

# In a Zigzag to the Goal: Ever Onward

## Experiments by Margareta Daepp

*Article by Hans-Dieter Fronz*

A WHITE VASE ON THE FLOOR WITH A DARK PATTERN of reeds fits well into the stylish ambience of the corner room on the Jurastrasse in Bern, made intimate by a low, sloping ceiling. The room is sparsely furnished – a chair by Ron Arad and Jasper Morrison, a Lehni bookshelf, a couch by Barber Osgerby and a porcelain vase.

The latter was designed by Margareta Daepp. The body of the extended oval, irregularly shaped vase has vertical depressions, giving the impression of staples pinching a soft material, perhaps a sheet of rubber or some sort of plastic. The impression is intentional. As a ceramist, Daepp seeks to bestow novel qualities of form on the traditional material porcelain, placing it in a new context. And it is just this suggestion of plasticity and elasticity that gives the vase a legitimate

place amongst the modern designer furniture assembled in the room.

The ceramist arranged a meeting with this guest from Germany, not in her studio in the suburbs of Bern but in her idyllic apartment close to the ancient centre of the city. She admits to having visited her studio only rarely in the last year because, in addition to her position as a teacher of ceramics at the Geneva School of Applied Arts, she is currently enrolled at the University for Art and Design in Basel studying for the degree of Master of Advanced Studies in Design | Art and Innovation. This theory-based course means for her a period of freedom, a widening of her horizon, a transfusion of new thoughts, an opening for much that is new. She anticipates not so much particular professional



*Above: Geklammertes Weiss (Stapled White). 1998. Porcelain (edition of 50). 25 x 11 x 35 cm.*

*Below left: Tokio-line: Marunouchi. 2007. Porcelain and automobile lacquer (edition of 3). 28 x 28 x 23 cm.*

*Centre: Tokio-line: Oedo. 2007. Porcelain and automobile lacquer (edition of 3). 28 x 28 x 23 cm.*

*Right: Lotus-serie: Kikyo. 2006. Anagama and lacquer. 29 x 29 x 25 cm.*



advantages after graduation but rather fresh ideas and inspiration, unexpected confrontations and situations – simply the unexpected.

Tolerant of novelty, receptive for the vicissitude of chance: these are the aspects of her personality that have determined both the personal and professional life of this 48 year old artist to date. It was clear to her early on that she would some day work in the arts, without then knowing in which form. At 16, she entered the School of Design in Bern, one of three technical colleges offering ceramics in Switzerland. After completing the one-year preparatory course, she chose ceramics over graphics, preferring to work in three dimensions. On graduating, she pursued further education with Setsuko Nagasawa at the School of Applied Arts in Geneva.

Daepf established her first studio in 1983 but then six years later departed for Berlin: she simply wanted a break from 'little Switzerland' and from the applied arts. The originally planned one year became five years, plus a one-year extension in the Netherlands and New York. She describes it as "a very important time". The geographical distance was apparently necessary for a real time-out, when she could "completely detach herself from the crafts". In Berlin, she studied at the Art Academy under Rebecca Horn and Isa Genzken, who are both now famous international artists. This was followed in 1993 by a residency in Holland. Her present degree course in Basel serves a purpose similar to

those earlier art studies: to stand back, to escape from the daily professional grind, to make space for new ideas.

Her time in Berlin led to sculptures and installations in materials such as metal and cement, or occasionally clay – for example the seven-part series *Spielfeld (Playing Field)*. She first worked again in ceramics during a subsequent residency at the European Ceramics Work Centre in 's-Hertogenbosch in Holland,

where she produced the complex object-installation *Archaeology of the Future* (which later won her a prize in Switzerland). It is not only this latter work, with its terse terracotta and enigmatic forms arranged on industrial shelving like a



surreal poem, that reveals the influence of Horn.

