

## **On the bliss of colour on columns, or how Stefanie Brehm breathes life into basic forms**

*by Prof. Dr. Johannes Kirschenmann*

It was 22 metres long, and securely suspended from the façade of the Munich art academy, a large, formidable plait made of white bubble wrap – Rapunzel might have left it there on a brief visit to the English Garden. At the time, art student Stefanie Brehm looked on smilingly, poised and engaged as ever. Surprising people with her art, leaving them to work out its meaning with a mischievous air, always brings a smile to her lips. She certainly succeeds in this by continuously playing with form, adding a well-considered element of colour. Stefanie Brehm rightfully takes her place among those ceramic artists who constantly tread new paths to push back the boundaries of traditional ceramic art.

In an interview, the artist states her intention of piquing the viewer's curiosity through her choice of material and colour, inviting them to explore and take a closer look. She enables ceramic to shed its usual guise; her large-format works are not composed of many parts, but wrought in a single piece, an immense effort on her part. The kilns used to fire the works are also huge. The dimensions and oneness of these works defy the general conception of ceramic art, reinforced by colour combinations and glaze application techniques not necessarily associated with ceramics at first glance.

Stefanie Brehm predominantly works with a spray gun and compressed air to apply the glaze to the bisque. She applies the colour guided by intuition and expertise, in a very free approach, generally without any preliminary sketches or templates, models or layouts or according to any specific technique. Yet there is usually reason to the rhyme of her actions and movements during application. Scraping off colour or deliberately building up several thick layers of colour, which can cause the islets or bubbles to form in the glaze, are phenomena normally deemed as defects, but which she tolerates or indeed intentionally provokes.

Notwithstanding an initial reluctance to settle on a particular material, colours play a key role on or in all of the materials she uses as they sort of blend into the material. Form and colour, sculpture and painting form a whole. The vibrancy of the colours is enhanced by the brilliant surface of a glaze or plastic. The colour needs the clarity and calm of the cylindrical form to spread freely and dynamically. Every movement is prompted by an intuitive impulse. The impulses are a synthesis of Brehm's thoughts and feelings. She focuses on imagining which colours the sculpture would like to connect with. Using samples that show her how the colours will actually look after firing, she defines a scheme of colours and then a brisk marathon of decisions ensues: which colour will dominate, which will be used first and which last, what manner of actions does she want to work with? Are the main lines going to be vertical, horizontal, diagonal or circular? Where is the glaze going to be removed to expose the layer underneath? Applying one colour prompts the next. The colours interact until a sort of harmony is created through their movement, engagement and layering. The calm phase of turning is counterpoised by the swift action of applying the glaze. Chance and surprise are the artist's assistants, their influence often revealed in the layering of several colours. Anticipation and suspense mount, as only after firing will the artist see how the different colours have interacted to become a single entity of form and colour. Although many different

separate images may be evoked from various angles, form and colour are inseparable. The form determines how the light falls on the colour, for instance. The vitreous glaze affords an almost excessive durability, preserving the pigments and colouring oxides for centuries or even millennia. The glazed ceramics thus radiate a noble resilience.

## **Circle and cylinder**

The qualities of austere and rational may well be applied to the form of the ceramics. By contrast, the colour disrupts or at least impinges on the tranquillity of the form, bringing it to life. Emotion and concentrated calm hold sway in Stefanie Brehm's work. And does not the word "concentration" include the idea of centring, which is the skill primarily involved during the formative phase at the wheel? Her marked preference for cylinders, obviously a very suitable form, initially stems from her fondness for circles and turning objects on the potter's wheel. "No matter what you make on it, it's kind of round. For me, the cylinder is a circle grown tall," says the artist simply yet succinctly. She turns and chivvies the clay into towering cylinders of monumental dimensions. Later, in the exhibition, some works are also normally sized, at least in terms of conventional expectations of ceramics.

The circle, in modified form, can be found in many of her earlier paintings. She has always made a point of avoiding perfect geometric circles. The leitmotif of circular forms in her works perhaps reflects her love of dancing, a passion she lived out to the full during her student days. If we follow this chain of associations, then all matter, bodies and even thoughts are simply waves: low or high-frequency, they ripple out in space in a circular movement, connecting and communicating as they go. The artist regards circles as movement, but they also stand for expansion and symbolise constancy and order.

Structurally, the cylinder is very well suited for large ceramic sculptures. Yet this is not why Stefanie Brehm mainly works with this form. She is aiming for an inherently quiet, unprepossessing sculpture that is lent maximum impact by the painting. The surfaces of the cylinder have an air of endlessness, with many different facets. Walking around it, the sculpture always retains the same silhouette.

