

Helsinki Fat Clay



Going Forward From Asceticism

Helsinki Fat Clay at Gallery Marianne Heller in Heidelberg, Germany.

UNDER SLEEPY BRANCHES
*a strange light shines,
in the forest a magic path
comes from nowhere, leads nowhere.
My shadow fled, I am
without body, dissolved in moonlight.
My step remains suspended in mid-air*

So writes Aaro Hellaakoski, the modernist poet and art critic. The Finnish language is based on straightforward expressions. For this reason, abstract concepts and sentiments are usually rendered by association to the Nordic landscape. The richness of the language and the abundance of synonyms are likewise reflected in Finnish ceramic art.

In the field of design, the roots of Finnish modernism emanate from the humble countryside with its plain-form language born out of handcrafted items for home and farm use. The forms of these objects evolved from available materials and their intended use. Early industry

in Finland made use of central European models and the first leaders were often of foreign origin. The neo-classical architectural features in central Helsinki were quickly embraced by small town wooden buildings and, in the same manner, ceramic archetypes were soon interpreted from the point of view of Finnish culture and the rising sense of a national identity.

The history of Finnish ceramic art is short but bountiful. This small country, with its limited population, has all the same produced a sizeable number of internationally renowned and award-winning ceramists. The majority of the *Helsinki Fat Clay* group of artists descends, through their training, directly from the first well-known and celebrated personage in Finnish ceramic art. He was Alfred William Finch (1854–1930), Belgian born, of British parentage, who became the director of the Iris ceramics factory in Porvoo.

Finch followed the ideals of William Morris

Article by Teija Isohauta



Helsinki Fat Clay at Ceramics Museum Westerwald, Höhr Grenzhausen, Germany.

and combined international Art Nouveau design concepts with Finnish national romanticism reflected in its domestic red earthenware clay. He became the first head teacher of ceramic art at the Central School of Art and Design (now Aalto University, School of Design).

A true cosmopolite, Finch paved the way for the acceptance of ceramic art into international exhibitions and raised its standing among other industrial arts in Finland.

One of the most significant names in the history of Finnish ceramic art is Kyllikki Salmenhaara (1915–1981) whose teacher, Elsa Elenius (1897–1967), was the favourite among Finch's students. Salmenhaara was active in the art department of the Arabia porcelain factory 1947–1961 and continued as head ceramics teacher at the above-mentioned school until 1981. Her vases, imbued with a certain rough beauty, were awarded the Grand Prix in Milan in 1957 and a gold medal in 1960. Salmenhaara educated many of the artists belonging to the *Helsinki Fat Clay* group or their teachers.

The clean and plain language of form in Finnish ceramic art relates naturally to the country's modernism, whose flag bearers were Alvar Aalto, Tapio Wirkkala and Timo Sarpaneva. Finnish design emerged internationally victorious at the Triennale exhibitions in the 1950s. In parallel with the general impression of a down-to-earth and archaic style, grew another, which combined the organic with a dash of Byzantine aesthetics and ornamentation. Among those ceramists interpreting modernism in a different way were Birger Kaipiainen (1915–1988) and Rut Bryk (1916–1999). The artists in the *Helsinki Fat Clay* group clearly display these two legacies inherent in Finnish ceramic art.

THE INVESTIGATORS OF MEMORY

Kati Tuominen-Niittyliä, recipient of numerous international awards, produces dishes, buckets, bowls and baskets by handbuilding. Their interior and exterior surfaces are identical. The material of these flat and level surfaces limits the space in such a way that the three-dimensional pieces appear two-dimensional. The thin wall draws the profile of the vessel sharply and it appears silhouette-like



Erna Aaltonen. *Ravine*. 2010.

against the background. She tells of these forms as being memories of pails and vats seen through the cow shed window in her childhood backyard.

Tuominen-Niittylä often uses a rough clay body that invites touching. She adheres to earth tones in her handmade art pieces but delights in bright colours in works intended for industrial

production. The white, brown, gray and black surface patinas, achieved with metal oxides, create a fragile impression approaching poetry. These are imbued with intangibles such as moonlight and the smell of burning birch wood.