The visual statements of these non-functional, sculptural inventions also position them close to technical products. They imply, for example, satellite dishes or, as do some of the objects on the factory shelving, they relate to industry. Like the three large containers with connotations of antique amphora, which are actually copies of blue plastic industrial barrels cast in porcelain: artefacts from the 'archaeology of the future'. These pieces hint at industrial objects not only in their serial reproduction but also in the production process itself. They were not sculpted but cast. This technique, which was then not so common in studio ceramics, has been retained by Daepf also for her functional ware, right up to today. "I am someone who prefers to construct and slipcast rather than to throw." Even the attractive small porcelain teapot in her tea-service series *First Flush* is slipcast.

In the mid 1990s, when Daepf returned to Switzerland, it was her firm opinion that "the ceramics industry produces the best functional ware". But what about unique accessories for the

Above: *Die Krönung (Coronation)*. 2003.

Red and white porcelain. 25 x 21 x 6 cm.

Below left: *Rote Terracotta (Red Earthenware)*. 1998. Earthenware (edition of 50). 34 x 34 x 7 cm.



*Dreisnitz (Tricorn)*. 2000. (edition of 50). 45 x 23 x 7 cm.





home that are not found in every shop – ceramics that, on the one hand are meant to be used but on the other hand have a certain artistic quality? And so she set to work on a new line of dishes and vases – pieces with an object/sculptural character like the porcelain dessert and praline dish *Die Krönung (Coronation)*, or the earthenware fruit dish *Dreispietz (Tricorn)* that remind one of cloth moulded in plastic, or the porcelain vase with its sculptural references referred to above that she christened *Geklammertes Weiss (Stapled White)*. The idea was to experiment with cheap materials and transfer their surface character to clay. Plaster casts in several parts reflect the properties and symmetries of each synthetic material and allow their translation into cast ceramic objects. For example, the plate *Rote Terracotta (Red Earthenware)* derive from a simple doormat. Seams are deliberately not retouched and so the production process is visible in the finished piece. Most of this ceramic work is produced in limited and signed series.

Daepf has been awarded a series of commendations, prizes and stipends for her ceramics work. Three years ago, a studio stipend enabled her to spend some time in Japan. While at the Shigaraki Ceramics Cultural Park, she learned about the 16th century woodfiring process and the traditional Japanese lacquer technique *Urushi*. While experimenting with these processes, she clearly rejected pure imitation of the traditional and instead applied

them in a contemporary context. In her seven-part *Lotus* series she combined two cylindrical elements, one of which was fired in an Anagama kiln for three days and nights at temperatures up to 1340°C and displays on its typical raw surface multiple colour flashes caused by ash deposits. In contrast, the lacquered part with its fine, shining surface and uniform colour has a hint of plastic or metal. Instead of the toxic traditional lacquer, the artist uses a synthetic version. For her three-part *Tokio Line* series, based on the lacquer technique and identical in form to the *Lotus* series, Daepf combines a monochrome base in the colour code of a *Tokio* underground line with a second part decorated with the stylized maze of lines used to represent the interconnections of an underground railway system.

Daepf's relationship to the Far East has not stopped there. Her diploma thesis for her Masters course in Basel is devoted to the question: "How does an unpretentious, uncompromising aesthetic develop, exemplified by present-day Japanese designers?" And there is also China, where attended the 2008 General Assembly of the International Academy of Ceramics, a country with a rich ceramics tradition, not least because Margareta Daepf's favourite material (porcelain) was invented there.

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Translated from the German by Patrick King.  
Photographs by Dominique Uldry.

Above: *Blauer Körper (Blue body)*. 2000. Porcelain (edition of 99). 15 x 15 x 17.5 cm.

Below: *Lotus-serie: Hasu*. 2006. Anagama and lacquer. 29 x 29 x 25 cm.

*Tokio-line: Shinjuku*. 2007. Porcelain and automobile lacquer (edition of 3). 28 x 28 x 23 cm.

