Roma Babuniak's (D) "Perception II", a piece purchased by the municipal authorities, discusses perception at the level of the material. The inner question, "What is it?" draws viewers closer and causes them to examine the papery nature of the porcelain tablets. Paper and porcelain, both translucent and brilliant white, both fundamental materials of human culture, both really and metaphorically inscribed with countless memories, can be read in immediate juxtaposition as a minor chronicle of cultural memory. The question of the material easily leads on to illusion - is it ceramic or not? Is it easier to succeed on



ILLUSTRATIONS

- top left - work by:
- Adriana Hartley
- bottom left - Valérie Buess
- bottom right - Chie Kobayashi



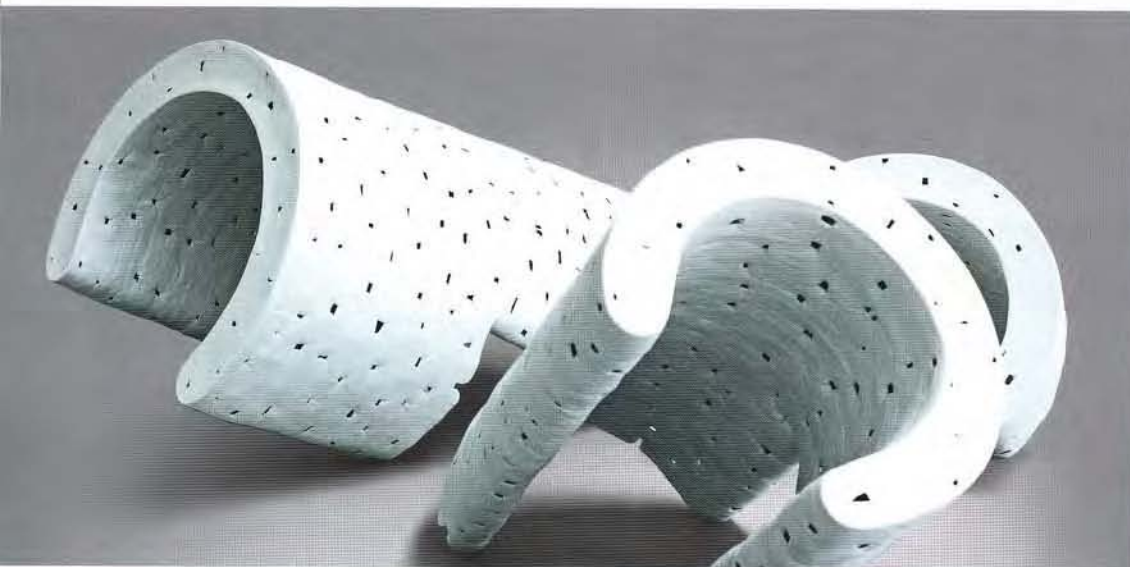
the global art market with non-ceramic works? Would camouflage be a solution?

The desire to question the mechanisms of the market with the camouflage effect is very much in evidence. A deception presented on this scale can refer to the surface, in this case of course also referring to the great art of glazing. A reflection of the nature of the surface and its semiotic nature in relation to what it conceals is particularly successful in Frank Louis' (D) prize-winning piece "If I were not empty, I would be full". His minimalist approach restricts the artist to glossy white cubes, with a perfect, white, lacquered surface reminiscent of plastic furniture from the 1970s. But these boxy forms are perforated and allow a glimpse of their interior, which is anything but "industrialised". It becomes apparent to the observer at this point that this really is a ceramic object. Coarse scraping movements in the surface structure give evidence the hollowing-out

process, the clay body is left in its earthy state and colour. The question remains as to what form the "inner form" has, which reveals itself as "empty space", and yet in the puzzle-picture between form and "not-form", it remains in existence as a spatial form. Working with internal space which does not reveal its true nature at first sight also dominates in the work by Chunbok lee (D), "Forest I" and "Forest II", a technically sophisticated interpretation of spaces and structures concealed in the interior of the sculptures. Their existence is mainly hinted at by the shape of the surface as evidence of the making process.

