



C E R A M I C
S E R I E S ●

Gabriele Koch

Aberystwyth Arts Centre



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Gabriele Koch

The first pot that Gabriele Koch sold was to Anthony Caro. It might seem surprising that the foremost postwar sculptor to use metal, the creator of an uncompromising architecture of tectonic planes and surfaces should respond so immediately to the fluidity and organicism so often commented on in Gabriele's vessels. There is an easy and rather facile assumption that there is a polarity between the kind of highly cerebral modernist sculpture that Caro makes and the beautifully considered surfaces and volumes apparent in the sensibility of Gabriele's work. But this is not so. For all her modesty and unassuming way of talking about her work, Gabriele makes seriously considered vessels. They are pots that contain a fiercely coherent architecture of their own and they are pots that demand to be placed in architectural spaces with care and deliberation. The idea that just because her pots have beautiful surfaces, surfaces that have the complex interchange between tautness and movement apparent in the transience of moving water or cloudscapes, they are lesser works of art than something with an angrily abraded texture, is in error.

Gabriele has an unorthodox and intriguing background. She was born in the South West corner of Germany on the edges of Switzerland and France - an experience she describes as a 'frontier childhood'. She studied to become an interpreter and took a degree in history and political science at Heidelberg University. It was a time of great political and social unrest: a new German young generation was redefining itself. It was the time for a new internationalism. Academic hierarchies were being challenged, the campuses were in uproar. Though this radicalism appealed to her it was to be in England that she was to make her home, teaching German in a South London school (an experience she is still rueful about) and living in a kind of self-directed way that she indicates might have been difficult to sustain in a Germany that was still for

all its promise a country of boundaries for her. Gabriele Koch's first awareness of clay came through handling Spanish unglazed earthenware pots - cheap, commonplace and unremarkable, yet containing a quality that she loved and which are still a marker of some significance for her. She talks vividly of the marks of the flame on the clay and of Spain being a 'culture of directness'. Indeed any visitor to her kitchen is likely to see a sort of domestic reference collection on the surrounding shelves: many of these pots are made in earthenware, many are from disparate cultures that share this type of directness that Gabriele focuses on.

In dedicated and hard won time away from teaching, Gabriele learnt to throw pots and to handbuild, firstly at the Camden Institute and then at the studio she set up in her house in North London. As a thirtieth birthday present to herself she took the post graduate ceramics course at Goldsmiths College. It was at this time that her interests in hand building came to the fore - it was, in her own words 'liberating'. These early pots do not reveal an antiquarian interest in hand building, the kind of studiedly self conscious archaism that is so common in American ceramics. It was passion. The traditions on which she draws are not ones where the vessel is in stasis, kept still for exhibition only. They are traditions where pots are full, abundant, animating forces - her early Spanish influences met African, Pueblo and Indian traditions. These first truly independent pots made at Goldsmiths were large and magisterial. They were also perfectly symmetrical - something that is of a hugely difficult technical nature to accomplish. It was as if she was determined to learn this new vocabulary of ceramics in the hardest way possible. Her great technical facility has increased substantially since then, but at heart the techniques she uses remain the same. Firstly a round base is pinched out from a ball of clay. Coils of clay are then added to make the body of the pot - at each stage they are joined with great care and precision. A blow torch is used to help shorten the drying process. The pot is then ready for burnishing, a process that Gabriele does with old and bent stainless steel spoons rather than some precious Kettles Yard type collection of resonant pebbles. Burnishing is a key

element in the whole making cycle: it is the way that the slips that she uses are pressed into the surface of the pot. At its most basic it is a smoothing process. But it is also the way that the extraordinary surface is arrived at - both exact and clear yet also with a feel that is resonant of living materials, wood or the body. The pots then have a bisque firing before their final sawdust firing. If you look out of Gabriele's kitchen window you see a remarkable disparate collection of dustbins and lids. This is her laboratory. She has a depth of knowledge of how to fire her pots in sawdust that belies any notion of 'low tech.' How to place a pot, how closely to pack the sawdust and where, are but mere preliminaries to the decisions as to how and when to retrieve it from the kiln. These decisions are crucial. Her pots depend for their success on achieving the fugitive qualities of binding together the controlled and the accidental. To open the kiln at the wrong time or to misjudge the pack means a lesser pot, one that does not sing. The marking must bring an added depth and tension to the form: the detail is all.

