

Viewed in Carouge



For nine days last autumn, the Swiss *International Biennial of Contemporary Ceramics* in Carouge staged exciting new work in ceramics. *Colin Martin* took in some of the sights

Carouge, as those who have visited will know, has a long association with ceramics, with the first earthenware factory in the location having been established there in 1803. Although now a suburb of Geneva, it retains a village ambience, with most of the biennial's twenty five venues located within easy walking distance. Held over two weekends and the intervening week, the majority of the participating ceramic artists exhibited their works in solo shows at private galleries, although there were also several group exhibitions in public spaces. These spaces included the Foundation Bruckner, which was responsible for organising the biennial. Other attractions for ceramists and collectors included lectures, demonstrations, firings, workshops and film screenings.

The majority of the forty five ceramic artists who participated in the *14th Parcours Céramique Carougeois* (PCC) were from European or Nordic countries, with China, Japan, Mexico and the USA also represented. Some of those European participants engaged with non-European ceramic traditions. One especial focus of the event was the work of seven ceramists whose pieces had been selected by the Musée Ariana. These were Karin Bablok (Germany), Ruth Borgenicht (USA), Paul March (UK/Switzerland), Toshio Matsui (Japan), whose work is pictured above, Gustavo Pérez (Mexico), Nicolas Rousseau (France) and Henk Wolvers (The Netherlands). I found much of their work arresting. Karin Bablok decorates her porcelain forms in two contrasting styles; either geometric or gestural. Using masking tape, she defines lines and geometric areas, before precisely applying glazes. Her other technique is to apply broad, expressive brushstrokes of pigment, with a spontaneity and freedom that contrasts with the rigour of her geometric technique. The museum selected a large bowl, decorated with those brushstrokes.

It also acquired a paper-thin, cylindrical porcelain form by Henk Wolvers. Its external surface was encircled with gently undulating black lines – about seventy in all – while its internal surface was glazed with gold lustre. The contrast between exterior and interior provided a visual metaphor for this craftsman's alchemical skill in transforming base clay into treasure. Next, I viewed the work of Gustavo Pérez, who asserts that 'everything begins with a prone cylinder'. The undulating surfaces and silhouettes that are typical of his style

evoked traditional Mexican pottery, but are uniquely his own. Some forms are decorated with black lines to accentuate their contours. Others rely on solid colour to create their effect, especially a subtle blue glaze, incorporating cobalt and iron oxides. The tiny cube forms on the exterior of Toshio Matsui's striking tea bowls, meanwhile, were modelled using sugar cubes, which dissolve when cast in plaster, creating a 'lost sugar' mould akin to the 'lost wax' technique in casting metal. Fired with dark glazes and then further embellished by applying six or seven layers of lacquer, the finished bowls gleamed seductively.

Other highlights of the biennial included Ursula Morley-Price's stoneware forms, inspired by nature, exhibited with Finnish artist Heidi Kailasvuori's ink drawings, abstract in form but suggestive of landscape. Also influenced by nature were Swiss ceramic artist Magdalena Gerber's 'cloud stones', made by pressing clay into a mould and allowing it to expand randomly into a porcelain 'foam'. French ceramic artist Jeanne Bonnefoy-Mercuriali's interlocked bottle forms, made in Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, reflected a shared Israeli and Palestinian ceramic tradition.

There's no need for those interested in ceramics or ceramic history to wait until the next biennial to visit Geneva – it's worthwhile at any time. The permanent collection of the Musée de Carouge documents the town's ceramic history. During the PCC its temporary exhibition was *La Lampe Céramique*. The Fondation Baur houses a fine collection of Far Eastern ceramics, including examples of Chinese imperial ceramic ware spanning twelve centuries, and fine Japanese stoneware and porcelain. Opened in 1884, the palatial Musée Ariana is home to the encyclopaedic collections of the writer and art collector Gustave Revilliod (1817–1890), with 22,000 ceramic objects from Asia, the Middle East and Europe, spanning the entire range of techniques. It has a lively temporary exhibition programme: *Luxury, Peace and Pleasure*, an exhibition of contemporary Swiss ceramics, coincided with the PCC. *My Blue China: The Colours of Globalisation in Blue and White* continues until the end of February. 

For more see parcoursceramiquecarougeois.ch