Erna Aaltonen also produces vessels which, with the progress of time, have transformed from being spherical in to forms that may stretch in different directions. Originally the vessels had minimal openings but lately they have closed up to resemble hollow boulders and, in a way, they continue to express the same idea. The plain form contrasts with the opulent microcosm of the surface, achieved by applying various rasps and saw blades on to the surface structure of the pots. From 2001 on, Aaltonen has developed her own engobe technique in which the layered clay slips, in conjunction with the glaze, produce unpredictable and truly sensual textures. The colours have evolved from blue-greens and various earthen hues to black and near-white. The outside is highlighted by a coating of gleaming crystals that arise from the use of metal oxides.

The relationship between time and place emerges in the architectural works of Pekka Paikkari of international repute. These offer an interpretation of the gradual changes in both the built environment and the social milieu. Old building debris as well as ordinary bricks and thin roof tiles inspired him to build walls and heaps, which seemed coincidental or random but clearly portrayed the changing social structure during the 1990s. In the *I Remember* exhibition in 2004, his material consisted of things relating to his childhood memories of meals and the history of the Arabia factory as the producer of Finnish tableware. The basic exhibition

component consisted of a soup bowl, in progress from unfinished to finalised.

Recently Paikkari has produced flat planes or reliefs, small and large surfaces that describe (through the use of patinas) the traces of man in nature. These may present remains of blackened brick walls with cracks and grooves that draw to mind charred fingerprints, the human mark on materials. The same kind of allusion to tracks on the earth's surface can be seen in Paikkari's piece *Clay Words* where he literally poured the words on the ground during the Neil Brownsword Mari Hole project at Stoke-on-Trent in England in 2009.

THE HEIRS OF CONCRETISM

*When you have seen a cloud
in the lap of a pond;
and the moon
between the waterlilies;
inevitably you are at the mercy
of your own soul. ~ Eeva Kilpi
(first verse)*

Heikki Rahikainen and Kirsi Kivivirta continue a rather more constructivist trend in modernism. Their works draw parallels to Finnish architecture and sculpture. Concretism occupies a solid position in both architecture and art in Finland. Its rationality in combination with nature experiences continues to apply.

Kivivirta is a minimalist whose works consist of stoneware and slipcast tiles, cut into puzzle pieces and re-assembled after firing. She uses glazes deliberately where landscapes or their reflections appear. Her works are two-dimensional but frequently offer an illusion of perspective, generating a sense of amplitude. In the pictorial tiles, the images are placed around the edges as if to frame the empty space.

Clay tends to crack during the drying process and Kivivirta has refined this innate behaviour. Delicate lines and assembled pieces relate to the aesthetics of silence and sparse gestures. The mood is one of the *karesansui* gardens, which give the impression of randomness but are controlled. The material aspects and the fact that here is a work in clay, remain inconspicuous.

Heikki Rahikainen is a minimalist and also a handbuilder. The consistency of his tiles or plaques reminds the viewer of darning. Something is broken and its surface is repaired with horizontal and vertical compositions. It is somewhat haphazard but balanced and harmonic, clinging to the familiar.

The abstract, typical for constructivism, is dominant in Rahikainen's works and is further emphasised by his ample use of glazes. With them, he paints sheer aquarelle type coatings and accentuates the relief-like surface with glaze. His works are characterised by a certain kind of imperfection and playfulness.

THE ABSTRACT PRIMITIVISTS

Abstract art was accepted in Finland as part of interior design in the 1930s, limited however to modernist circles. It did not become generally accepted until the late 1950s and early 1960s and, with it, colour arrived.



Pekka Paikari. One's Floor the Other's Ceiling. 2008.

The ceramic sculptures of Johanna Rytkölä, a ceramist of abstract colour and form, emanate from the heritages of cubism and impressionism. The free-standing sculptures open up in several directions and the works for hanging emerge as quick sketches where the organic outline takes the front stage. The themes are extensive; a ball of decorative string, shadows on snow, everyday gestures or the sense of movement. The combining factor is timelessness and the acknowledgement of positive feelings.

Adding to the strong two-dimensional language of form, the works have colour: red, yellow, blue and green are dominant and there is a dialogue between moulten glazes of various hues. The surface treatment dims the vivid colours to some extent as the first glaze is rubbed off before the final matte glaze is applied. The result is a nuanced and somewhat powdery surface. Although there



Top: Åsa Hellman. *Waves*. 2009.

Above: Kati Tuominen-Niittylä. *Iron Age*. 2004.

Facing page, top: Eliisa Isoniemi. *Mirror*. 2009.