For Stefanie Brehm, the column is a symbol of enduring, unassuming being. The form creates a connection between the earthly and cosmic. The air columns in our bodies, when we breathe in deeply, correspond to it, as do our spinal columns. The dimensions of the large columns are human size. Stefanie Brehm uses the body height and shoulder span of adults and children as a reference for creating her columns. Positioned in a room, they relate to one another. Depending on the spatial situation, they stand alone or are grouped together.

The curved top is also significant in the artist's eye; it is permanently fixed to the cylinder. Slightly convex in shape, it increases the column's height and makes it look lighter. The glaze application enhances this air of lightness. Stefanie Brehm does not regard it as a sealing element, but as a receiver dome that picks up things from its lofty height and transmits them into the column walls. The sprayed colours on the tops reinforce this intention. Not all observers are tall enough to be able to look down on the works at 180 cm and higher. Echoing the curved tops of the columns, the artist was therefore inspired to make convex discs with a larger diameter of 70 cm, which can be exhibited hanging from the wall or lying on the ground.

Her artist-in-residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre of Oisterwijk in the Netherlands in 2018 enabled the artist to produce large ceramic works for outdoors, which she had long wished to do. Risks were largely minimised through a special formula for the clay, high-fire glazes and very slow firing processes. She succeeded in firing the columns at 1240 degrees Celsius without damaging them. Sintering the clay at high temperatures stops it from absorbing water, ensuring frost resistance in the winter. Success hinges on craftsmanship and in modern ceramics especially, art and craftsmanship are “inseparable siblings”, or as Stefanie Brehm says: “The two go hand in hand and are kindred spirits.” For as she adds, creating a material object springs first from an idea in the artist’s mind, which is then realised by dint of craftsmanship. Whether the artist or someone else does the crafting is immaterial. She values the crafting work, because she knows exactly what has to be done, performing the same work processes for days or weeks on end to produce a work. Practising a craft fosters continuity and concentration, and the manual skill is joined by creative ability. She focuses on her sense of rightness. At what point do the colours and form develop a relationship in which the figure as a whole achieves a balance? When this balance is struck, the figure is most akin to what the artist is feeling at the time.

## **Groundwork**

For Stefanie Brehm, painting has always existed as an independent field of art within her creative work. Every artistic consideration and experience with colour is filed away: this store of experience is radiated on to all the pictorial fields she engages with. Like all artists, she makes roughs and sketches. Initially, all the smaller cylinders are used as test pieces to try out various glazing ideas. Yet they are also works in their own right. They are not roughs for the large columns, nor mock-ups, but inspire new ideas and discoveries. They are very practical, valuable even, because little or no dialogue is needed in their making. Everything is immediately allowed. When she stands in front of the large columns, she first has to overcome her trepidation and muster trust in her impulses and spontaneity. “Once I’ve coped with that, things get going...,” she finishes.

## **Expanding material with polyurethane**

Polyurethanes take their place beside the ceramics. They are a “fluid game”, an expression the artist likes. All her colours are applied in a playful approach, also in her ceramic works. When playing with colours, as in a game of chess, what counts is the next best move. The artist is engaged in a stream of decisions and reactions as she aims to create tensions with the ultimately aim of striking a balance. Compared to the large ceramic pieces, the polyurethane works possess the charm of being easy to produce with negligible risk. However, polyurethanes also demand the same concentration and clarity to realise the artist’s colour-form ideas. Coloured liquid polyurethane, applied to a coated plate with pouring vessels and sprayers, forms the basis for these paintings. From a certain point onwards, when the chemical curing process begins, the artist has to take decisions and work very fast. She discovered this kind of painting while trying to create a sculpture consisting of multiple layers of plastic. However, she stopped at the first step; taking in the potential of the first thin layer, she abandoned her original idea and following her intuition, combining the polyurethane with painting instead.

In her polyurethane works, Stefanie Brehm carries over her original painting technique (oil on canvas) to a new material and expands on it. As with the ceramics, she is enthralled by the brilliance and luminosity that the medium lends the colour. She identifies a great, initially unanticipated, similarity between the two materials. Both captivate the observer with their shining surfaces, whose colours appear to vibrate. Both materials tempt the observer to touch them. The polyurethane sometimes looks like glass, some colours are transparent, others opaque, just like the glaze. The material offers a wide palette of colours including neon shades that are not possible in ceramics. The polyurethane also enables the colour to be self-supporting, without a conventional substrate. The colour gradient blends into the wall architecture of a room, allowing the artist to create references between the polyurethane works on the wall and the ceramics in the room at her exhibitions. They are obviously related.

The large plait Stefanie Brehm attached to the neo-classicist façade was not meant to direct us into the studio of a versatile artist, but to bring a young artist out of it, for her to experiment with material and fathom the extremes of form. In a skilful game of colour, she spirits the observer into a magical realm of art that inspires a spontaneous blissful thrill. Always new, always different.