



Shlomit Bauman

Article by David Goss

IN HER NEW EXHIBITION, *AZAL*,¹ SHLOMIT BAUMAN SHOWS a series of ceramic works that may be viewed as ontological hybrids crossing over conventional boundaries between art and design. The works possess deep symbolic and ideological meaning on various levels, among them political imagery; historical contexts of subjects and their exhibition; technological and craft processes of their creation; emphasis on the ceramic material itself – the terracotta clay composed with S5 and, finally, the contemporary fundraising process via the Internet. For an observer, who is well-versed in history, craft and methodology, the deeper he or she is immersed in the contemplation of these works, the greater he or she becomes aware of their un-categorising traits.

The act of exhibiting utilitarian–functional objects in a fine art context possesses a 100 year-old history. With Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1913, a ceramic object – a urinal – when placed in a fine art context at the beginning of the 20th century was considered a raised mundane utilitarian object. Yet, not many years before, the same object was a socially and symbolically charged status symbol of wealth and class. Although having changed status, the ceramic piece was chosen for its social significance.

Ceramics has played an ideological role throughout history in many cultural contexts. Writing on

the utility and symbolism of the *Ramey Incised Jar* from the pre-historic Mississippian polity centred at Cahokia, Pauketat and Emerson (1991) stated that: “The ‘primary function’ of pots, one might assume, would be simply to contain consumables, a mundane task. Yet, it is in this capacity that ceramic vessels also serve in the mediation of political power.”²

More recently, the works of the ceramists Paul Scott and Barnaby Barford bring critical overtones to the field.³ Using traditional blue-monochrome painting/prints in his work, Scott raises questions dealing with mass production in the ceramics industry. Scott’s works show a rare non-tactile, un-sentimental attitude to clay, in a field dominated by expressive attributes of handling the material, “. . . promoting a practice at odds with the traditional truth to materials and form/function concerns of craft potters and, indeed, of many studio ceramists. A leading proponent of ceramics and print, he has been instrumental in demonstrating the contemporary creative potential of a combination used in industry for hundreds of years to mass-produce decorative wares and tiles.”⁴

In Barford’s works, he uses kitsch to question traditional bourgeois concepts of ‘good taste’, whereby quaint shelf figurines become sinister, virtually criminal characters. His porcelain figures have a contemporary sleaziness to them “. . . by either painting on



Facing page: **Untitled.**

Above left: **Figure.** Local Israeli clay and porcelain slipcast. 8 cm/h.

Above right: **Untitled.** Local Israeli clay (S5) and porcelain, wheel thrown. 32 cm/h.

or cutting up the found figurines and reassembling them together providing a clever way of getting people to look again at something they would on principle have dismissed. The way they are put together forces you to look at the figures and the scene in a slightly disrupted way. A new conglomerate is the result, a reworking of tradition that leaves it recognisable but witty. . .”⁵

For these creators, everything in their creative process adds meaning. Their works become complex cross-cultural statements reflecting on the ceramics fields’ traditional and domesticated function and transforming the medium into a contemporary critique. Furthermore, they manage to take a historic craft tradition and recharge it with the zeitgeist of contemporary art and design discourse.

