

Refinement versus rusticity (and vice versa)

During her first visits to China in 2004-06, Clémence van Lunen transposed into the round the rippling circumvolutions of an age-old Chinese motif, capable in an identical graphic synthesis of describing the movement of clouds and an undulating dragon's back, the shifting presence of spirits and the agitated flow of a stream. Other small porcelain pieces, as refined as they are disturbing, were made in China at that time, similar to *Lotuses*, flesh-eating plants, quilted trimmings, exotic and enchanted islands... The capacity for refinement mingled with exuberance which the artist obtained in porcelain paste, with almost obsessively finical attention to detail, caught the eye of the Manufacture de Sèvres, which in 2006-07 commissioned from her the now famous *Sèvres Dragons*, one coated in a brilliant cobalt blue glaze, the other, more mineral, left in white biscuit. These fantastical creatures describe vigorous curves without head or tail – more stumps and bony limbs – and, in their syncopated writhings, call to mind the fireworks let off by the traditional paper dragons at a Chinese carnival. Their dancing violence associated with a real joy in living could serve as a device for Clémence van Lunen's whole output, whose virulent fantasy could in some ways be set in echo with that of Niki de Saint-Phalle.

Clémence's approach to sculpture changed quickly from 2010-11 as she deliberately turned her back on that minutely detailed *trompe l'œil* and a sense of kitsch maintained by her frequent visits to China. Vigorously she embarked on more head-on confrontations with the mass and plasticity of clay, producing her *Doodles*, ample foldings of ceramic paste (not porcelain any longer but stoneware), some made on a large scale with the help of an extrusion machine during a residence at the European Keramiek Work Centre (EKWC) at 's-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands. These enormous clay coils seem born from the enlargement of a coloured mixture squeezed directly from a tube onto a painter's palette. It is important to note how Clémence plays with that strength of colour, on sculptures whose glaze is hastily brushed on, so that it imparts energy to form. The same effect can be found more recently, from 2012, when she embarked on the arresting series of *Wicked Flowers*, made in her own studio in Paris. These great sculpted vases (with flowers included) are the subject of the exhibition at Domaine de Kerguéhenec.

This new, forceful manner – coming after years spent working with delicacy, fingertips, scalpel even – is undoubtedly another way of using clay, though it is not as much in contradiction with the previous period as it may seem. The unusual scale and ample movement could be compared to a change in tone during a conversation, when the speaker looks to renew the attention of an already captive audience in order to recall some essential points of the subject under discussion. For the artist, it is also a way of throwing down a challenge to the material, of confronting it in every possible way, even to the point of questioning attainments and processes which may have led to initial success, with ostensible scorn for the hidebound attitudes which inevitably lie in wait for those who seek acceptance by consensus through an unchanging method, a "style". Clémence tries to rid herself of all the restrictions inherent in establishing a style, is not afraid to sow confusion even among the most loyal followers of her progress. Utterly unafraid, she approaches all the aspects of that vitality which clay possesses, its capacity to respond unpredictably to the impulses of the body which agitates it... gently or with force.

The very expression of vitality

The artist's physical confrontation with the mass and ductility of clay has greatly increased with these "devilish" and "wicked" flowers in pots, athletically modelled by accumulating and compressing cakes of clay flung against each other, as if the artist were a boxer training with a punching ball. She lifts broad tongues or thick coils, winding them, patching them, filling them in, propping them up or adding material, courting the risk of collapse, on the cusp of balance. The mountain of solid clay then has to be cut in two and hollowed out so that it is light enough to be fired... The movements could seem archaic or simplistic, but working these masses is in fact a highly complex affair, the result of considerable technical experience and admirable temerity.

These troubling sculptures are shaped with such energy that they seem to be cut with a machete from a block of wood, which instantly recalls a formative time in the artist's journey, in the 1990s, when she would cut and strip enormous logs of solid plane or oak, then interlock them with mortise and tenon joints in order to make long wavelike forms, installed outdoors or inside, already convulsive and suggestively anthropomorphic. This is how she described her vision of the body/tree relationship at the time: "I'm amazed when I look at trees. Everywhere, arms, shoulders, bellies and creases, joints, feet, skin, cavities, saggings and tensions. Why do trees look so much like us?" With clay and in her large pot-sculptures, Clémence rediscovers a similar metonymic corporality with these full-figured vases, nervous or placid, plump and wrigglesome, chubby arms proudly akimbo, stiff-necked, broad of hip, expansively coiffed... Their glaze is pictorial and abstract, more prone to running and staining than to covering and protecting the ceramic. The bright baby colours, the scatological browns are applied like a suggested sample of character or

temperament rather than a true second skin, “to make sure the glazes are not overly seductive”.

But before germinating such “wicked” flowers, the movements to fashion them had to be premeditated for a very long while; very different, as we have seen, from previous cycles of work. Clémence made an impressive number of small models out of clay but also, and more surprisingly, aluminium foil, the kind you would find in any kitchen. In the crumpling of these thin, sharp leaves she seeks material folds of a different sort, more nervous, more angular, quite unlike those imposed naturally by clay when it bends and subsides: it enables her to invent a different – unconventional – kind of assault on the soft mass, not at all the kind one might learn in a traditional pottery workshop. In Sèvres, in an exhibition of her recent work running from January to April 2015, these many aluminium-foil models are the subject of a special display, in a very beautiful series of photographic prints made by Raymond Pillai. They are shown opposite five previously unseen *Wicked Flowers*, which the artist has subtitled *Tang Family* because they are glazed, in a very relaxed way, with the famous three lead glazes (green, yellow and violet-brown) of ancient Chinese *sancai* pieces from the Tang era.