In Gabriele's most recent work her concerns with volume have taken a most exciting and surprising development. Her pots have often played with almost vertiginous profiles - the shoulders on some of the large vessels appearing on the knife edge of collapse, the bases disappearing into shadows - though actually stable. But there are now new forms that take this even further. One form has the vestigial memory of shoulders, two raised parts that seem almost to echo a Hans Coper form. There is a tall vessel of exquisite poise and balance that seems to be a counterbalance to her generous rounded pots. These new works have benefited from Gabriele's recent visit to India. There is no easy or banal link between her travels and her pots, but it is not too fanciful to believe that the deep drenched colour of some of these new pots are quietly reminiscent of an Indian encounter: a Jaipur pink, or a cloudy dusky golden tone.

Gabriele's pots are articulate: they are wide in reach yet deeply focussed. Maybe Gabriele Koch is still a translator in some way: making new art on the edges of old cultures.

Edmund de Waal



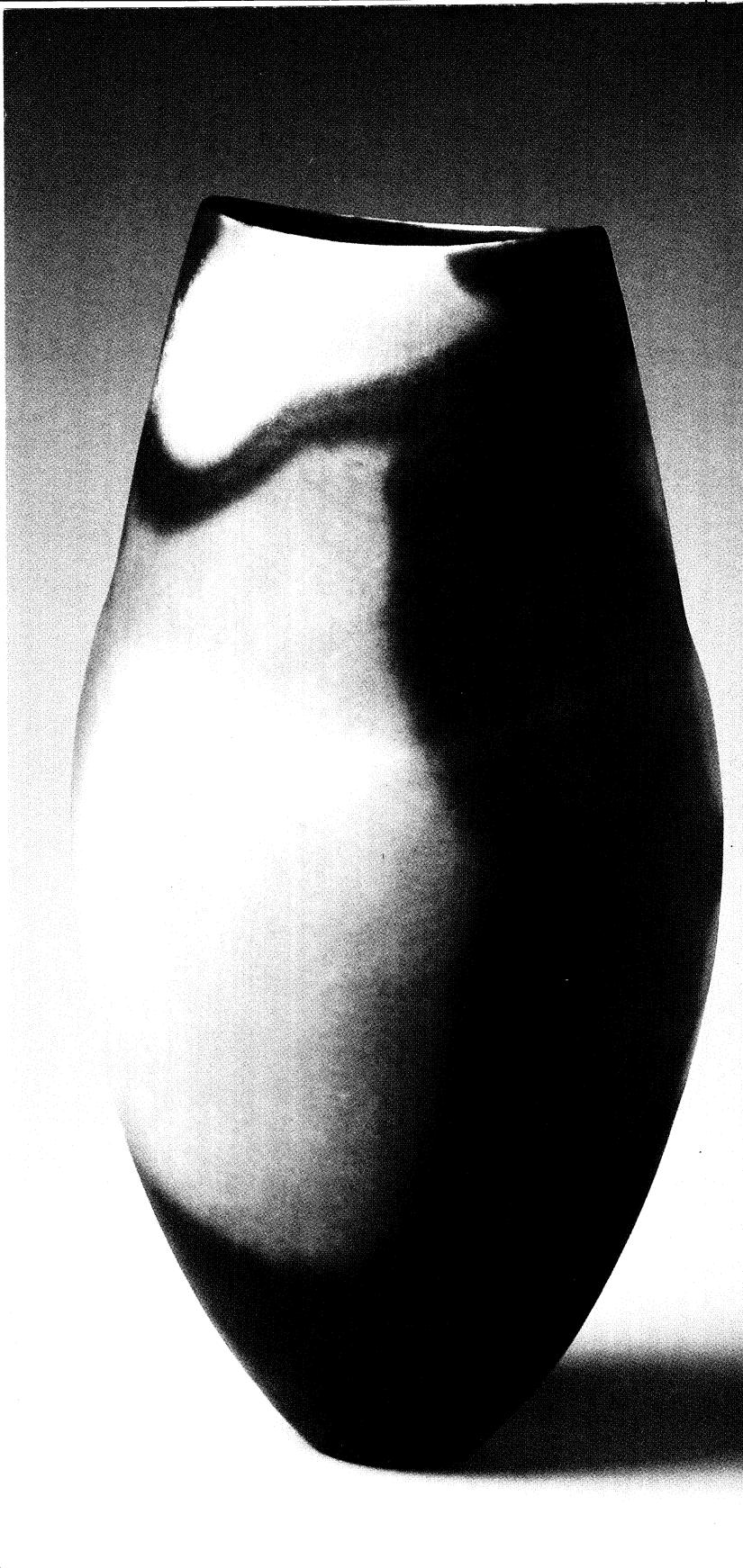
Burnished vessel ▲ 37cm



12 April - 24 May 1997

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C Y F R E S O

G E R A M E G

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E BRILL 1997 rhif 83

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Anthony Caro a brynnodd y pot cyntaf a werthwyd gan Gabriele Koch. Rhyfedd, hwyrach, fod un o gerflunwyr cyntaf ar ôl y rhypel i ddefnyddio metel a phensaerniath ddigfaddawd planau a wnebau tectonig, wedi ymateb mewn ffordd mor