**Karen Bennicke:** **Curiosity and Speculation**

Karen Bennicke’s special quality, it seems to me, is her open mindedness. This may be an ordinary value to comment upon, but it is an unusual characteristic for an artist of such experience. Prized by the Danish art world and also in a wider international field, she has made an extensive body of work of adventurous variety, mainly using clay but also other media, over the past five decades. Her strong aesthetic language has continuously evolved. From time to time she works in other fields and contexts such as architectural ornament, and does make use of wood or metal or plastic. There is a tendency for *grandes dames* of an artistic field such as ceramics to become emphatic, to proselytize and reflect on their achievements, and this Bennicke refuses to do. It appears to me that she is always starting again on a new tack, with the free-spirited quest of a much younger person, and a very broad vocabulary of making.

Bennicke and Peder Rasmussen, her husband and colleague, have worked alongside each other for more than forty years, and yet their works are markedly different. There has been no sense of competition, she assured me, ever. They work within a longstanding dialogue, but are very distinct from each other. Collectively, they seek out visual experience in travelling to far-flung museums, and they are also collectors. Their house contains a whole dictionary of forms in their acquisition of chairs, of ethnographic and folk art, especially wooden spoons and masks. Then there are buttons, numerous small sculptures, paintings, and the Kähler factory pot collection.

Karen makes sculpture, she has freed herself from utilitarian constraints, but use itself and also symbolic representation, the ‘magical’ aspect of much of their ethnographic collection, is evidently of great interest. ‘A spoon is a spoon. It has to be able to do something quite specific – but there are ten thousand different and meaningful ways of forming them’. She goes on to say ‘We have profound relationships with useful objects, but by adding something more to them - story, meaning – you can give them a duality. It doesn’t necessarily mean they become sculptures, for that’s something else. That I also work with sculpture is another matter.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

The British novelist and playwright Michael Frayn said in an interview that ‘the *structure* emerges as you think about the *story* ’ – and he is referring of course to words and literature, drama and fiction. But that concept can also apply to other kinds of imaginative construct. If you are working with clay, the making process could be equivalent to the writer’s ‘story’; a sequence of movements and changing material states that occupy the attention and lead into an idea, and then to the realization of a physical form.

‘Story’ is a word Karen frequently uses in talking about her approach to ideas and form making. ‘It’s the content that matters – or the story; understood as the capacity of the work to spark off thoughts and associations.’ [[2]](#footnote-2) I think she means both the responses of the artist in making the piece, and the viewer in seeing it. Some of the sparking capacity of that story is based on life experience and personal history, and how that creeps into subjects that engage the imagination and filter into artwork, as it is impossible for us, as artist or audience, to detach them.

I have mentioned that Karen has worked across a range of materials and artistic categories. I now want to focus on the way in which certain forms, in the sequence of new ideas, are ones that she returns to over a period of several years. Karen generally works in series, which is not uncommon in developing a body of work for an exhibition. A sequence of works that try out versions of an idea can stretch your form-language, following the subject and finding new scope in it, like peeling off the layers of an onion. In her researches, Karen understands forms by making them, and she takes a theme and pushes it in radical directions, as Bach did with the fugue.

Why make it in clay? Raw clay is a pliant material that is easily workable for some time, if kept under polythene, and plasticity is perhaps its special quality. She thinks of clay as ‘a kind material, I can decide almost everything with that material, until it is fired’.[[3]](#footnote-3) ‘I can feel incredible happiness working with clay. That’s because it’s a material where you have time to think – and the possibility of constantly changing it. I think that’s fantastic.’ [[4]](#footnote-4)

In her observations of the stream of everyday life Karen might come across a photograph of Stravinsky at his grand piano with the lid raised, she might pick up a Japanese cigarette lighter, or a diagram of a geological structure. These are all objects that have started series’ of her work. Another purposeful collection of Karen’s is plastic packaging, the expanded polystyrene structures around appliances, with their outlandish and incidental forms, or the clear protective shield around a toothbrush or a tool. The ephemeral function of packaging, with its curious chunks and depressions for protective and un-aesthetic reasons, makes these intriguing ‘free’ forms. Finding them is not unlike recognising a stray object in a junk shop as somehow ‘yours’. All of these can initiate an idea, a way into new ambiguities and meanings.

