

# BEAUTY IN THE VOID

Ceramicist Gunilla Maria Åkesson's cylindrical objects are the result of endless experiments and mindful mishaps. Her goal is to lose control and find unexpected effects in the glaze.

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Text: CAROLINA SÖDERHOLM

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**G**unilla Maria Åkesson's cylinders in clay have taken her from the Scanian cow fields to the major cities of Europe. She was recently in Brussels and London. But although her lines are simple and straight, there is no predicting what she'll do.

– I often stand here in my studio wondering what I'm doing. But that's what my work is all about, entering that uncomfortable space that takes me forward, she says.

Outside her window at the farm in Komstad, the cows are grazing. Österlen is beautiful, despite the grey skies. She picks up her latest mishap from a shelf in what was formerly a car shop. The layers of slip and glaze have formed bubbles and folds over the cylinder's surface. Can't it be used in some way?

– My professor Hanne Heuch always said, "Turn it 180 degrees and see what happens." You must have the courage to go places where you may actually lose the work, says Gunilla Maria Åkesson.

At the time, during her years at the Academy of Art and Design in Bergen, Norway, she was frustrated by the need to always break boundaries. Yet that is what she's always done in her own way. This past summer, she was nominated for the prestigious Loewe Craft Prize, and exhibited along with other finalists at the London Design Museum.

– Now I do things that I know aren't actually possible. But they may still work? Like working with clay so thin, in such large volumes. It gives stability, as well as vulnerability.

It is tempting to place her work in a category of Scandinavian minimalism. It bears clean lines, a light zircon glaze whose splashes of cobalt and copper oxide seem to capture the movements of the sky. But on closer look, the austerity dissolves, while the glaze drips and runs. Each cylinder is turned and made by hand, a time-consuming job. In order to make it very thin, she uses paper fibres as reinforcement. The paper burns off with the heat of the kiln and forms craters in the glaze, an effect she deliberately works to achieve.

– I began logging everything I did, but realised it was no use. I can't control it, says Gunilla Maria Åkesson.

That is also the place she wants to go, where all control is lost. All in contrast to the methodical, almost meditative process of forming the cylinders.

– I have always felt at home in Japanese and Korean aesthetics. The natural simplicity that seems to arise on its own. But it is also the most difficult. For me, it has come from within.

She remained in Norway for over twenty years. At the time, she was already exhibiting internationally. Remnants of those days include bodily sculptures with voids and hides, in a tension between inside and out, the visible and the concealed. With time, her work got lighter.

"When I started making cylinders, I was close to quitting. I stood here with a finished studio, and doubted everything."

– When I work, I follow an intuition from within. Sometimes I only realise it afterwards. When I'm done with a series of pieces is when I'm done with that intuition.

But her sense of rootedness in her own inner being only arose once she changed focus.

– When I started making cylinders, I was close to quitting. I stood here with a finished studio, and doubted everything. The cylinder is like a blank canvas. It's clear, simple and open. An archetypal form that has always existed. But it was only in 2013 that I managed to work with it.

In her latest series, the glaze flows in dark greens and bold pinks. She is drawn to blackness.

– It is something that tries to breathe, that is about to come to life or drown, she reflects.

The shape is the same. It is the cylinder, the vessel, the container that both closes and opens itself, but never expects to be filled.

– I see my pieces as already filled. The emptiness is enough in itself, says Gunilla Maria Åkesson. ●

NAME: Gunilla Maria Åkesson

PROFESSION: Ceramicist, working in Komstad, Österlen

CURRENT WITH: Exhibitions in spring at Galleri Ping-Pong, Malmö (16/2-9/3),

Blås & Knåda, Stockholm (16/3-3/4) and Modern Masters 2019, Munich (13/3-17/3)

BACKGROUND: Raised in Älgö, Småland, educated at the Academy of Art and Design, Bergen 1987-92

