ALMINE RECH

By Fire, Ceramic Works

Oct 31 — Dec 15, 2018 | New York, Upper East Side

Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present *By Fire, Ceramic Works.*

Through the juxtaposition of works by Modernist masters and a diverse set of contemporary artists, *By Fire, Ceramic Works* explores the oppositional forces central to the materiality and history of ceramics. Works by Justin Adian, Miquel Barceló, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, Amy Bessone, Johan Creten, Lucio Fontana, Günther Förg, Mark Hagen, Wifredo Lam, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, Joan Miró, Ron Nagle, Mai-Thu Perret, Pablo Picasso, Anselm Reyle, Julian Schnabel, Arlene Shechet, Claire Tabouret & Pierre Yovanovitch, Rosemarie Trockel, and Betty Woodman will be on view from October 31 to December 15, 2018.

As one of the oldest artistic traditions, ceramics is imbued with a sense of mysticism tied to the unpredictable nature of the firing process. The artist cedes a certain level of authorship to the transformative power of fire, which solidifies the substance, color, and utility of the work in the darkness of a closed kiln. Despite the alchemical implications of the medium, ceramics have traditionally been defined by their functional and domestic uses, divorced from the aura surrounding 'higher' art forms such a painting and sculpture.

In the 20th century, many distinguished artist such as Miró, Fontana, Lam, and Picasso incorporated ceramics into their larger practices. Enamoured with clay's dual capacity for figuration and abstraction, ornament and utility, these artists framed the medium as an extension of modern art. Nonetheless, in relation to painting and sculpture, this body of work has often been viewed a subordinate rather than parallel pursuit.

In the wake of postmodernism, which saw the destruction of traditional hierarchies of taste, a new school of contemporary ceramicists emerged. Artists such as Creten, Nagle, and Woodman position ceramics as an intermediary between painting and sculpture, celebrating the fluidity of their chosen materials. Others, like Bessone and Trockel, create forms in an unexpected medium, reflective of the temperamental character of the firing process.

By placing modern and postmodern ceramics in context with one another, the exhibition highlights the dialectical nature of the medium.

Delegating the Decisive Moment (of Completion)

Dominique Païni

A Brief History of Ceramics

The Italian Renaissance gave ceramics a prominent place in religious art (the Florentine della Robbia dynasty, the Faenza tradition). Majolica (decorative objects, often depicting mythological scenes or portraits of great warriors, real or legendary), along with aristocratic and ecclesiastical portraiture (busts and faces, raw or glazed) gave great importance to a kind of three-dimensional painting in which the artist's hand is not the only factor. In addition to the considerable role that ceramics played at the time in the broader scale of the arts—with its early contribution to establishing modern principles of distinction between the applied and decorative arts—it also served extensively in architectural ornament, Northern countries, as much as those around the Mediterranean, covered the walls of their palaces and more modest dwellings with mosaics, often narrative (mythological or religious).

The somewhat succinct format of this retrospective does not allow me to dwell on the 17th and 18th centuries, during which the hierarchical gap between fine arts and ceramics was substantially widened, and the standing of ceramics as a major art eroded.

In the early 20th century, which witnessed the birth of modern art, ceramics was often seen as a pursuit *in parallel* with other visual disciplines, an "additional" (if not secondary) practice bordering on "domestic" applications, restricted in the supposed hierarchy of disciplines to the production of dishes, pots, vases and plates—simply objects endowed with *usages*. Such is the superficial memory conveyed by classical art history. For a long time, the fate of Bernard Palissy—potter, enameller, glassmaker and scholar of the French Renaissance—served little purpose other than to express the moralistic agenda pushed in 20th-century schoolbooks with heroic and inspirational tales. This was, however, the same century that saw ceramics take off once more.

The arts of earth and fire were not fully reaffirmed as an experimental practice, separate from the decorative vocation of "tableware," until the 19th century. Art Nouveau ceramists—Auguste Delaherche, Alexandre Bigot, and Félix Marcilhac, aided by the Müller factories in Ivry—helped revive polychrome sculpture; major painters in the turn of the century, from Gauguin to the Vienna Secession, explored a new repertoire of forms, materials, and colors echoing the innovations of Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Neo-Impressionism, the Nabis, Fauvism, or Cubism. And in "rediscovering" ceramics, the greatest artists of the 20th century—Miró, Fontana, Lam, Picasso (a selection of their most iconic work is shown here)—extended the unlikely balance between figure and abstraction, between completion and *non-finito*, between ornament and usage.