uniongyrchol i'r hylifedd a'r organebaeth sy'n nodweddu llestri Gabriele. Mae 'na ragdybiaeth ddigon ysmala fod yna bolareiddio rhwng y math o gerfluniaeth fodernaidd uwchymenyddol a wneir gan Caro a'r arwynebau a foliwmaw ystyrlon, hardd sydd i'w teimlo yng ngwaith Gabriele. Ond nid felly y mae. Er gwaetha'i gwyleidd-dra a'r ffordd ddiymhongar y bydd yn siarad am ei gwaith, bydd Gabriele'n creu llestri ystyrlon. Mae pensaerniath ei photiau'n meddu ar ryw gydlyniant unigryw. Dyma botiau sy'n mynnu cael eu gosod gyda gofal mawr mewn gofod pensaerniol. Hollol gyfeiliornus yw'r syniad bod ei photiau, oherwydd eu harwynebau hardd, arwynebau sy'n atgoffa rhywun o symudiad Dŵr neu gymylau, yn weithiau celf, yn hytrach na rhywbeth ag iddo wead sgriffiniedig.

Cefndir brith a diddorol sydd gan Gabriele. Fe'i ganwyd yn ne-orllewin yr Almaen ar y ffin â'r Swistir a Ffrainc - profiad y mae hi wedi'i ddisgrifio fel "plentyndod y ffin". Hyfforddodd fel cyfeithydd, a gwnaeth radd mewn hanes a gwyddorau gwleidyddol ym Mhrifysgol Heidelberg. Dyma gyfnod a welodd lawer iawn o fwrlwm gwleidyddol a chymdeithasol lle y bu cenhedlaeth Almaenig newydd yn ei diffinio'i hun mewn gwrthgyferbyniad â'i rhieni. Roedd pob hierarchaeth academaidd yn cael ei herio ac roedd pob campws ar ferw. Er bod y radicaleiddio yma wedi apelio ati, yn Lloegr yr ymgartrefodd Gabriele yn y pen draw lle y bu'n dysgu Almaeneg mewn ysgol yn ne Llundain (profiad sy'n dal i fod yn destun edlifeirwch ganddi), gan fyw mewn ffordd hunangyeiriedig y gallasai fod yn eithaf anodd i'w chynnal yn yr Almaen, gwlaid, a oedd, er gwaethaf ei holl addewid, yn wlad llawn ffiniau iddi.

