



PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF

'Passage', 2007, porcelain, slab built, raku fired, 30 x 130 x 30 cm

Emotive Structures in Clay

THE CERAMICS OF BRIGITTE LONG

Employing stoneware and porcelain as her medium, Brigitte Long defines herself a sculptor. Simplicity, balance, power, strength and fragility are the signature characteristics of her work.¹ Profile by Betsy Shands.

THE first encounter Brigitte Long had with clay dates back almost 30 years to when she was a student at the School of Fine Arts (evening classes at Quimper and Grenoble). Working in clay in tandem with other media, at one decisive point, clay imposed itself as the vehicle of choice for her expression. Like a game of hand ball, passing the clay between her hands, she found her life's work. It became a dialogue with matter. Using clay, porcelain and adding other materials such as paper and plant material, she embarked on an adventure which is continuing today. Exploring textures and different firing

techniques, she decided Raku best suited her search for modes of expressing her innermost yearnings. She also discovered that the demands of the technique pushed her to find her own language, her own interpretation and, ultimately, develop her own unique expression. When dealing with intense, rough or subtle forms, she sensed secret stirrings inside the matter that space would suddenly break through to create a singular encounter between man and nature where the balance is ephemeral. Clay transforms into stone, to rock, to cliff, like witnessing history, or seeking a stable and peaceful world enounced



PHOTO: CHRISTINE REFALO

'Blocks', 2013, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 25 x 40 x 20 cm



PHOTO: CHRISTINE REFALO

'Feux Follets' (Small Ghosts), 2014, stoneware, hand built, raku fired, tallest approx. 15 x 10 x 5 cm



PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF

'Blue', 2012, stoneware, hand built, raku fired, tallest approx. 35 x 28 x 20 cm



PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF

'Carré', 2008, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 42 x 55 x 16 cm

through silence like milestones along the road. Clay creates and defines spaces. As most of the sculptures are white or off white in colour her 'pieces look like fragments of a white desert' (Gina de Luca – *Arte Diem* 2013). Nature becomes a prelude to creation. In her ceramic sculptures or installations she plays with the dichotomies of stillness v tension, emptiness v full spaces. Opposites achieve complementarity rather than conflict in her pieces.

Brigitte Long lived in Brittany, France for a number of years. In 1990 she opened her first studio in Grenoble and taught ceramics and sculpture. She lives now in a small village close to the Alps in France, the home of the composer Berlioz. It is a calm, quiet and somewhat remote place with panoramic views across a fertile valley seeding dreams and imagination. Her small light-filled studio is awash with clay, sculptural works in progress and paintings in the process of emergence, where the flow of ideas and tinkering abound. It resembles a beehive with continuous activity going on in every corner, surrounded by objects of every description, such as bits of iron, scraps of wood, shells, interesting stones, pieces of bark – all of which stir the artist's curiosity and contribute to her inspirational collection, providing fodder for her next idea. She gives new life to these bits and pieces, whether from nature or human origin, animating them once again through the clay renderings and telling new stories.

'She combines slate with metal in her Raku. Each element finds its poised place and each gesture translates an exactitude. The mineral world is thus imbued with beauty. We find ourselves transported to a place between stone and dream. These stones in their silence speak of itchings of the soul and touch us in a quiet inner sanctum,' gallerist Martine Cazin.²

Long's initial contact with Japanese culture was through the study of ikebana (the ancient art of flower arrangement) which employs a mixture of simplicity and strength in its ethos. She was so inspired by this that she adopted a similar approach to creating form. She finds that in her studio there is a dialogue between sensations and feelings that translates into matter. She works with slabs or lumps of clay and joins or builds them into the desired shapes then engraves or paints them with oxides and glaze or alters their appearance through the firing process. What begins as a rough mass of clay is stretched, stroked and shaped, then subjected to layers of coloured kaolin coatings which finished with matt or slightly shiny glazes. Colours are superimposed on the large structured forms to create the finished sculpture. She enjoys the process of playing with



PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF

'Mégalihe', 2009, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 70 x 38 x 25 cm



'Traverse', 2012, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 25 x 45 x 35 cm

PHOTO: CHRISTINE REFALO



'Walls', 2011, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 75 x 60 x 32 cm

PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF



'Full Moon', 2012, stoneware, slab built, raku fired, 65 x 60 x 20 cm

PHOTO: ANDRÉ LE MAUFF

light through the colours she applies on her sculptures and her clay paintings. She incorporates, at times, other materials to produce diverse effects and explores new ways of combining matter with matter.

In a recent article published in *Revue de la Céramique et du Verre*, Maud Grillet of Terra Viva Galerie wrote: 'Strange and subtle balance characterises the works of Brigitte Long. While the inert mineral aspect of her work is quite obvious, the pieces themselves are inhabited by an imperceptible movement. There is a slightly unsteady, quite rounded shape, a wavy edge, a twisting in the clay. The contrast is always present and alive in her art and speaks through it. She carries a fascination for the power and fragility of nature into her works, hence they contain holes, tears, engraved markings and polished parts. She admits to not particularly liking smooth surfaces. The work reduces things to the essential and is made stronger with colours and the firing process. Damaged, uneven, bumpy surfaces appear as natural accidents or injuries or wounds demonstrating the underlying violence hidden in these peaceful works of art. Suspended between pain and tenderness, the works of Brigitte Long are like a road trip with bridges and passages, tunnels, with links that join together and create a constant throughout her work. Shapes, drapes, folding screens, blades, clumps of earth rise up or topple over. All of these are images of the successive constructions that structure and draw an existence.'

In self-expression and creativity borders do not exist, as in travelling and meeting others mark the road. Outside of the solitude of studio work communication and sharing with other ceramists and artists is essential according to Brigitte Long, who has taken part in many residential retreats and symposiums in numerous countries including German, Spain, France, Poland, Czech Republic and Japan. These encounters inspired proposals for her to take part in joint projects with other artists such as painters and a calligrapher. She found these joint ventures to be very interesting and exciting while also soliciting a certain discomfort. She recalls feeling like a tightrope walker teetering on the edge and being pushed into uncharted territory that invariably created new openings and larger vistas. Long recognises the necessity to be constantly evolving, to be challenged, to find new ideas, new forms, different ways of seeing her work, testing new materials, exploring within to bring forth freshness and greater depth

to her work without. She finds it enriching to share with others her own vantage point and sensibilities within groups like "Correspondances Croisées" and "Chanteloube".

Since 1995 Brigitte Long (pictured) has taken part in major art fairs and ceramics events throughout Europe, Japan and Australia. She has also held numerous solo exhibitions in reputable commercial galleries in many countries

Through the French ceramics organization she is part of and thanks to Jane Annois, an Australian ceramist, links between French and Australian ceramists have developed and expanded. Long finds these sorts of exchanges mutually enriching and has taken part in numerous events in Australia over the past eight years. Among these have been events in Skepsi Gallery, Manningham Gallery in 2007, Narek Galleries in 2009, Qdos Gallery in 2013. And more recently in February, 2015, at Narek Galleries in Tanja, NSW, where five French ceramists exhibit their works.



PHOTO: CHRISTINE REFALO

Betsy Shands

FOOTNOTES

1. Martine Cazin, gallerist- La Maison de Brian, 2012.
2. Ibid