The Ceramics of 20th-Century Masters

The character (*Personnage*, 1956) created by Joan Miró and Josep Llorens Artigas is truly a culmination of figurative uncertainty: anything that could easily anthropomorphize the shapeless volume actually defeats interpretation, by the very fact that all facial attributes are wildly exaggerated: the grossly distorted nose, the pierced and swollen face. And what if the figure, with its arms outspread, was just a simple peasant jug waiting to be passed around for a drink?

Going further with the uncertainty of mimetic vanity, Pablo Picasso's "lazy" trick leaves his work unfettered by interpretive suspense: it forbids the eye from making a final choice between the circle of a face and that of a plate (*Face,* 1965), blurring the borders between the exercise of art and the usage of objects.

Wilfredo Lam's outstanding series does not leverage the hazards of firing to unsettle the relationship between artwork (invented) and object (manufactured). Here, the Cuban artist questions the symbolic function of the art object itself, but uses no theoretical ostentation: his choice for this series is to create an effect of repetition, of ritual revival, by elevating his dishes, which ignore the loneliness of the *objet d'art,* to the power of a magical object.

Lucio Fontana's humour debunks his penetrating cruelty: to me, this plaque evokes the starched shirtfront of a turn-of-the century dandy, its holes expecting their additional buttons. More seriously, Fontana reminds us that ceramics is the welcoming material of choice for a certain brand of violence in art, for the frequent and necessary brutality of artistic gestures, sister to the sculptor's chisel or the burin on the engraver's printing plate.

More than sculpture itself, perhaps ceramics invite an exaggeration spurred and encouraged by kneading. The forms of ceramics are not engendered by the brutal strike of the hammer or cruel scarring of the chisel. And although the initial phase of ceramic production is relatively "gentle"—the wheel, the modelling, the messy fiddling of fingers, the polishing strokes—fire then rivals the torture inflicted on stone or on twisted metals plunged into the forge.

What explains the regular disappearance of ceramics as a major art? How can we interpret the reasons for its return to artistic prominence in the 20th century, the most industrial and mechanistic era of all? And finally, how can we fathom its unquestionably significant survival in many contemporary artists (here, for instance, the series by Günther Förg)?

The Salutary Vocation of Ceramics

With its intermittent exteriority compared to the other arts, is ceramics not a reflection of one of the *tragic* torments pervading the practice of the arts, with fire as its most appropriate symbol?

Art history has not often dwelt on an intimate part of the artist's activity, which can be encapsulated in a set of questions: What are the criteria that allow artists to consider their work *finished*, *complete*? When do artists consider themselves entitled to turn their back on their ongoing work—to literally turn away from it and surrender it to the eyes of the amateur, collector, merchant, art critic, or historian? How do artists measure the completion of their work, given that wholeness is always relative but nevertheless endowed with a specific power to please the eye? How does the sense of achievement settle in to interrupt the creative work of concerted movements and spiritual agitation? How do artists come to believe that the finalized harmony or constructed disharmony, the composition or stabilized imbalance obtained are horizons reached at the end of a complex, perhaps even painful pursuit, both intuitive and propounded? By what practical and mental means do artists consider that their work is done? In more narcissistic terms, is it in the course of these final stages that they are invited, if not summoned, to evaluate themselves? Talent or craftsmanship, skill or innovation, secret ethics or ruses revealed?

An Orphaned Work

These questions should be more often made central when reflecting on the artistic imitation of nature and/or the invention of forms, because we tend to forget too easily that they assail artists when the creative process ends. Is this the torment Marcel Duchamp experienced when he called his *Large Glass* a "definitively unfinished" work?

Think of Cézanne (or Bonnard, or Turner…) when, with a few extra brushstrokes, he *touched up* a landscape already hanging in a gallery or living room. Is it possible to resist regret when an orphaned work cries out for its former master? In truth, what reasons are there to consider it immutably finalized? Perhaps it can be seen as such if the work was arduous, but its condition can be refuted by its display in a space other than the workshop, or by the opinion of viewers.

