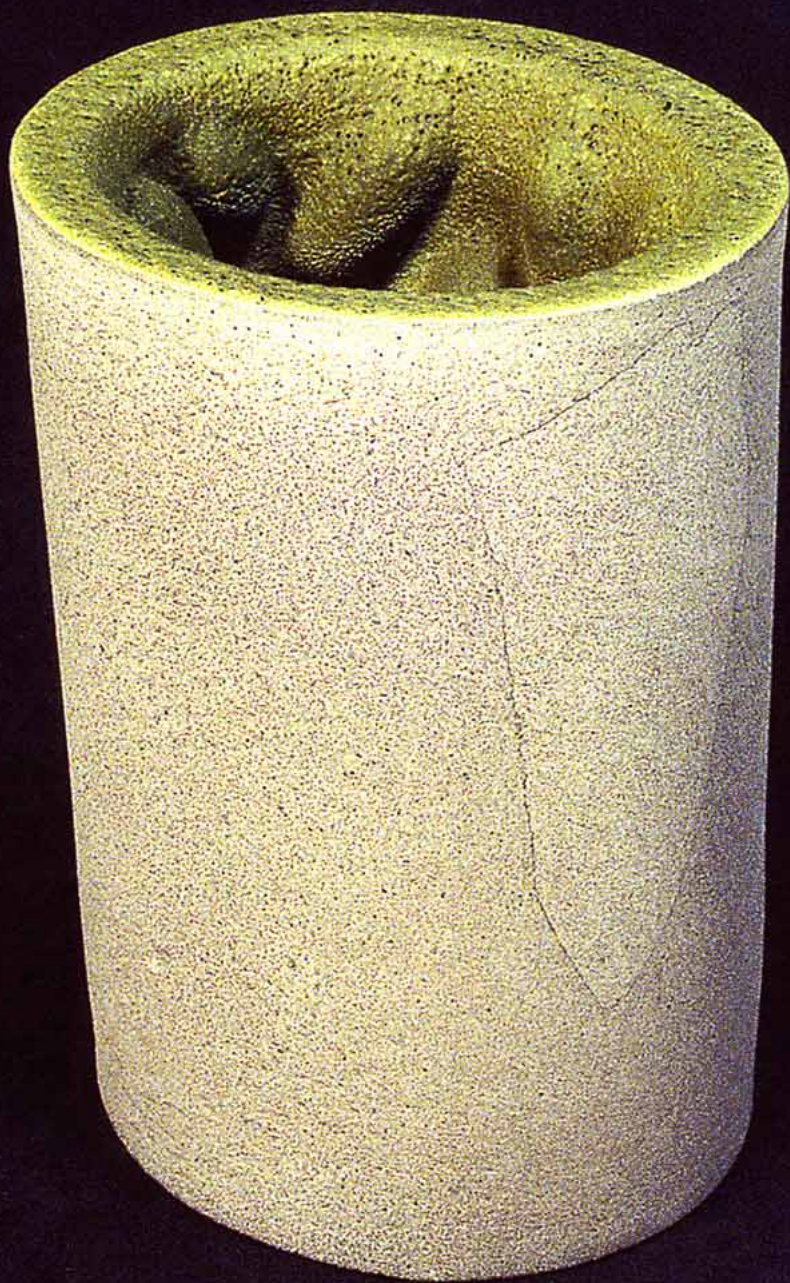


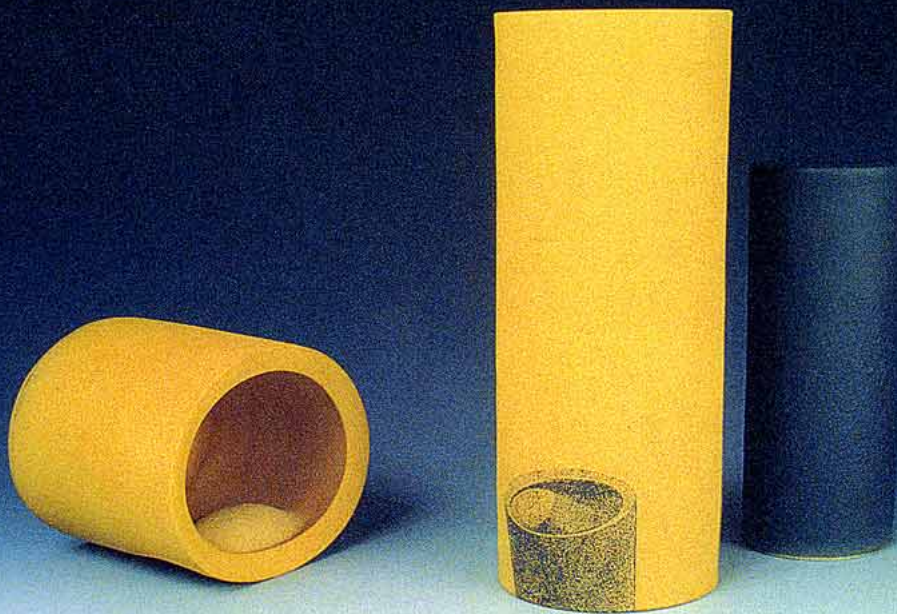
Bettina Baumann's  
**Vessel – Spaces**

*Article by Deborah Malor*



*Organic and Constructed III. 2005. Stoneware. 21 x 13 x 12 cm.*





*Inter-Influencies. 2005. Stoneware. 24 x 40 x 22 cm.*

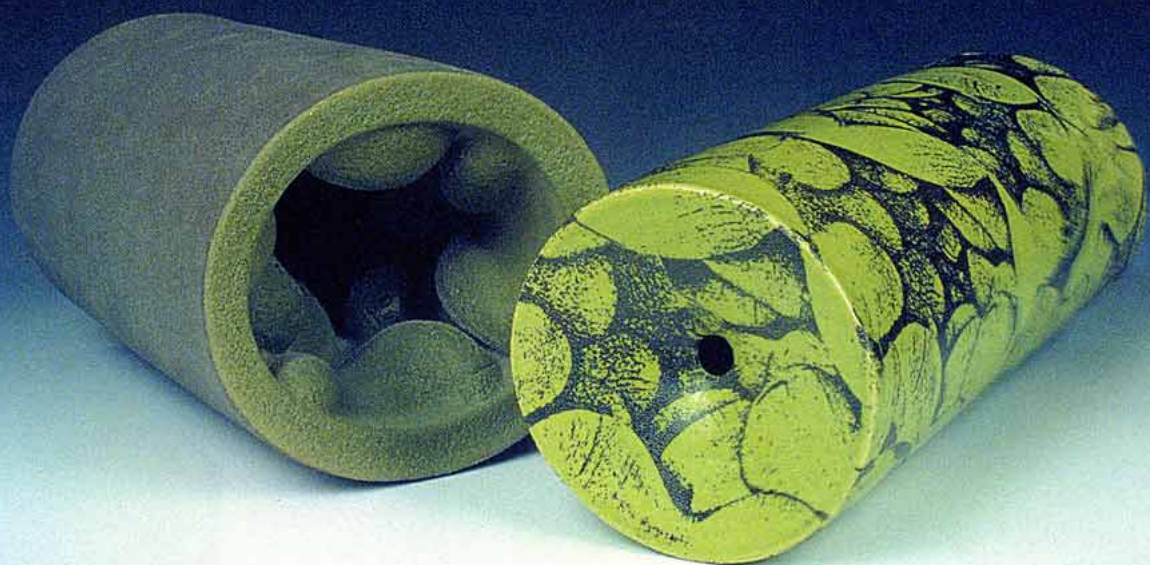
**I**N 2004, SWISS CERAMIST BETTINA BAUMANN WAS looking for opportunities to extend her practice. With a background in music and a degree in humanities/education, for Baumann, ceramics had begun in Wales. There, in 1996, she felt at last she was doing "the right thing". By 1999 she had completed an honours degree in ceramics at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. While in Wales she was initially influenced and taught by the Irish ceramist, Billy Adams, "falling in love with surface", as she puts it. She had also extended her interest in photography: images of natural textures – stones, sands, soils, the materials of a ceramic body, catalogue her fascination. Now she was keen to bring a different perspective to her ongoing exploration of the idea of the vessel. The serendipitous discovery of reference to Tasmanian landscape in a magazine inspired her to travel to Launceston for 12 months. The move itself, from a personal and cultural centre to the new horizons viewed from a rim that always tilts towards that centre, became symbolic of her work.

By the time she arrived in Tasmania, Baumann had developed an impressive exhibition record for someone so recently come to the art of ceramics. Since 1997, she has taken part in at least 10 significant exhibitions, including solo shows at Zentrum PPE (2000) and at Galerie Kulturprozent (2001), both in Zurich. She has received recognition at the First International Ceramic Biennale in Korea, and at Designer Crafts 2000, the

Crafts Design Exhibition of the British Crafts and Design Society, London. She is the founder of the Swiss ceramics group K 02, other members include Andreas Steinemann, Andreas Schneider, Sibylle Meier, Sophie Lechner, Ursula Frueh and Bruno Fischer. The group engages with questions of perception and communication of ceramics objects, a critical engagement indeed for Baumann whose relationship with her audience is crucial to the rethinking of the vessel forms she uses as the basis of her visual language.