Her exploration of a new form is developed sometimes by model making in paper or cardboard, or casting in plaster or other materials. Building large sculptures with fragmented planes and sharp facets, like the terracotta series she made recently based on crystal structures, involved a great deal of planning. Karen loves the planning stage and could easily have been an architectural model maker, or a tailor. She drew, cut and taped cardboard structures into accurate 3D models before building in clay. For the gallery show of these large works in 2012, alongside Steen Ipsen, both artists were described as sharing an ‘astonishment and fascination’ with geometry.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Back in 1996 she started on a series that began with a cast of a collection of eggs in a stretchy bag made from a pair of tights. The series was given the title, once a few were made, of *Little Buddha*. It is a small work for her, and although abstract it reads as a small compact curvaceous body, seemingly full of possibilities. ‘It has taken my heart’, she says, and has made many versions of it, in different coloured glazes, or in platinum lustre, and recently it has also been cast in bronze. Sometimes an idea has not been ‘emptied’ and she needs to return to it. In subsequent adaptations, the curves have been built up into points, or have depressions carved in them or small growths added. Later the form was cut up; a couple of Little Buddhas chopped and reassembled into cubist structures of arcs and hollows. A series of these made in 2009 was unglazed with white bone-like surfaces. At some point the work seemed to be repressed by over-experiment, as when she clamped slices of Little Buddha between flat planes. She recognised that the freer works had more possibilities and a more pleasing sensuality. The ‘teapot ‘ versions of 2007 have hints of humour, and larger sculptural compilations of the Buddha curves were made in 2010.

Also from 1996 are two larger single sculptures that really stand out, in my view, and this is partly to do with intense colour fitted so well to form. *Corbus* is a very rich blue matt stoneware form derived from architectural floor plans of Corbusier’s chapel in Ronchamps of 1954. The other is *Prospero’s Hat*, both are beautiful ambiguous bulbous forms and both have anthropomorphic resonance even though one is based on a sacred modernist building, the other on the Shakespearean actor John Gielgud’s hat in a film. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Two years later, Karen did a solo exhibition called *Thema* in Galerie Nørby, Copenhagen, where she showed her explorations of one basic form. She made about twenty variations, from the curvaceous and bodily to the skeletal and angular, evoking engineering and Constructivism. Some had deeply scarred surfaces such as the large version now in the Designmuseum Danmark collection. They were built up from the same ground plan, so you would always recognize the basic shape. Karen wrote recently ‘The idea of the *Thema* pieces was, as in many of my other themes, to try to find the " soul " and the many possible expressions, in variations of one single form. And you are right - sometimes it looks human, and it surprised me too, considering the rather straight basic form.’ [[7]](#footnote-7)

If she finds herself making sensuous sculpture out of a costume or an architect’s ground plan, then it is not surprising that a remarkable series, mainly of relief sculptures for the wall, came out of a road plan for the Dansk Touringcar Championship ‘Baneoversigt DTC 2003’. The map itself, a diagrammatic poster,has abeautiful strangeness and I can see why it inspired her.Karen’s series *Radical Landscapes*, working from the road plan, was begun in 2006. To achieve the cool exactitude of these interconnected elements, Karen made separate pieces that were glued in place after firing and glazing, sometimes on a flat painted wood base. The works include layers of labyrinthine horizontals in strong contrasting colours of glaze, and some parts in a metallic glaze. In *Hanging Landscape* the background surface looks like small tiles, and *Radical Landscape* has serpentine relief textures on a flat olive green plane. Her composition of colours and surfaces is very striking in these works, and uses some of the language, I think, of 1960s interiors.

Looking at Karen’s sculptures and wall objects from the mid 2000´s, it seems that their complexity and precision - their conjunctions of very different colours and surface qualities - has grown through her decision to join separate parts together after they have been fired and glazed. The collaging approach began in 2002 with her series on the unidentified flying object.[[8]](#footnote-8) These were beautiful smooth ovoid or ‘flying saucer’ forms with discs or blobs of contrasting colours set in to their surfaces. In 2003 a series called *Formscapes* takes this tendency further. These horizontal pieces, although sometimes whole forms in monochromatic glaze, hint at more elaboration, and an approach to art that engages with engineering aesthetics.

Aspects of the road race language are still found in some more recent freestanding sculptures. The sensuous curves of the track could now be horizontal spurs protruding like cantilevered limbs from a simple cube, seeming to defy the heat/gravity of kiln firing, all in the same glaze. The marvellous, mysterious and serenely elaborate sculptures *Violet Form* and *Green Form*, made in 2008, are particular favourites of mine. They exemplify for me what she sums up in her own words: ‘I try to eliminate the distance between the logical, concrete world of form that we know from everyday life, and the illogical, unknown and absurd.’

Alison Britton, July 2016

1. Jorunn Veiteberg interview with Karen in *Status – Retrospektiv* catalogue, for her exhibition at Keramikmuseum Grimmerhus, Middlefart, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ditto [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In conversation with me, March 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jorunn Veiteberg interview, *Status* catalogue, 2001 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Copenhagen Ceramics, 2012. Text by Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The film was *Prospero’s Books,* a version of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Peter Greenaway, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E-mail to me, June 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. a UFO in English, UO2 in her Danish titles. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)