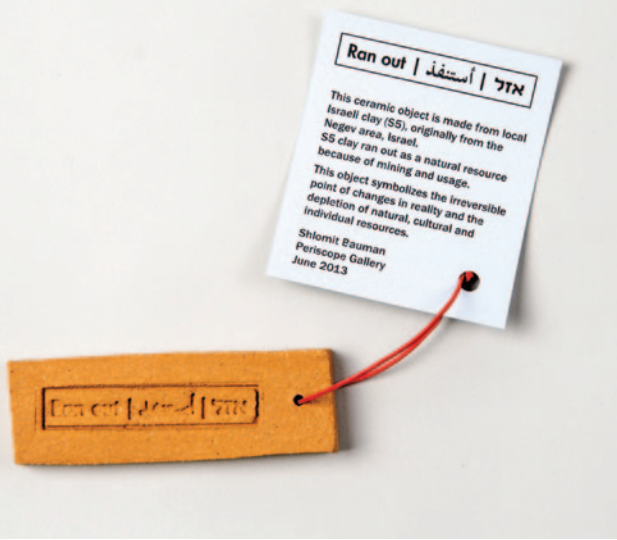
In Bauman’s previous solo exhibition, *Channel AIDuwara* (2008), the political meanings were directly conveyed. The works were fashioned from various materials. “Concrete material – the ceramic substance, the reality that cannot be evaded – and the virtual material that is elusive – memory that falls apart, the screening of the video, the voices.”⁶ The subject and title referred to an Arab village that was previously situated on the same land as her native kibbutz. “Between these materials – the substantive material, the ceramic body and the virtual material, the memories that are (constantly) constructed anew – a different, new dialogue develops into the space, a dialogue that challenges the Zionist story of the founding of the kibbutz, that points at its fissures.”⁷

These works of Bauman’s are a kind of reverse *skeuomorph*. Whereby, rather than a new technology using the formal qualities of a previous one, high-tech forms are created with the low-tech medium

of clay. Ironically the imagery of technology, due to the immense technological leaps and constant redesign of electronic equipment, has become quickly outdated. So the old TV monitor, or a basic computer keyboard give us the feeling of ‘out-datedness,’ whereas the ancient ceramics medium becomes timeless, evading the techno-death of its own imagery.

In the *Azal* exhibition, Bauman deals with another kind of outdating: the depletion of the ceramic material itself – S5 clay. “When I started working on the series, I wanted to deal with the subject of locality – similar to the Canaanite school in Israeli art and culture. I wanted to compare different Canaanite points of view – the original to a contemporary outlook. That is why I started to work with a local terracotta clay composed with S5. After I started the process I learnt of its depletion and that the quarrying of S5 had been halted by a court order obtained by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel because the usage and quarrying had almost completely diminished the source.” This is not the first Israeli clay that has reached depletion. A number of years ago, a clay called Motza clay from the Jerusalem and Negev area ran out (*azal*, Hebrew). As often happens, no one paid any attention to the matter other than by searching for and importing alternative replacements. “The fact that S5 had run out intrigued me and I knew right away that I would construct a creative process dealing with it. What had previously passed with a certain amount of indifference turned into an important fact that demanded attention.”⁸

Bauman sought to make a relevant statement with ceramic material, transforming locality and materiality into the foci of interpretation and attention. Thus another aspect was integrated into her studio



Above: *Give Away, Local Israeli Clay (S5)*. 8 cm/w.
 Right: *Untitled*. Local Israeli clay (S5) and porcelain slipcast and press moulded. 18 cm/h.

work – a marginal phenomenon that usually does not attract much attention gained importance and meaning.⁹ In response to the court order, Bauman purchased all the S5 available from her supplier, accumulating a ton of dry S5 clay in her studio (two tons of wet working clay). Having been depleted in Israel and not found elsewhere, Bauman cornered the market on a mud treasure, enabling her to continue working with the material for another few years.

“The S5 clay became a metaphor for the point-of-no-return in the process of the depletion of natural, cultural and human resources.”¹⁰ Transforming her studio into a material laboratory, Bauman commenced a complex multi-staged creative process with different modes of creating ceramics crossovers of sorts. The basic formula she used for all modes was the ‘binding of opposites’, the material combination of porcelain and the terracotta composed with S5 clay. Bauman casts pieces of finished ceramic works from different materials into unfired works, creating material and formal hybrids. Taking the local rough S5 clay and juxtaposing it with what is considered the noblest of ceramic materials – porcelain – she creates unfinished and/or broken forms, cultural and technological crossovers and hybrids.

For other works in the series, Bauman recycled original porcelain that she obtained from the Naaman ceramics factory and utilises historical moulds she obtained from the Israeli Lapid ceramics factory (that closed due to globalisation processes of the late 1980s) and combines them, traditional Palestinian pots from Hebron, another local victim of the same economic process.