It seems so simple, to consider the idea of the vessel in the context of ceramics. To a non-ceramist the relationship of clay to vessel might appear a matter of commonsense, even beyond questioning. To Bettina Baumann, the acceptance of the vessel as natural to ceramics leaves it open for consideration. Baumann worked to reduce the vessel to its simplest form, that of the cylinder, either circular or elliptical. In Tasmania, she found the cylinder used repeatedly in the industrial architecture of the Inveresk cultural precinct in Launceston where she worked. She wrote of encountering the cylinder, "again and again horizontally and vertically in Tasmania's landscape: in the shape of silos, industrial sites or water pipes". She also found inspiration in the range and warmth of colour in both the built and natural forms. In response she took on technical challenges to retain the colour and to retain the touch of sand on fingers, the microcosm of a windy beach.





*Inter-Causalities*. 2005. Stoneware. 11 x 40 x 26 cm.

Wherever she may be working the key to Baumann's most recent making and thinking – to her these activities seem inseparable – lies in her ongoing engagement with phenomenology. Whereas the curse of 'theory' has exacerbated the art/craft debate in many studio contexts and the schools from which they derive, Baumann wears her European culture lightly, making natural her philosophical concerns. It is without any affectation that she finds grist for thinking the vessel in Martin Heidegger's 1950 lecture *Das Ding* ('The Thing'). In one of many passages that illuminate Baumann's work, Heidegger contemplates what is a jug, a commonsense ceramic form: "Sides and bottom, of which the jug consists and by which it stands, are not really what does the holding. But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No – he shapes the void."

Through this text it is easy to see how Baumann relates to the shaping of form, the negating of an inside by seeing it as the outside, the edge of a void. The sublimely textured inner skin of *Organic and Constructed III* (2005) or the turned glove of *Organic and Constructed I* (2005) both bring the tactility of Baumann's Tasmanian experience to a pure cylindrical vessel and the juxtapositioning of its spaces. Heidegger's observations continue: "For it, in it, and out of it, [the potter] forms the clay into the form. From start to

finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as container in the shape of a containing vessel." The range of containing vessels that Baumann has drawn on in her work is as broad as her reduction of the vessel to the cylinder is refined. Of course, there is the human body and, arguably, the human mind, and then there are the inevitable references to things architectural and industrial: Baumann has commented that the cylinder itself should be considered as "a metaphor for a constructed, human-generated and organised environment" and yet at the same time "relates to the human body". The language of contrast, of the organic and constructed, is central to understanding the nuances in Baumann's work.

It is in Heidegger's closing phrases that there appears a space into which Baumann may invest something of her interest in the complex relationship of art to its craft, of thinking to making: "The jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds." It seems that the qualities that ground the forms she makes, are derived through Baumann's interest in surface as a thing in itself, as much as in the character of the clay that is malleable. (In Tasmania she used raku clay combined with a fine throwing clay for plasticity), and forgiving of the rapidity with which she must work to achieve these seamless elegant forms.





Outside view of *Vessel-Spaces*. Installation. Photography and Ceramics at the Powerhouse Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania, 2005.

In *Vessel – Spaces*, her 2005 exhibition at the Powerhouse Gallery, Launceston, Baumann extended her play of three-dimensional surfaces by introducing to these grounds two-dimensional images of aspects of the same or related vessels. The entrance to the exhibition eased the viewer into the space by the careful placement of computer-generated photographic enlargements that had already invaded the void of the vessel, that gave permission for close inspection of each form, even to the point of allowing the audience to re-arrange the groups Baumann had placed on large painted drums across the gallery space.

In a series of veilings and light-plays, often using curved translucent screenings and capitalising on the variations in natural light cutting through the tall windows of the gallery, Baumann brought her audience inside a vessel, took them into the curves and undulations at the heart of the form, the permeable interstices between inside and outside, the activity of the void. Her initial arrangement of forms brought to notice a series of perceptual relationships between the vessels, and the spaces they both actively contained. Baumann had provided a further amplifying of the ambiguity of each vessel's void by imaging that which defines the void and reapplying the manipulated image to the vessels, as in *Inter-Influences* (2005) and to a greater and even more complex extent in the pairing that is *Inter-Causalities* (2005).

In mounting *Vessel – Spaces* Baumann rethought the dichotomies that Heidegger contested – the inactivity of void, the activity of holding, the barriers to representation itself – and makes them sensible to the viewer through the act of display. In one way, the display removed Baumann's vessels from the domain of those that hold (something) as a function (the jug) to those that hold as a meaning (the actively permeable membrane that is surface). This activity maintains and encourages Baumann's continued concerns with the viewers of her work and the language of viewing and the communication of viewing itself. Even in spoken language there is an inside and an outside, a 'what we mean' and 'what we say'. Words may hide as well as reveal meaning. Gesture may obstruct as much as emphasise. All give meaning to their apparent opposite. Why should we expect a visual language to be any different?

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Deborah Malor is a writer on the arts from Tasmania. Bettina Baumann returned to Switzerland in 2005. With the members of K 02, she will present a variety of projects in TON TRANS FORMER at the Ortsmuseum Meilen near Zurich, 2-17 September 2006. For information, contact: [keramik02@yahoo.de](mailto:keramik02@yahoo.de)