

## *Bubbles and Blobjects and Ferrofluids (Oh My!)*

By Garth Johnson, Paul Phillips & Sharon Sullivan Curator of Ceramics at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York

In 1993, design journalist Phil Patton published an article in *Esquire* Magazine entitled *Blobjects*. The one-page article featured an array of consumer objects that prized rounded edges and inflated volumes that welcomed the enveloping embrace of a human hand. Suddenly, a Go-Video remote control became a pebble “worn smooth by the waves” and a Minolta camera puffed out its volume in curious places “as if it had been left too close to the fire.”<sup>1</sup> As it turns out, Patton’s observations were prescient—they presaged nearly two decades of fun consumer objects that achieved maximum (aerodynamic!) velocity with the near-simultaneous introduction of the iMac and Volkswagen’s “New Beetle” in 1998.

The word *Blobject*—a portmanteau of “blob” and “object” has been widely attributed to writer Steven Holt-Skov, who was credited by *Esquire* writer Phil Patton.<sup>2</sup> Holt-Skov, along with his partner Mara would go on to curate the exhibition *Blobjects & Beyond: The New Fluidity in Design* at the San Jose Museum of Art in Spring 2005. The exhibition, which was sponsored by *Wired* Magazine, was touted as [having] “gathered its energy from the premise that blobjects have become the defining products of the new millennium—the best examples of what is considered cool-looking and compellingly curvaceous.”<sup>3</sup>

Although he would only stray from his path of rigorous geometric work in the early 2000s, this is the landscape that artist Steen Ipsen inhabited after receiving his graduate degree from the late, lamented ceramics department at the Danish School of Design in Kolding in 1990. The relationship between ceramics and design is inextricable in Denmark. Instead of hopping into bed with university art departments like it did in the postwar United States, ceramics in Denmark hewed to design’s strengths: form, function, and the in-depth study of materials, which gave the Danes a commanding edge in mid-century design. By the 1980s, when Ipsen and his *Copenhagen Ceramics*<sup>4</sup> colleagues Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl and Bente Skjøttgaard cut their teeth, rebellion was in the air. Although steeped in design education, Ipsen and his peers set their sights on fine art rather than industry.

All three artists now make wildly divergent work. Skjøttgaard has embraced the primordial nature of the kiln; her objects ooze, drip, and are pushed to their very limits during their firings. Kaldahl makes meandering sculptures out of sections of ceramic tubes that exploit the tension between their odd forms and masterful glazed surfaces. Of the three, Ipsen has always been the hardest to pin down as he continues to reconcile an unmatched taste for rebellion with his penchant for exacting detail and exquisite finish.

Nowhere is this dichotomy more evident than his studio. Rather than producing his work in a shabby loft or former factory, Ipsen is more at home in a gleaming, white-tiled former fishmonger’s shop in Nørrebro, once home to thousands of newly arrived factory workers, and

now Copenhagen's most diverse (and increasingly trendy) neighborhood. Although he shows at galleries around the world, Studio Steen Ipsen also serves as his showroom, giving passersby a glimpse into his more than three decades of world building.

Although his work is now celebrated for its organic, undulating forms and precise glazes, his initial body of work upon graduating from Kolding was unrelenting in its exploration of geometry. Taking inspiration from such disparate influences as Islamic mosaics and 1960s "Op Art," Ipsen leaned as hard into "hard-edged" as the medium of ceramics would allow. Achieving formal mastery over a notoriously amorphous material like clay was itself a form of rebellion, as was denying the sense of texture and materiality that we often associate with Danish ceramics.

Precocious in their construction and mind-boggling in their formal complexity, these formative works marked Ipsen as a rising star. Just six years after graduating from Kolding, he was appointed as the head of the department of ceramics at the prestigious Royal Danish Academy School of Design in Copenhagen, a position that he would hold for eight years. Ipsen's influence can still be felt at the Royal Academy today. Students at the Academy still receive rigorous formal training, but they are encouraged to spread their wings and create work that is conceptual, performative, multimedia, or even ephemeral.

Ipsen's path to the *blobject* began in the early 2000s with the exploration of the sphere as a geometric element to accompany the other forms in his vocabulary. First came a series of accumulated teardrop shapes that were combined into sculptural "plates." Quickly, the teardrops gave way to aggregations of spheres (or in Ipsen's vocabulary, *Bubbles*) that initially held on to vestigial function as bowls and plates, but quickly became autonomous tabletop sculptures. Ipsen also began exploiting his work's new curves by pairing his forms with dazzling polychrome glazes that run, drip, and stretch over the spherical forms and pooling in their joints.

As with all his previous bodies of work, Ipsen worked through his ideas methodically. His prolific rate of production allowed him to take stock of the combinations of form and surface that he felt are most effective. Over a period of several years, the polychrome glazing became more subtle, and began to privilege single candy-like colors that provide the frenetic *Bubbles* with a sense of unity that is by turns playful and seductive. The *blobject* revolution in design was undeniably driven by 3D modeling, but Ipsen works in a deliberately low-tech way, laboriously hand-modeling and assembling his pieces from the ground up.

