

Roland Summer

The Enduring Rewards of Proceeding Slowly

Article by Josef Strasser



Form. 2006. 40 cm/h. Terra sigillata, burnished raku.



Two Forms. 2006. 46 cm/h. Terra sigillata, burnished, raku.

ROLAND SUMMER (BORN IN 1955) LIVES AND WORKS IN Velden am Woerthersee, a small, lakeside town in Carinthia in southern Austria. The beautiful, dreamlike scenery invites one to linger and relax, yet such surroundings can also inspire creative work.

In principle, Austria is not a country noted for ceramics. There are historical roots, such as Gmünder Keramik, which came into being close to the German border, and later the ceramics of the Wiener Werkstätte but, generally speaking, modern ceramics has not been able to find favourable structures here. There is no museum in the whole of Austria

specially dedicated to this type of applied art. There are no galleries to represent ceramic artists internationally, no centres and hardly any collectors of contemporary work. It is therefore all the more surprising that this small country produces not only ceramic artists able to bear international comparison but who also achieve worldwide acclaim.

Without doubt one of them is Roland Summer. His work is less about emerging from an Austrian tradition, apart from this country being the site of its creation, and more about a product which is independent of place in a globalised world. His forms



Vessel. 2006. 28 cm/h. Terra sigillata, burnished raku.

and techniques evince a discussion of past cultures on various continents. Africa, and especially the Sudan, plays a role, as do Asia and, of course, Europe. Summer works with raku, an ancient Japanese pottery method, originally inseparable from Zen Buddhism and the Tea Ceremony. As important for his work is the use of terra sigillata, which originated in Italy of the Roman period, and which he applies in a specific way. However, Summer's broad knowledge of ancient cultures and techniques is merely the starting point for his own creations which are situated in the present – the here and now – with traditions transcended and the future mapped out.

Roland Summer turned to ceramics relatively late, having first completed his studies in architecture at the Technical University of Graz (1974-80). Although he finally decided against a career in this discipline, the association with architecture and its questions, which are, at the least, also questions for mankind in general, was to remain a lasting influence. Above all, the encounter with Hugo Kuekelhaus (1900-1984), one of the most important initiators of teaching in the fields of sense perception, architecture and ecological approaches, was in retrospect the decisive impetus in Summer's turning to ceramics. Impressed by this versatility and ability to assemble the most diverse

matter before the mental eye, he decided to create something using his hands, not in order to plan extensively, but to create and build in detail.

After a long period of experimentation, numerous dead ends and detours, Summer finally found his own direction at the end of the '80s. Time did and still does play an important part. One discovers this, in an absolutely positive manner, by viewing his work. Summer does not use a fast pottery wheel, but coils his ceramics inch by inch. The pieces grow, as it were, out of themselves. This involves bringing together the characteristics of organic, softly rounded forms and his preferred technique, terra sigillata, in the best possible way.

The 'magic moment' for Summer does not occur only after the firing, but also, and in particular, at that moment when the moist gleam of the hand-built piece stands ready on his workbench. This is one of the most exciting moments in the creative process. It does not mean that further treatment is not important. Quite the reverse. Another step follows: the application of the terra sigillata, which can differ depending on the colours, and which will have a decisive influence on the piece's final appearance. Terra sigillata does not only bring back the shiny surface which was lost in the drying process but also the layer for the smoke traces which are so characteristic of his work.



Three Vessels. 2006. Largest 52 cm/h. Red, blue, white terra sigillata, burnished raku.

Summer has, therefore, in this way, developed an entirely individual technique. He refers to it as "Lost Glaze". After the biscuit firing the vessels are covered with a separating slip, sometimes in combination with a glaze. Lines are drawn into this, even though, without this treatment, crackles will still appear after the raku firing. The coating splits and peels during the cooling phase when plunged into water, leaving a negative image on the surface in the form of smoke traces.

At a certain distance the pieces look like conventionally glazed ceramics, but on closer inspection irregularities become evident; lines and crackle patterns begin to blur. They do not really exist, only their negative images. At the same time they form an inseparable part of the vessel in not appearing as an applied coat but as the material itself. This the difference between Summer's work and glazed ceramics. For him the glaze is a supplement, a surface covering which does not arise out of the piece. Typically, his glaze cracks away. It is only a medium for the purpose, not part of the completed object.

Summer's smooth and burnished surfaces possess totally different aesthetic qualities depending on drawing and colour. The vessels with lines acquire an almost ethereal quality while the latest light-coloured

work, with its tender cloudy traces of smoke encourage associations to marble.

It is important for Roland Summer that one can see into his ceramics. Each has an opening to render inside and outside both visible and touchable. This clearly establishes that they are vessels, while his latest pieces with their asymmetrical protrusions remind us of the work of Hans Arp or certain idol-like forms. We are always concerned here with vessels, not objects, and rounded forms almost always play an important part.

Round forms appear more erotic than square ones. And in Summer's work eroticism play a vital though submerged role. A Korean admirer of his work has expressed this by comparing the bodylike forms with their smooth flattened surfaces to "women's skin".

A further aspect in this context is the *Pairs* which have led like a continuous thread through his work since the mid '90s. It is not merely about placing two vessels side by side, as they do not only correspond with the space around them, but above all with each other and in the establishment of a relationship. The space between appears as negative space (empty space) and gains in this sense a special importance. Out of this juxtaposition of the vessels emerges architecture in space. It is made evident, particularly in the



Blue Bowl. 2006. 28 cm/d. Blue terra sigillata, burnished raku.



White Vase. 2006. 37 x 40 cm. terra sigillata, burnished raku.

case of the *Pairs*, how Summer's view of space is influenced by his earlier studies in architecture.

In surveying Summer's work over the years the constants and changes become apparent. Prevalent in his work is a meditative character which does not involve only the outer forms but also the processes which develop out of his working methods.

Above all, Roland Summer's vessels manifest a special austerity which has to some extent in more

recent times begun to dissolve. In spite of all the rigour and precision, the work does not appear cold, lifeless or dull. Through hardly visible irregularities, small shifts and movements, slightly diagonal instead of straight lines, underpinned by the irregularities and contingent smoke traces, the vessels always exude a liveliness and tension.

Some forms permit the recognition of clear lines of development – as in the case of pairs growing together or merging into a single form. Some pieces, reminiscent of fruit forms, have their origins in this development, while others follow a further line, such as porcelain objects which were produced as a result of an exhibition project at the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory in 1999.

Even though this was for Summer a unique outing in the world of porcelain, it demonstrates the essential character of his work: eyes fully open combined with an allied delight in experimentation. Each step is thoroughly considered and thought through. Not for nothing does his work receive numerous awards, as well as being exhibited internationally in, for example, Germany, France, England, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, USA, Australia, India, Taiwan and South Korea. It is therefore clear that Roland Summer belongs to the few ceramists in Austria who have achieved worldwide recognition.

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