

# Helena Andersson's Woodfired Earthenware

*Love Jonsson discusses Helena Andersson's ceramic art*



**I**N HER WOODFIRED EARTHENWARE, Helena Andersson investigates the expressive values of organic sculptures and reliefs and examines the prospects of enhancing the artistic meanings through ceramic processes. Her forms open up through their crude relief effects, and the material suffers under the stresses from technical restraints. Traces of the shaping, glazing and firing remain clearly visible and the details are permitted to form complex and sometimes contradictory complete works.

Andersson first came into contact with woodfiring during the mid-'90s while studying at the School of Design and Crafts at Gothenburg University. Torbjørn Kvasbø, the Norwegian ceramist and avid woodfire enthusiast who was the professor of the Department of Ceramics at the time, was particular about giving the students the opportunity to woodfire. Andersson describes her own path towards woodfiring as somewhat accidental. Some of the pieces among the reliefs that comprised her thesis work were woodfired, and they came out more interesting than the ones that had been fired in the school's regular gas kiln.

*Above: Helena Andersson.  
Above left: **Ceramic Wall Collage**. 2001.*

*TECHNIQUE: Earthenware clay fired in electric, gas and wood kilns. Covered with slips and lead glazes.*

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**Green Organ.** 2002. Earthenware. 60 x 35 x 25 cm.

**CLAY BODY:**

Consisting of a red clay from Southern Sweden and a blue Danish clay, the body is mixed with about 20 per cent grog of various grades, quite coarse for the most part, which is a condition for the durability of the sculpture walls. The glaze she most frequently uses is a transparent lead glaze, which is sometimes tinted. The glaze is poured or brushed on, and the pieces usually have a slip foundation. For slip, a white casting clay tinted with oxides and pigments is used. The slip is poured over the smaller forms and sprayed on the larger ones.

**TECHNIQUES:**

Andersson uses rolled slabs and coil-building. When giving the surfaces a rugged, eruptive structure, by pressing on it with her fingers or various tools, she places foam-rubber underneath the clay to render the work surface less rigid.

Following her graduation in 1998, she has been able to continue using the school's woodfire kilns – a privilege she shares with all alumni of the school. The school's kiln park is situated 40 km north of Gothenburg on the Swedish west coast. The construction of the school's first raku kiln instigated the park and during Torbjørn Kvasbø's tenure, an anagama kiln and a Bourry box kiln were built as well. The school's current professor of ceramics, the Norwegian Elisa Helland-Hansen, had a fast-fire kiln added. All in all, the kiln park today consists of half a dozen kilns of various types and sizes, including a few smaller experimental kilns.

Actually, states Andersson, woodfiring is daunting, because it entails extra work. Added to the process are the complications of transporting the bisque fired pieces from the workshop to the faraway kiln. She has also come to realise that the number of colleagues working with woodfired earthenware is small.

Andersson emphasises her humble attitude towards the mysteries of woodfiring saying she still feels that there is much left to explore and discover. However, she is less interested in the suggestive process of the method than in the finished result. When reduction firing in a woodfire kiln, the simple lead glaze she uses becomes alive with many shades of colour, rather than a uniform gloss that would normally be the result. The colours become deeper and tinged in semi-flat and milk-white. The surface structures are also affected. When reduction firing in woodfire kilns, glazes usually acquire a softer surface than through other reduction fire methods, claims Andersson.

Some of her later works have large unglazed sections where the clay colouring becomes central. Where the flames do not reach, the unglazed clay retains a light and sand coloured hue. From there a spectrum of colours ensues, from brick red to dark olive green and nearly black where the clay is on the verge of becoming overfired. It takes time to acquire the practical knowledge on how to control the effects, and in some aspects many of Andersson's works still have something accidental about them. Some pieces draw their strength precisely from this act of balancing on the verge of being overfired. The clay is melting and the forms start careening. Many are discarded, even though the artist herself rarely finds cracks alone to be a sufficient reason for disposal.

Andersson has become increasingly drawn towards larger formats, having discovered that her treatment of the clay demands ample surface space to avoid the risk of becoming timid or restrained. Her methods reveal a certain disrespect towards the material and, at the same time, an artistic self-confidence that has been gradually attained. And in spite of this element of disrespect, trust in the fundamental aspects of the ceramic tradition is evident; it is clay that is given form, coated with slips and glazes.

Many observers have pointed out a certain nature-inspired streak in Andersson's sculptures. It is indeed easy to perceive the visual correlation to lava and moss-covered rocks, or crudely fashioned sea animals and magnified mollusks. But more than being depictions of nature, which generally presumes a distance between the artist and motif, the pieces have the character of documents, of being records of violent and direct processes. The motif here, if it is

possible to speak of such, is first and foremost the chain of events itself and the energy charged into the material during the shaping, glazing and firing.

Naturally, the creative force is also based in a need for personal expression. An obvious parallel is to the expressionistic ceramic sculpture, a modern tradition whose Scandinavian pioneers include the Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914-74) and the Swedish ceramist Anders Liljefors (1923-1970). Torbjørn Kvasbø can also be said to belong to this tradition. But there is an apparently just as important reference point to Andersson's work: the older, popular tradition of earthenware with its colourful ornaments. This is something that differentiates her from many of her predecessors in the expressionistic tradition.

In Andersson's earthenware, the encounter between the different access points appears to form a personal platform for action with wide-ranging artistic ambitions. What concerns her here is also the struggle for diversity and refusal to be hemmed in by predetermined categories. In a broader perspective, what one finds in her work is a connection to general tendencies within Swedish ceramics, which have been discernable to a varying extent for several decades already and have their obvious international parallels. These tendencies have to do with aesthetic pluralism and a desire to distance oneself from the conventional meaning of notions such as beauty and good taste. Inspiration is drawn from a number of directions with emphasis on bringing together and adding rather than refining and deducting.

Some of Andersson's sculptures are glazed with apricot and pink coloured hues that can be interpreted as codes that are signifying decorative home environment and popular taste. The creamy pastel coloured glazes contravene the violent expression conveyed by the ruthlessly treated clay. The result is not necessarily a harmonious totality. These sculptures, along with many other works by Andersson, provide a subtle criticism of the notion of the artwork as a unified message. The emphasis is placed on the expressive detail, the forceful contrasts and the sudden whims. Cracks and half-uncontrolled colour changes resulting from the firing underscore the tensions. Even if the fragmentary expression emerged more strongly in Helena Andersson's earlier work, the tension between detail and the whole, between surface and volume, remains evident in her latest and sculpturally more balanced works.



Above images: From the suite **Bergtagen** (detail). 2003. Woodfired.