

## ***Much of a Muchness***

By Glenn Adamson

Pernille Pontoppidan Pedersen. Has an artist ever had a better name? Like her work, it just keeps on coming, in a rush. Effects rise to the surface (the pop-gun percussion of Pontoppidan!) only to be supplanted in the next breath.

Talking to her, I have found, is the same. The interview included in this publication gives a strong sense of her personality and imaginative intelligence. What you don't get is the physicality of her speech, the way she holds an idea up in the air with her hands and then gives it a quick twist, pushes it to one side, or gives it lift off.

PPP (as she signs her work, and I'll call her here) is thus an artist of impressive consistency, who incarnates her singular sensibility at every turn. This may come as a surprise to the casual viewer, because on first encounter, her work can seem unruly to the point of incoherence. Every great pot is a poem in physical form. Hers are no exception, but they seem to be compounded of nothing but non-sequiturs. Give them time and space, though, and you'll soon understand them as a totality.

This next-level ceramic sophistication pours forth from an unexpected place. PPP occupies a woodland studio near Silkeborg, in the Jutland peninsula of Denmark. It's a remote place, and she likes it that way (there's plenty of stimulation right in front of her, as she works), though she's as far from being a country potter as is possible. Her wide reading takes in newfangled theories of Object Oriented Ontology – which asks, as she puts it, "How does the object exist independent of human perception, and can it exist on its own terms?" – and the work of eco-feminist theorist Donna Haraway, well-known for her advocacy of kinship between humans, animals, and machines.

In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway writes of the need to "solicit the absent into vivid co-presence, in many kinds of temporality and materiality." If you were trying to explain this idea, PPP's work would be a great place to start, and stay for a while. It does make sense that the vibrancy of matter should find its clearest expression in objects, rather than words. If you want to see "vivid co-presence" in action, look at her work *Bon Voyage*, an oversized, upside-down pinch pot, with a wooden oar leaning casually against its rim. The two objects are utterly unlike, yet the conversation they have with one another – about color, silhouette, function or the lack thereof – feels somehow essential.

Though PPP's no-rules methodology is usually expressed in more sculptural terms, the simple act of juxtaposing a pot and a paddle does get at something intrinsic to her approach. She's an X-axis thinker, opposed to hierarchy and fully embracing of horizontal adjacency. There's a nice, somewhat antiquated saying in English. When we compare two things that are of more or less equal value, we say they are "much of a muchness." The phrase is a perfect fit for PPP, for whom muchness is definitely a core principle. Her ceramics variously suggest garments, architecture, guts, mechanisms, plant life, and the raw matter of their own making. One idea surmounts another, and another, and another, in a constant chain of association. Everywhere you see the marks of her searching fingers, posing questions of the form and simultaneously answering them. Even once fired into rocklike permanence, they feel ephemeral: thought experiments without a control group.

The maximalism of PPP's work has only grown, of late, and I mean that literally. Her exploration of large scale began in 2017, at the Tommerup Ceramic Workshop. Its facilities afforded her the opportunity to shape massive quantities of clay, glaze with a spray gun, and fire in a walk-in kiln. The initial result was a work called *Spine Has Pine In It*, a five foot high construction of coils and slabs, fleshy pink with a blast of sunshine yellow around its midsection, a crown of pipes and spheres at its top. It looks sort of like it should do something – give birth to more of its own kind, perhaps? But it doesn't need to, so imposingly does it transmit the energy of its own making.

From that moment on, PPP has continued working at human-size or bigger, giving full compass to her free gestural tendencies. Even during the pandemic, when so many people's circumstances were painfully reduced, she somehow managed to be more expansive than ever. In 2020, she created *Terra in Ferro* onsite at the CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art: a noble pile of clay, three tons worth, heavily worked and then painted over in brick-red iron oxide, all sheltering under a simple wooden structure. It resembled nothing so much as the Tower of Babel as depicted by Pieter Breughel the Elder. Like the biblical city, it contained multitudes. Also like Babel, it fell into ruin, because PPP allowed it to, letting the unfired sculpture degrade in spring when the rain came.

By then it was 2021 and she was at work on another project, this time at Driftskontoret, during a residency at an artist-run space in a historic manufactory in Viborg. She worked with blue cardboard, made from paper pulp, to make tall, crumpled vessel forms. PPP called them *Female Studies*, underlining their gynomorphic qualities. Even more than in her ceramics, which often feature voluptuous ruffles, there was a strong

affinity in them to tailoring – she compares the riveted seams to those on denim jeans. The *Female Studies* were a departure for PPP in material terms, but they are representative of her approach to typical ceramic typologies. Rather than eliminating or deconstructing conventional features, as most modern and contemporary conventional ceramists do, she tends to go for exaggeration. You want a vase? I'll give you a vase, is her attitude. Handles are absurdly distended, bases excessively "ornamented" with fingermarks, other bands of decoration stacked up like cakes, necks flared out like foghorns. None of this is satire, or not exactly. She doesn't really give a damn about her discipline's sacred cows. It's more like burlesque, with all the unabashed acting-out for its own pleasure that this term implies.

This same hedonistic energy courses through PPP's figural work, which is never literally representational, but all the more psychological intense for it. Exemplary in this regard are a pair of works included in the Hostler Burrows group exhibition "Matter at Hand" in 2021, *Donna's Baby* and *Marianne's Baby* (the titles refer to Haraway and to a Danish feminist artist from the 1970s, respectively). No more sentimental subject could be found than a pair of infants – nor any less predictable interpretation of it. Instead of rosy-cheeked cuteness, PPP gives us amorphous clods strewn with reddish polka dots. Though possibly legible as swaddled newborns perched, in one case rather precariously, on little seats, their convoluted abstract shapes lend them the quality of dream-objects, existing perhaps in the mind of a mother.

At the time of writing, PPP was working with her customary intensity on a new series of sculptures, tall and totemic. The red dots are back in force, shown off to spectacular effect on long, sloping flanks and muscular twists. The polka dot pattern, she says, is inspired by the skin of the day octopus – a highly sentient creature (as anyone knows who has seen the marvelous recent documentary *My Octopus Teacher*), both cunning and empathetic, with cognitive capacity distributed throughout its eight-armed, shape-shifting body. Haraway has adopted the animal as an avatar of "tentacular thinking," that is, an extended form of intelligence, with its priorities arranged multiply rather than along one linear, progressive path.

PPP's new works exemplify this polymorphous principle. There is the usual mashup of formal languages, with ribbed and screwed mechanical forms integrated seamlessly into organic shapes that resemble African termite mounds. Furthermore, in another move that resonates with Haraway's fluid worldview (as well as the writings of novelist Ursula LeGuin), the sculptures project gleefully mixed signals when it comes to gender. They have the phallic uprightness of a traditional lingam, but also feature soft labial folds and vaginal slits. These passages could be construed as explicit references to

feminist precedent, from the *Abakans* of Magdalena Abakanowicz to Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* to the clay forms of Hannah Wilke. Yet other new works glide away from that explicit iconography, complicating the story with plant-like tendrils and (in one case) a flat sidelong slab, a horizon to the field of view.

Despite the richly allusive character of these new works, they are anything but abstruse. Each makes for a person-like presence in the room, complex and multivalent. As befits a tentacular thinker, PPP is moving in multiple directions at once. She's reaching out with her artistic feelers, sensing, testing, and gathering. How to summarize this welter of ideas and forms? How to explain what it's like to stand amidst her works – the invitation they seem to offer? Well, let's just put it this way:

*We would be so happy, you and me,  
No one there to tell us what to do.  
I'd like to be  
Under the sea  
In an Octopus's Garden with you.*