In this way she transforms her works into political hybrids of Israeli-Palestinian nationalities, clashing ideologies and religions, territorial conflicts and land-earth-clay that has been taken and claimed from one another. And what is deemed an attempt for a

metaphorical solution – S5 clay and porcelain, high and low materials, industrial and traditional ceramic processes – is infused into new ceramic objects. In a number of these works, the actual material work process becomes a political metaphor, causing the work to literally self-detonate. The clash of different materials creates an inherent technical incompatibility; the simultaneous firing of two ceramic materials that react in disparate ways to different oven temperatures creates a ceramic explosion of sorts. The works cannot contain themselves – they are distorted and twisted – and become dysfunctional from their own creative process.

Another group of works continues Bauman’s previous clash in her work process of materials and imagery, conveyed through simple technical electronic devices. Forms such as a megaphone (as used in demonstrations), a keyboard, a Gameboy, among others, are moulded in porcelain and joined with traditional Palestinian pots. This surrealistic juxtaposition is an alternative explosion of meaning, creating objects that are not functional and that do not make sense in our familiar surroundings. In their un-categorical traits, these objects are grotesques that leave us feeling unclear as to their function or meaning.

Other forms, which also bring to mind the confronting pieces of Barnaby Barford, are the statuette bust figurines – some of which have been cast from an 18th century European character model and others modelled after traditionally dressed Palestinian women. All of these works are created from the previous combination of different clays – porcelain and S5. These are non-threatening, yet deeply disturbing pieces, attempting to enforce a Eurocentric aesthetic sensibility as a civil and tamed solution.

As a sequential part of her creative process, Bauman uploaded her S5 project to an Israeli crowd-funding site called Headstart.¹¹ This online fundraising and marketing process stands in contrast with the material



processes in her studio. Bauman managed to use the benefits of the site, reaching her total fundraising goal and materialising the project with the sale of different sized ‘souvenirs’ made from S5 – now a rare material. This raises questions of mediums and methods and about traditional creative processes in our highly digitised contemporary surroundings, where applications in the digital world help turn simple terracotta clay, with S5, into a valuable material and a rare commodity. The clay is an allegory for the earth, land and territory, so highly valued in the local conflict. What is essentially earth, dirt, mud, ironically becomes priceless – and tragically something ‘to die for’.

ENDNOTES

1. Hebrew: depleted, ran out.
2. Pauketat Timothy R and Thomas E Emerson. “The Ideology of Authority and the Power of the Pot”. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 93 (4) (1991). p 919.
3. *Ceramic Art by Paul Scott*: http://www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/artist/paul_scott; *Ceramic art by Barnaby Barford*: <http://www.barnabybarford.co.uk>.
4. Stephanie Brown in Pioneer Printer for *Keramik Magazine*, June/July 2001, quoted in Paul Scott’s site <http://www.cumbrianblues.com/about.html>.
5. “Ceramic Art by Barnaby Barford”.
6. Musih, Norma. AIDuwarra Channel, exhibition text, the Zochrot Gallery, 2008.
7. Ibid.
8. David Goss, A talk with Shlomit Bauman, March 2013.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.



Top: *Ran Out (Installation View)*.
Above: *Untitled*. Local Israeli clay (S5) and porcelain, slipcast. 23 cm/h.

11. Headstart is an online Internet platform specialising in funding entrepreneurs in art, design and community activities.

David Goss is a painter who has participated in many solo and group exhibitions. He teaches painting and drawing; the history and theory of contemporary design; and African art. He researches and is interested in the function of liminality in contemporary design. He lectures at the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Design of the Technion; Cultural studies of the Shenkar College; and the Inter University program for African studies at the Ben Gurion University. All works are 2013. Article adapted from an essay in the exhibition catalogue for *Ran Out*. All photos by Ilam Amihai.