Centre: Johanna Rytkölä. *By the Blue Lake*. 2010.

Below: Kirsi Kivivirta. *From the Series Tempo*. 2009.

is movement and poetry in these works, the final mood is as potent as composted earth.

Åsa Hellman is an expert of ornament and the exotic. In her incomparably colourful and sensually

appealing works we can see influences from the cultures of the Mediterranean and the middle-East and a profound knowledge of art history. Hellman's production is characterised by curiosity and renewal. She makes sculptures, jugs and platters as well as reliefs. Inspired by archaeological finds, they are imbued by a certain primitivism, enhanced by lustre glazes and bold colour contrasts.

In her most recent works, Hellman has combined themes and techniques: assembled of tiny components, the patterning alludes to Islamic art, oriental rugs, or traditional Finnish rya-rugs. In her *Wintergarden* work she interprets snow and snow surfaces that reflect different colours like a prism. For Hellman, not even snow is pure white.

THE MATERIALS OF MODERN ART

The border between ceramic art and modern art wavers. Any kind of material is acceptable for the artist's purpose. Finnish photographic art became international in the 1980s and found its way into modern art collections. After that there was little distinction between different kinds of artists – there were simply some who used photography as their mediums. The same phenomenon is currently in progress in the fields of textile and ceramic arts.

Eliisa Isoniemi is a ceramist who discovered a draughtsman in herself. She makes her monotypes on copper plates, transfers them to paper clay and strengthens her topic by scratching and adding glazes. She has also produced three-dimensional ceramic sculptures on to which she fastens decals. The subject matter is always human.

Isoniemi's people are invariably anonymous and unadorned, for the most part women, resembling figures who depict feelings. They often exude longing and contradiction, some kind of mental combat between the self and the demands of the world. Isoniemi's images are quiet and receding but they are resilient and have a delicate power of seduction that grabs the viewer and holds him fast.

The atmosphere of longing also arises in young Caroline Slotte's works. She approaches the subject via strictly defined materials, through old porcelain dishes or decorative objects. She has written about her own activities and has emphasised the importance of seeing. The use of old objects as material for art has soared and become trendy. For this reason it is important that the artist who uses recycled materials has a good conceptual basis for this and Slotte has it.

She draws on that quiet knowledge that relates to the child's attitude to past time.

The old remembrance takes in the environment and things, at first fumbling as through a fog, but after some adjustment precise observations emerge from that memory. Slotte has adopted this process into her art. Porcelain plates have been ground to remove parts of the decoration, as in a series of plates

where only the clouds remain or where all colour has been honed off and the subject matter has been carved anew as for example in the series *Unidentified views*. The approach is wide ranging although the material is limited.

The significance of seeing has been emphasised in modern art, both in research and through the media growth. French philosopher Jacques Lacan brought into awareness the self as the object of seeing. "A lot happens in the moment of looking – it is at the same time alert and innocent," says Kim Simonson, who became known in Finland when he was named Young Artist of the Year in 2004. His fantasy figures emanating from popular culture are related to *anime*. They are large sculptures of children and animals in whose eyes we see the world reflected. The figures appear to be endearing but their porcelain surface alienates and raises questions.

The little girl sees the elf although it is golden, that is colourless and, in this sense, invisible. As a colour, gold retains otherworldly powers. The girl who has been baptized in gold has received supernatural potential. The deer sniffing at each other are not seeking procreation but are probing the possibility of radioactive rays. There is something frightening and grotesque in Simonsson's figures precisely because of their eyes. They do not see but are closing or reflect the look in the eyes of the viewer who is an outsider, an alien.

The *Helsinki Fat Clay* members' ceramic works bring forth on the one hand how the old peasant life style and its resulting form language continues to affect Finnish modern art. On the other hand, perhaps as a result of their isolated location, Finnish artists may, particularly actively, have been following what is happening in other parts of the world. Ceramic art and ceramics as a material in art as well as in architecture is arriving at a new renaissance.

*What is this sound that awakens me at night?
It is biology, it calls out its rights.
At night you can hear it more
clearly, when the
sociologists are sleeping.* ~ Eeva Kilpi (second verse)

Helsinki

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The group, Helsinki Fat Clay, exhibited last year at Gallery Marianne Heller in Heidelberg and at the Ceramics Museum Westerwald.