Is enough thought, in aesthetics and art history, put into this decisive and crucial moment when a work is detached, torn away from its creator? As the decision is entirely the artist's responsibility, let us say that, beyond the wholehearted admiration that the artist's talent and efforts deserve, it is perhaps only at this paradoxical moment of the creative process—deciding it is complete—that the work's fate is essentially sealed. No wonder, then, that the artist's fate is also at stake.

Perhaps one dimension of any artistic endeavor lies in the deviation, the circumventing, the avoidance, or the delegation of the artist's responsibility in deciding when a work is complete.

For the artist, a *mistake* made at this time in the elaboration of forms can suddenly defile or destroy the effects of toil and genius. I was mentioning Cézanne… For him, satisfaction was probably tenuous but relief was possible, thereby reducing uncertainty in the ultimate decision. The fact that he could return—stealthily, even—to the gallery or living room defied the sacrosanct "do not touch" of museums or commercial spaces. The furious revenge and anger manifested in never reaching a conclusion are truly consistent with Cézanne's temperament, infused with unflinching resentment for himself and his own *insufficiency*.

Other ways to spare yourself the pains of a crucial, decisive moment, as Cézanne further illustrates, include repetition of a work or iteration of the same motif (the Sainte Victoire, obviously), copying (Renaissance artists sometimes copied their own work), or producing series with increasingly narrow differences between versions (from Monet's haystacks and Rouen cathedral façades to Minimalist and Conceptual art in the 20th century).

This also brings to mind more recent protocols deployed to delay the "full stop" decision—for instance, by the abstract and gestural artists of a genre known as Abstract Expressionism, especially in America. When the paint drops stopped raining down, was Jackson Pollock able to identify, to designate a comforting end point? Was his dancing around the canvas not an endless touch-up serving to postpone the moment when the painted surface was placed upright? Was it just as distressing for Franz Kline to decide on the completion of each of his paintings, once his layered black and white brush strokes had drowned out the order of appearance of shadows and light?

One could also mention the last two years of Nicolas de Staël's life, in which he produced 250 works in Provence after a trip to Agrigento. All are haunted by the torment of completion.

A Dialectical Art

What of ceramics in all this?

It was always there. I never stopped suggesting one of its vocations and one of the reasons for modern artists' fervent feelings towards it. Could ceramics not be another way to push back the tragic responsibility that artists have, towards themselves and the completion of their projects? Could ceramics not allow them to count on the forces of nature, rather than on modest human, mental, and technical forces? The transformative power of fire, like that of water for ink wash painting, could accomplish, and therefore complete…

From an Art Nouveau centerpiece, the purpose of which is cancelled by deliriously decorative modelled and fired shapes, to the compartmented, bicolor clay-and-enamel *ronde bosse* of Fernand Léger, *firing* supersedes the artist in his sovereign capacity and duty to judge whether or not a work is finished. But the greatness of this art, contracting the clay, transforming the enamel powder, liquefied into a vitrified surface offering an illusion of robustness negated by knocks and falls, the *art of firing* asks for its due in exchange for the aesthetic relief and moral alleviation it provides. The art of ceramics generates other anxieties and uncertainties. But here, the consequences do not depend on the artist: they arise in the darkness of a closed kiln. *In* ceramics—as one says *in* painting or *in* sculpture—the "infernal" firing stage completes the work without consulting the artist. An ordeal by fire, so to speak.

When artists place their *raw* pieces in the kiln—the abstract or figurative volumes they have chosen to model, turn, and polish, and then, in successive steps, cover with slip or set with enamel for the finishing touch—what have they to fear? Unfettered by the duty to declare their work complete, they delegate the final judgement to the flames—a tragic symbol indeed, given the constructive/destructive effects of fire. The artist/ceramist then feels renewed curiosity after the experience, the effects of which are mostly out of his control. He discovers the seductive quirks of substance and colors that his imagination and handiwork contributed to, but not decisively *in the end*.

Can ceramics thus be seen as a dialectical art, combining the malleability of moist clay and burning intensity of flames, the controlled movements of the spatula or brush and the unpredictable whims of varying degrees of heat, the line/surface relationship twisted in the incandescent kiln, its very unpredictability stripping the artist of his last hopes and illusions, of what made him believe he would still be firmly in control?

Dialectics rather than tragedy, opposing and uniting human programming and the chance actions of natural elements.