

Brehm's columns

by Ranti Tjan

There is a photo of Stefanie Brehm in which she is working in a studio in the Netherlands, standing on a jetty, a large column in front of her. The photo is not special, except that it reveals that Brehm makes the substrates for her paintings herself. Just as many painters stretch their own canvasses, Brehm makes hers out of clay. This is not an easy task and cannot be seen in isolation from the result itself. She turns every centimeter on the wheel, for the large columns about fifteen centimeters a day. It takes skill, conviction and willpower. And all to ensure that a solid base is created for the glazed paintings.

Norbert Prangenberg and Markus Karstieß are two giants in whose steps it is not easy to follow. In a remarkable way, they have succeeded in giving ceramics a distinctive face within the field of sculpture. Both make use of the characteristics of fired clay and both know how to get their shape out of the material in a natural way. An art historical awareness is immanent in the sculptures of both Prangenberg and Karstieß. In his work, Prangenberg regularly refers to one of the archetypes within ceramics: the pot, the vase, the container. His firm hands leave traces in the baked clay. You can see where which finger has applied force, and where the whole hand has sculpted the great shapes. And Karstieß hints at the surreal, at the invisible hand that unconsciously stirs the viewer. His kneading hands try to address the unconscious in the spotlight. His vertical images are human-sized. They are symmetrical and form non-human figures.

Columns are carriers of a roof vault. Every architectural historian has taken lessons in the function and meaning of them. Most columns are round in shape, in one piece and sometimes made up of several equal elements. They have a base, a shaft and a capital. The base releases the column from the ground, the capital is the connection to the roof. Caryatids, the famous antique statues of young women who decorate the Erechton Temple of the Acropolis, are slightly different. Through them, figuration has crept into architecture, the reference is to something other than the building itself which not only has a function, but also a meaning that is provided by the sculptural decoration.

In the exhibition "Prangenberg, Karstieß, Brehm", in the museum De Pont in Tilburg in 2019, these three German artists are connected by the same material they use and by their common background, stemming from knowledge gained at the European Ceramic Work Center. All three artists completed residencies at the EKWC at different times. Playing, experimenting, and then arriving at new works of art is the crux of this center, located in the south of the Netherlands. In the exhibition, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the EKWC, the three completely different visual artists come together, each of them with works that are oriented vertically.

Brehm's columns in the Tilburg exhibition are brightly colored. They are not modeled or roughly finished, but refined and hand-painted with glaze. This means that the material which is primarily intended to make ceramic objects waterproof or to convey a decorative accent has been promoted to an independent medium. Glaze has become paint that has its meaning in the hands of the artist. There is another aspect that makes glazing special: anyone who creates a glaze will see a different color once it has been fired. Heating up to 1200 degrees Celsius

causes chemical processes so that the result appears only after firing. It bears a high degree of probability, but cannot be predicted with certainty.

On the one hand, Brehm consciously chooses the glazes, the firing program and the carrier, and on the other, she surrenders to the fire, to the unknown and thus to the viewer's judgement. The chance factor that occurs when glazes melt during firing and take on a different color is part of the artistic process. Brehm's work therefore fits in with the refined history of both painting and ceramic sculpture. She may not like the understanding of her work in a narrow context, but in the belief that all good art is about good art, Stefanie Brehm's work is a precious contribution.