Surfaces, whether smooth or rough, delicate or voluminous, tell a story of the object. Or perhaps one that has nothing to do with the object. For instance if habits of perception are subverted. With forms and surfaces, Judith Runge (D) evokes the viscose softness of babies' teething rings rather than the fragile hardness of ceramic

material. Similarly, the formal patterns of fluffy materials that are often used for furnishings produce a pleasurable deception when they are interpreted in wire. By using additional materials, Ursula Comandeur (D) differentiates her work from the ceramic, and the specifically ceramic aspects of the material tend to become secondary. Helene Kortner (N) deals with the crunch question of "What is your relationship to ceramics?" in a completely different fashion – but takes no less pleasure. Her prizewinning installation, "Bohemian Art Nouveau" makes direct reference to a dominant tradition in making ceramics, which flourished particularly at the beginning of the last century in the Jugendstil and Art Déco movements. It was the fundamental conviction at that time that all the boundaries in art (particularly between genres) should be torn down – in the tradition of the 19th century, these were organised even more hierarchically





than today – to facilitate a genuine interpenetration of life and art. Kortner has recourse especially to the flowing, gleaming iridescent metallic colour patterns that were typical of glassware and ceramics from Bohemia at that time, intensifying the effect with irregular, dynamic surface structures. This leads to a visual overload. The excessive movement in colour and form conceals the figures, which on further inspection reveal themselves to be objects from a world of childish figures, which in their grotesque execution actually open up a link to contemporary fantasy worlds. The study of tradition which has found canonical form through art history, thus appears as a source of the creation of new things, which if they were merely new would have no value in themselves, but only become exciting and significant for us in their being repositioned within a specific relationship. The third prizewinning piece should also be seen in this context, Hugo Meert's

(B) "Read a made", which plays with the idea of Marcel Duchamp's epoch-making "Ready Mades". With his bottle dryers and urinals, Duchamps initiated a conceptual approach to artistic creation, which is still valid today, through ennobling it the context of the museum. Apart from the fact that the outline of the vessels is determined by the shape of individual words, the terms "made", "nice" or "lovely" refer explicitly to the craft-based character of ceramics – after all, these are vessels that are being shown here! Ultimately, a highly subtle or even subversive strategy becomes evident here to question the justification for the position of ceramics in the context of the arts.

Illusion was a perfect subject to inspire a large number of international artists to sound out and define the whole spectrum of ceramic art. Crossing the borders of space and time as in Petra Förster's (D) delightful talking bust, or in Nina Petrik's

(A) ceramic sketch of a film sequence, more obvious transformation processes in ceramics, of earth and fire into water and air, or even light (Adriana Hartley, CH, Maroh Iztok, SLO, or Marian Veronica Marcatili, AUS), or a fundamental analysis of the consistency of matter (Akazawa Yoshinori, J, Joana Teper, PL, Steve Hilton, USA, Studioceramica, CH, Rachèle Rivière, F), give us the opportunity to experience work in ceramics in its incredible diversity. This may be the reason for the judges' suggestion of not searching for a similarly fertile title for the 6th International Ceramics Biennale in Kapfenberg, asking instead for the (self)reflective breadth of ceramic art, giving up the idea of a title and categories for entries in favour of a self-confident positioning of ceramic art without any further constraints.

Dr. Astrid Kury is an art historian and is President of the Akademie in Graz.

