

# FINN DAM RASMUSSEN



## A Contemporary Approach to the Vessel

Eva Müller

**S**tandstill is an expression unknown in the world of Finn Dam Rasmussen. He is always exploring new ways to optimise his ceramics. This applies not only to the form but also to a very great extent to the interplay and intensity, the visual structure of the material and its tactile properties.

In his house, his gallery and his studio by the beautiful Tisvilde Hegn on the north coast of Zealand, 50 km from Copenhagen, Finn lives in a world full of THE sources of inspiration that he is able to translate into a striking personal formal vocabulary. This does not mean that Finn has in some way devoted himself to a traditional description of nature. What fascinates him are the structural formations in nature. On a macro level, this means the shaping, structuring – actually colouring – intervention of humanity in nature, as well as the agricultural division of the

earth's surface into fields or the cityscapes of modern conurbations. On a micro level, he is drawn for instance to variations in colour and patterns and transitions in natural materials like the parts of plants, tree bark or the earth's crust.

Finn has been involved with art and craft since his youth, both as a practitioner and as a student of art history and the history of ceramics. At a very early stage, the first generation of Danish studio potters fascinated and influenced him: Gertrud Vasegaard (1913-2007), Christian Poulsen (1911-91), Gutte Eriksen (1918-2008). Although they are often classified as belonging to Scandinavian Functionalism in art history, they each in their own way managed to transcend the borders of applied art from the inside and to raise specific ceramic forms of expression to become fully valid artistic statements. They are all artists whose starting point lies in ceramic material and who are bound to it. Their art is only possible as ceramic art. The inspiration and the ideals of these artists have shaped Finn all his life. And like them, for him the distinction between art and craft is irrelevant. A command of all aspects of the ceramic process is the prerequisite in Finn's works, not the opposite of art.

Finn's work in ceramics has not, however, been an uninterrupted progression. As a young man, he worked for years as a professional ceramist with his own studio. He was caught up by social and political commitment, and what was intended as pause in his work in the studio took him to university, where he took a degree in sociology. He subsequently worked at the university as a lecturer and researcher until changed circumstances brought him back to the crafts in the early nineties: he set up the first major gallery for "vintage furniture", i.e. the classy architect-designed Danish furniture made by master joiners in the first decades after the Second World War. The gallery also sold Danish ceramics and painting from this period and gradually evolved into a business of international rank. It was sold in 2007.

This period gave Finn the opportunity to pursue further studies of recent developments

left -

Conical vessel and vase form - stoneware, press moulding, engobe, 30 x 40 cm and 45 x 40 cm

right -

Conical vase form - stoneware, slipcast/thrown, engobe, 45 x 20 cm





Square bowl - stoneware, thrown, manipulated, engobe, glaze inside, 14 x 21 cm

in modern art, craft, and not least, in ceramics.

FDR has been working full time as a ceramist in his studio in northern Zealand since 2008, which, together with his gallery, is built as an integral part of his home.

His early work was informed by Scandinavian Functionalism typical of the times, as well as by Bernard Leach's Far Eastern inspiration, the founding father of studio ceramics. In his work from the past decade, functionalism has become secondary. He endeavours to liberate his work from the conventional concept of applied art by consciously focussing instead on artistic forms of expression.

Irrespective of whether it is a bowl, a pot, an architectural element or simply ceramics, it always becomes a piece of sculpture, sometimes with the additional benefit that most of his works have a practical use – if you can bring yourself to ignore the fact that it is sculpture.

Finn does work with pure sculptures too, but the vessel is central to his work. H. Jørgensen says in his work about the ceramist G. Vasegaard, "Handmade ceramic containers are among the most important, immutable products of humanity. If you are a ceramist, you participate in one of the most complicated and difficult traditions."

Finn's simple, severe formal vocabulary is dependent on the results of modern abstract sculpture, and there are countless discreet references in his work. The severity of the forms gives him the freedom to experiment with colours and glazes, but the Nordic approach does perhaps come through. These experiments with slip, glaze and materiality are among Finn's passions, and the whole field of possibilities can be looked upon like Aladdin's cave, where he makes tireless new discoveries

and keeps on finding new jewels. Not that they drop into his turban like oranges, on the contrary, his aesthetic successes are the result of hard work and perseverance. In this area, his training as an academic and a researcher is useful, both in the theoretical study of the problems of glaze chemistry and in the many long series of tests, experiments and combinations with clay, slip and glaze.

After numerous experiments with clay bodies, colours and glazes, FDR has developed a series of techniques that lend a personal character to his ceramics. His best work forms a unity of form, brushwork and materiality, where it seems as if the object had been created from a single raw material. Finn avoids the ornamental, working with an approach that is a further development of colour field painting. This term originated in the second half of the 20th century in connection with the exploration by Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and others of exploration of the qualities and expressive force of colours and of the newly created possibilities that artists had thereby discovered.

In recent years, Finn has also experimented with the properties and effects of salt glazing. For this he needed a new kiln, which he built for this purpose. The kiln was finished in 2014. When he has reached a temperature of almost 1300°C, salt is sprayed into the kiln chamber, where it combines chemically with the clay. A very strong glaze is created in this manner, with its characteristic nubby surface and tinted, shaded areas of colour. An interest in the effects of saltglazing is obvious for art that is as materially based as Finn's. In fact, he experimented with saltglazing in around 1970 as one of the first Danish studio ceramists to do so.

In conclusion, we can state that Finn Dam Rasmussen has



Cylindrical vessel - press moulding, engobe, glaze inside, 13 x 27 cm

managed to make ceramics the essential element in his art, and to make the material and its manifold material qualities an integral part of his style of artistic expression. As a consequence, Finn has achieved great recognition. He is a member of the organisations, Danske Kunsthåndværkere and Nordsjællandske Keramikere, and he exhibits frequently. He has a permanent arrangement with several galleries and he participates in ceramics markets all over Scandinavia and Germany. In April 2016, he intends to exhibit at the famous Ceramic Art London. His work is available through the museum shop of the world famous Louisiana museum of art, and elsewhere.

*Eva Müller*

*is an artist, editor and art historian.*

#### TECHNIQUES:

All works are stoneware. All sorts of forming techniques are applied. Beside his own glazes, Finn uses a special engobe (vitreous slip), which he spreads on the surface in several layers when leatherhard. The salt glazed things are fired in a gas kiln. At 1280°, salt is sprayed into the kiln and unites with the clay and slips.

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#### FINN DAM RASMUSSEN

(FDR), was born and raised in Copenhagen. After finishing school he followed courses in ceramics. From 1967-72 he was a professional ceramist with his own studio and exhibition situated on the island of Fyn. He cooperated with and was trained by other ceramists and took part in many exhibitions, including as a member of Dansk Kunsthåndværk. FDR graduated from Odense University in 1978 with a degree in sociology and taught at the University of Roskilde for a number of years. After teaching and research positions he opened Klassik in 1991, a gallery for Danish vintage furniture, arts and crafts from the same period as the furniture. His interest in ceramics stayed with him, however. He was a member of the ceramic studio Lerløst for many years, until 2007. FDR returned to his ceramic work in 2007 on a professional basis and is now working in his own studio located in Tisvildeleje, where he lives. The latest addition – built in 2013 – is a kiln for salt glazing. Since 2007, FDR has participated in both solo and group exhibitions in various galleries and fairs both in DK and abroad. He is a member of the Danish Crafts & Design Association and Nordsjællandske Keramikere.