Speaking of the ground, Ipsen's design training is particularly evident in the way his pieces seem to be floating or undulating upward, appearing to defy gravity. Negative space is also paramount—each piece contains volumes within volumes. With every successive exhibition, Ipsen adds to his vocabulary of forms. He started in the early 1990s with slipcast stoneware *vessels*, then added *bubbles* (which sometimes appeared in tandem with lattice-like geometric sculptures), which begat *balls*, which morphed into football-shaped *ellipses*. Ipsen's ellipses share DNA with another classic ceramic provocation, Dutch designer Marcel Wanders' *Egg Vase* (1998), which was made by creating a slipcast mold from a condom stuffed with eggs.

Ipsen has explored balls and ellipses for over a decade now. Again, his training as a designer is evident in how his work is resolved. As with the polychrome glazes in his *bubble* sculptures, his work benefits greatly from a pinch of friction... or more accurately, tension. Beginning in 2012, Ipsen began using PVC or leather cords as ligatures between the individual forms in his sculptures. The cords appear to constrict the bulbous forms—there is often a sense that the balls and ellipses are teeming with movement and energy that strains against the constriction of the cords. It is no accident that Ipsen's impeccably shiny surfaces resemble latex fetish gear, an association that is fortified by their PVC and leather bindings. His works draw their power from their knockout formal qualities but stick with the viewer as they process the complex *souçon* of desire, sex, and submission.

With every blocky new iteration of the iPhone, the *blobject* era recedes farther into the past.<sup>5</sup> Never a slave to fashion, Ipsen continues to find power in his undulating forms, finding ways to push the envelope both formally and conceptually. In 2014, he began his *Organic Movement* series, which untethered his work from the modular *balls* and *ellipses*. Works from *Organic Movement* are stark white amorphous cloudlike forms that are marked by topographic lines that help demarcate the sleek curves of the probing pseudopodia. As always, Ipsen magnified the complexity of his forms with every successive body of work. By 2016, the forms began to cantilever into space like futuristic riffs on Chinese scholar rocks.

In addition to their *blobject* qualities, Ipsen's forms also echo *ferrofluids*, liquids that suspend magnetic nanoparticles that respond strongly to magnetic fields. Ferrofluids were originally invented by NASA scientists in the 1960s to get rocket fuel from the tank to the combustion chamber using magnets in zero gravity. Ultimately, their use in rocket fuel was a failure, but ferrofluids have found their way into everything from audio speakers to silicone computer chips.<sup>6</sup> Depending on the type of magnetic field they are exposed to, ferrofluids can display tessellated geometric qualities, but they can also be wildly amorphous. Whether intentional or not, Ipsen brought his *Organic Movements* into closer alignment with ferrofluids by applying an inky black glaze to the forms, dubbing them *Organic Reflections*.

For his exhibition at HB381, Ipsen has amplified the scale, complexity, and ambition of the work. His longstanding forms have all matured without losing their sense of play. Each of the forms—*Balls*, *Ellipses*, and *Organic Movement* have been imbued with countervailing forces that lend their candy-coated qualities an edge that can be sexy, sinister... or both. Over the more than three decades that Ipsen has spent as a professional artist, it is clear he spends more sustained time than most artists methodically working his way through iterations of his ideas, leaving room for growth and surprise without duplicating his efforts. This body of work is extraordinarily resolved... which invariably means that new forms and new experiments are waiting to emerge from his studio.

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<sup>1</sup> Patton, Phil. "Blobs." *Esquire*, Dec. 1993, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Holt, Steven Skov, and Mara Holt Skov. *Blobs and beyond: The New Fluidity in Design*. Chronicle Books, u.s., 2005.

<sup>3</sup> "Blobs & Beyond: The New Fluidity in Design." *San José Museum of Art*, [simusart.org/exhibition/blobs-beyond-new-fluidity-design](http://simusart.org/exhibition/blobs-beyond-new-fluidity-design).

<sup>4</sup> Copenhagen Ceramics is an ongoing collective consisting of Ipsen, Skjøttgaard, and Kahldahl that revolved around a physical gallery space in Copenhagen that presented 27 exhibitions between 2012 and 2014. Copenhagen Ceramics continues as a platform for periodic new exhibitions and symposia. For more information, see Bogh, Mikkel, et al. *Copenhagen Ceramics: Exhibitions 2012 - 2013 - 2014*. Copenhagen Ceramics, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Wittkower, Dylan E., and Frances Raven. "The Moment of the Blob Has Passed." *iPod and Philosophy: Icon of an Epoch*, Open Court, Chicago, Ill, 2008, pp. 17–28.

<sup>6</sup> Rohrig, Brian. "The Mesmerizing Pull of Ferrofluids." *American Chemical Society*, Dec. 2021, [www.acs.org/education/resources/highschool/chemmatters/past-issues/2021-2022/december-2021/ferrofluids.html](http://www.acs.org/education/resources/highschool/chemmatters/past-issues/2021-2022/december-2021/ferrofluids.html).