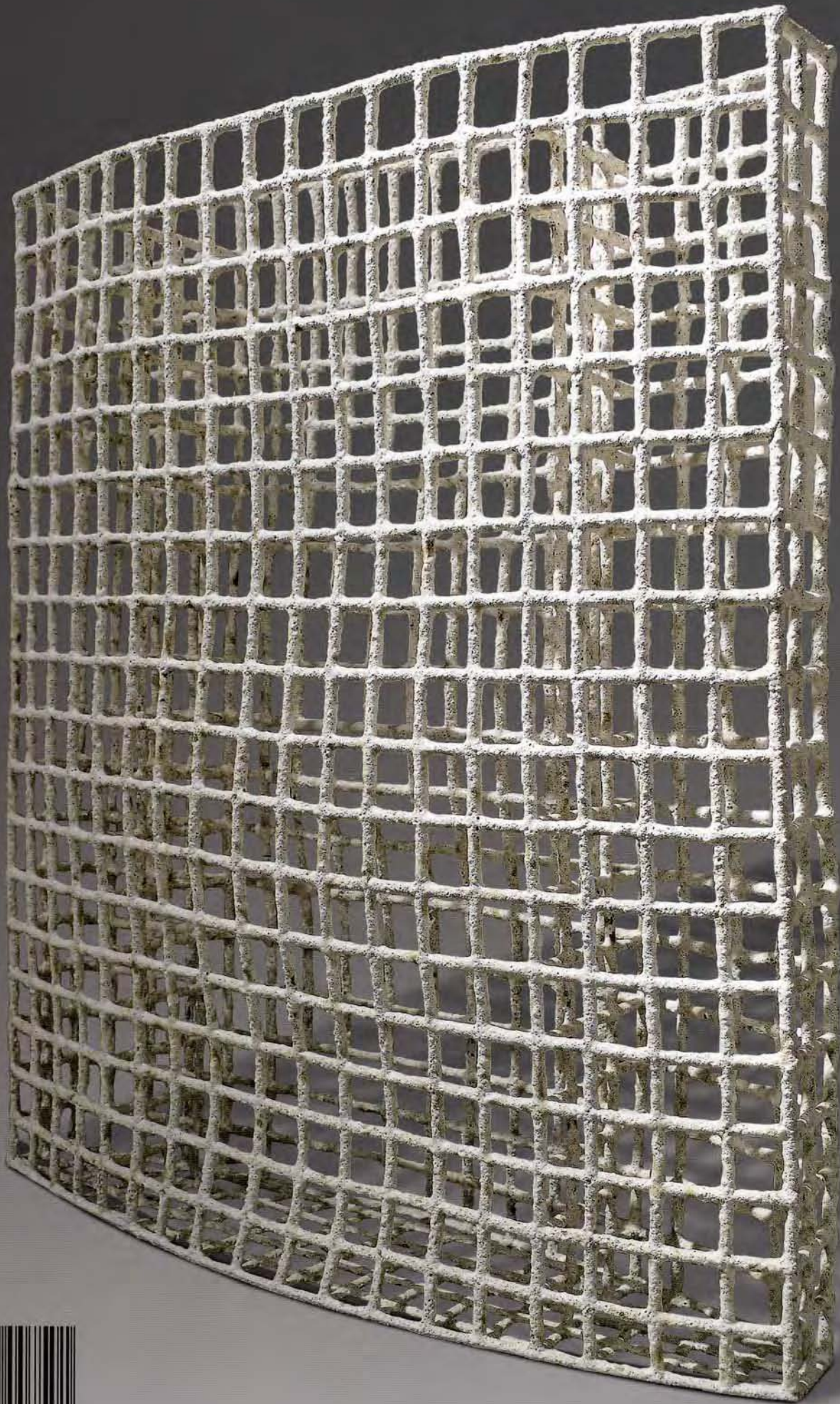
ILLUSTRATIONS

work by: opposite page

top left - Chun-Bok Lee
 top right - Judith Runge
 bottom left - Steve Hilton
 bottom right - Frank Louis

top left - Helene Kortner
 top right - Ursula Commandeur
 left - Hugo Meerts

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ISSN 1860-1049
US-\$ 9,50 | € 6,00