

Shona Wilson's Other Pathways



Lilting. 2001. Three pieces. Earthenware, engobes, copper inserts. 14 x 20 x 4, 35 x 30 x 4, 30 x 25 x 4 cm.

Article by Karen Weiss

BALANCE. SHONA WILSON'S WORK IS ABOUT BALANCE. Not the static balance of symmetry, but a balance found in steep descending curves. Pure lines that draw the eye, like watching an Olympic skier take the high jump.

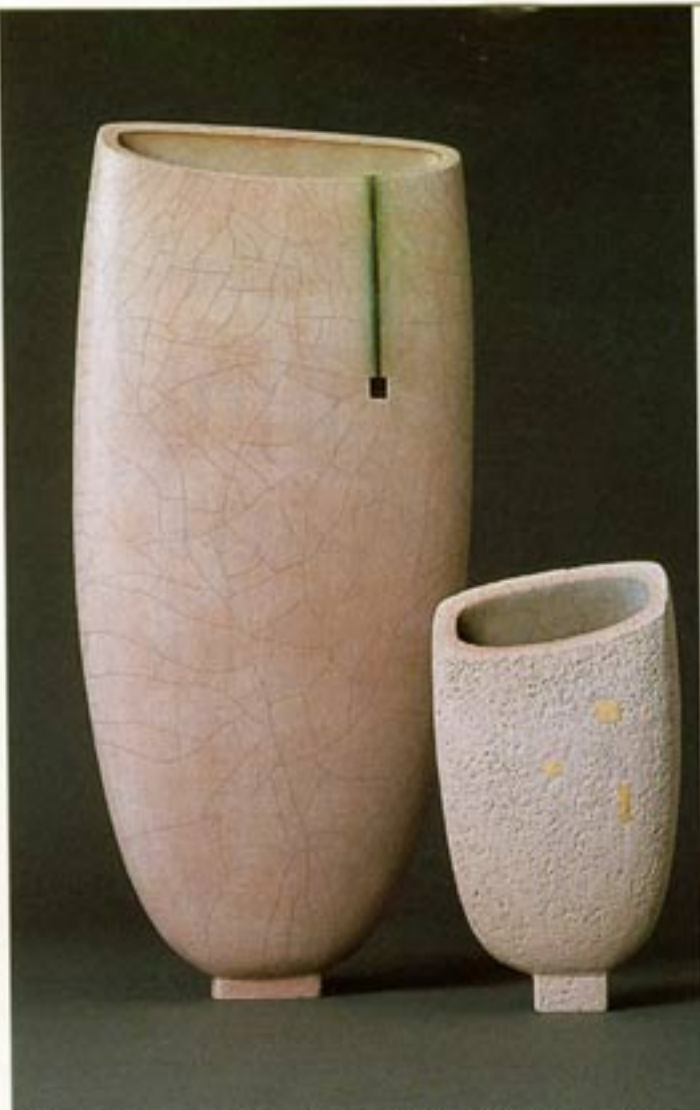
What is extraordinary about Wilson's work is her ability to reconcile opposites in the same piece without compromising either. In her November, 2000, show at the Michael Nagy Gallery, Sydney, the effect upon the viewer was both of the warmth that comes with the recognition of a familiar object, for example, a teabowl; and a coolness from the superimposition of concept and reference – the bowls are flattened as in a drawing, and non-functional. She plays with distance. The teabowl is a small object that can be held in one hand, but these bowl forms each have a small window. The placement of the window gives the viewer a visual reference of a large building seen from a far vantage point – large, small, near, far.

Wilson's father was an architect and many of the works have allusions to architecture, the minimalist architecture of the late 20th century – the rectangular box shapes that formed the glass canyons in so many cities, the blank-faced buildings of the '60s and '70s that present so graphically an alienated society and an anonymity of power. However Shona Wilson

takes this further. As she says, "We want to engage with something." And her use of windows allows us to do that. At night, when we pass by a large office or residential building, the handful of lit windows remind us of individual lives and events that are taking place behind these impersonal façades. In her 1998 installation for *Sculpture by the Sea*, Wilson made a grouping of boxes with windows, locating them within a sandstone niche. The boxes were connected to each other and the rock by a series of thread ladders, giving the effect of occupation by unseen inhabitants, unseen by the observer who, in turn, is being observed.

In her exhibition, *Wintering*, a reference to a winter she spent in Munich, Wilson assembled three rectangular box forms into a small cityscape. One of the boxes unexpectedly sprouts winter trees at the top, delicate twigs inserted into the top edge. Elsewhere, other boxes push up copper leaves like bannerets or extend antennae of fine copper wire – evidence of life asserting itself, irrepressible, in the impersonal city.

In the process of developing the bowl forms, Wilson says she found herself becoming more and more fascinated with the foot of the bowl. What started out as a small and inconspicuous foot dominated by the curve and weight of the form it supported, evolved into a



Poised. Two pieces. Earthenware, engobes, glaze, copper wire. 41 x 19 x 4, 20 x 10 x 3 cm.



Floating Hull and Vessel Form X. Earthenware, copper. 21 x 51 x 50, 14 x 20 x 4 cm.



Vessel form VIII. Earthenware, engobe, glaze. 21 x 24 x 55 cm.

piece where the flattened bowl form balances on top of a rectangular foot and is pierced with a rectangular slot. It is reminiscent of a pose in yoga, which Wilson practices, called the *Tree*. It is a pose of balance where the person stands on one leg, hands meeting above the head, the other foot resting on the knee. It is a pose which touches sky and earth.

Currently living in Sydney, Wilson feels a strong connection to nature. She goes bushwalking whenever possible and is a keen observer of natural forms in their many manifestations. An earlier exhibition at the Michael Nagy Gallery was based on the shapes of waterworn river pebbles. In both exhibitions she has put together assemblages based on collections of fragile found objects, such as cicada wings and skeleton leaves, which contrast well with the solidity of her works in clay.

In both media, one can appreciate the painstaking care and passion for exactness which characterises Wilson's work without limiting it. Wilson works intuitively. She speaks of "being confident of a sense of rightness" as she works, and of there being a "rightness for that moment". There is also a sense of development and flow between the pieces – of a completion and a moving on.

In the palette Wilson has chosen for many of her ceramic pieces, the colours are muted: mushroom, grey, beige, pale turquoise and pink. In every bowl form, there is a contrast of colour between the exterior

and interior but, more important than that, is the contrast in tone. This gives a subtle effect, serving as a linking between the upper and lower rims and asserting the inner space as having a complementary existence to the outer surface without being merely a continuation of it.

Wilson speaks of her work in terms of balance and counterbalance, of stillness in movement, of making art as meditation. Wassily Kandinsky in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, wrote of the artist of the future as endeavouring to "awake subtler emotions, as yet unnamed". And of the artist's work giving "to those observers capable of feeling them lofty emotions beyond the reach of words". The fact that real art works "fulfil their purpose and feed the spirit".

Wilson's ceramic work does all of the above, does it quietly and with a sense of innate spirituality that stays with the viewer. It is an achievement through which Shona Wilson is at last receiving the recognition which she well deserves.

REFERENCE:

Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Dover. 1977.

Karen Weiss is a ceramic artist and teacher living in Sydney. She is a regular contributor to art journals.