Clay is strong when it is unstable. Aestheticism weakens (C. van L)

With overflowing energy compounded by her sense of humour and fun, Clémence van Lunen takes us into the heart of an aesthetic interrogation of what is decorative and what is not, about what will question the ceramic tradition and what will not. She does not try to make beautiful artefacts; all she wants is to construct volumes “which devour space”, willingly tackling conventional subjects (heap, soft form, flower pot, etc.) in order to free herself of them. Taking account and preserving the traces of how each piece came into being, she says she wants to turn away from producing work which is “perfect and aesthetic, but from which all life has flown”. One may indeed find the unfinished, crude, makeshift aspect of the end result puzzling – beyond references to popular and craft pottery – because it gives off a feeling of urgency, instability, unquietness and impertinence, the density and freedom of which may find its equivalent only in the works of the German sculptor Norbert Prangenberg, an artist on the current European ceramics scene whom Clémence particularly admires.

Of the (non)importance of flowers

Clémence van Lunen is not one to indulge in excessive intellectualisation of the “vase of flowers” motif, considering that “art often suffers from an excess of meaning, of *mises en abymes*, of constantly being placed at a remove, as though it were a world parallel to the real world”. Her choice of a subject which she herself describes as “unintelligent, without depth” is like a provocation. But is it really such a stupid subject? The only choice to which she attaches real importance is the combative stimulation inherent in the act of sculpting, which she communicates to us in her working notes as a vital act: “I try to enter into dialogue with the sculptures, just as I would with people. The sculptures have their own life. They sometimes take me much further than I would like to go. Sometimes into stupid places, where I engage in serious play. Non-respect is essential: to manhandle and put to the test is for me, paradoxically, to respect: respecting the piece as totally having its capacity to react, as though it were there alive before me... Good sculpture awakens me, gives me vitality, sets me free. When I am working I experience a feeling of urgency, that’s what I was looking for. That non-respect also embraces accepting that the clay can defend itself, can exist [...]. I have noticed that I often take sculptures out of the kiln without any particular precautions, sometimes even at the risk of breaking them... Thinking about it, I suppose it’s related to a kind of wishful thinking, putting them to the test: either the sculpture is good and it survives, or else it is bad, weak, in which case let it break!”

Then why do these vases of flowers crop up now in a body of work so resolutely committed to sculpture? Clémence van Lunen gives us a timely reminder of her passion for utilitarian pottery, all the techniques of which she learnt in traditional potters’ villages in Spain. On her return to France, for a short while she even had her own pottery workshop in the south west of the country. She stopped making craft pottery two years later, considering it impossible to justify her vision of popular and almost anonymous manufacture at affordable prices in a society where economic growth encourages ever greater sophistication, luxury and niche markets. So she turned to sculpture, learning how to work stone and wood, especially during visits to Japan. “Done with clay!”, for the time being at least. But when she walks around museums she is still just as attracted to archaeological collections, where the many items of pottery on display reveal uses and rituals that inspire dreams...

In *Wicked Flowers* her star-crossed loves for pottery and sculpture have found a fortunate resolution. It is the famous distance introduced by the spatial, material and ideological interrogation of sculpture that has enabled Clémence van Lunen to discourse freely again about the formal repertoire of pottery, its long history, its simplicity and its imagination. What a pleasure it is to be able at last to talk about a sculpture as one would a vase of flowers modestly disposed (“like in a jam-jar turned into a vase, a makeshift, spur-of-the-moment kind of thing...”, jokes Clémence), or on the contrary artfully presented, as in some grand and stately vase. It is true that the field is vast:

some of her sculptures in two parts seem inspired by the famous *complets* (bowls or urns mounted on columns, often from the Massier factory in Vallauris) that were so fashionable in the late 19th century, or certain Paris porcelain wedding bouquets in the kitsch Second Empire style, or excessively ornamented Capodimonte porcelain from Italy. The free and exacerbated forms of the 1950s seem to come back to life before us in frenzied dancers, while the humblest vases from the traditional repertoire of the naïve painters scroll through our memories, their wide-eyed profiles limned on the canvas... As many wise as popular flowers, as many memories of gardens, interiors, antique bas-reliefs are recalled to mind... Each form of vase, each bouquet looks like something which may well be not new – on the contrary, even utterly banal – but it is that recognition which suddenly releases emotion.

Wicked Flowers is without doubt a key moment, a pinnacle in this untypical and prolix career. It is in a way the manifesto of an artistic position viscerally opposed to the official version of the avant-garde since the 1960s, which by the same token places Clémence van Lunen in an attitude of gallant resistance comparable to that adopted by certain German sculptors such as Baselitz, Lüpertz or Penck in the 1980s with the aim of reinstating figure and subject at the heart of contemporary sculpture. We should not forget that Clémence learnt from several leading sculptors of matter – Michel Smolders in Belgium as a specialist in granite, Shigeo Toya in Japan for the shaping of wood – and that she was certainly also much influenced by the protean and enigmatic work of her teacher at the Paris School of Fine Arts, Étienne-Martin. Clémence has never been afraid of either the illusion or the massiveness of sculpture (in the sense of an encumbrance born of its presence in space). She is not afraid of feeling herself on the margins of an art jostled, challenged and practically emptied nowadays of its statuary origins (monumentality, tridimensionality, spatiality, rootedness) by an avant-garde driven by belief in a “progress” that would ineluctably direct the neglected sphere of sculpture towards ever greater disincarnation, abstraction and sensory diversification through sound and image. Clémence van Lunen's quest to transmit a “presence” is so convincing, so bold and so central to her work that she could well rally around herself a growing number of other sculptors of her generation, and of more recent ones too, formed (or deformed) by over thirty years of dematerialisation of the artistic impulse.

Frédéric Bodet, Paris 2015

Curator of modern and contemporary collections

Sèvres-Cité de la Céramique