Profiad cyntaf Gabriele o glai oedd wrth drafod crochenwaith

heb ei wydro o Sbaen - potiau rhad, cyffredin a di-nod. Eto, roedd yna briodweddau a garai yn y potiau hyn, ac o hyd, maent yn arwyddocaol iawn iddi. Bydd hi'n sôn yn frwd am farciau'r fflam ar y clai ac am Sbaen fel "diwylliant uniongyrchol". Yn wir, bydd unrhyw ymwelydd â'i chegin yn debygol o weld rhyw fath o gasgliad cyfeiriol ar ei silffoedd. Llestri pridd yw llawer iawn o'r rhain sy'n dod o wahanol ddiwylliannau sy'n rhannu'r math o uniongyrchedd y mae Gabriele'n canolbwytio arno.

Yn ystod cyfnodau prin oddi wrth ei gwaith dysgu, dysgodd Gabriele sut i daflu potiau ac i adeiladu â llaw, yn Athrofa Camden ar y dechrau, ac yna yn y stiwdio a sefydlodd yn ei th_ yng ngogledd Llundain. Yn anrheg deg ar hugain oed iddi hi'i hun, ymunodd â'r cwrs cerameg i ôl-raddedigion yng Ngholeg Goldsmith. Dyma'r adeg y daeth ei diddordeb mewn adeiladu â llaw o'r math hynafiaethol, hunanymwybodol sydd mor gyffredin mewn cerameg Americanaidd, a welir yn y potiau cynnar hyn. Ysfa oedd dan sylw. Bydd hi'n tynnun'n bennaf o draddodiadau lle na fydd y llestr mewn stasis ac wedi'u cadw ar gyfer arddangosfeydd yn unig.

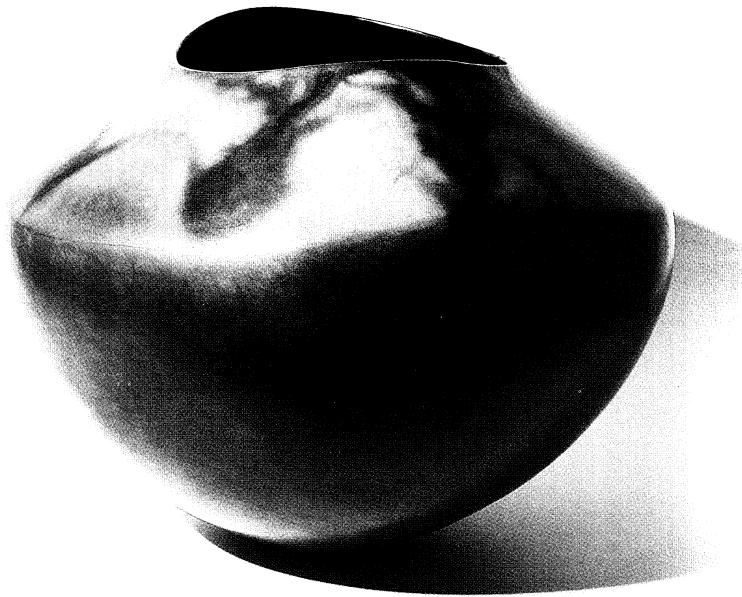
Y traddodiadau y bydd Gabriele'n ymddiddori ynddynt yw'r rheini lle mai grymoedd llawn, ffrwythlon, toreithog yw'r potiau. Cyfarfu'r dylanwadau cynnar o Sbaen â thraddodiadau Pueblo, Africanaidd ac Indiaidd. Roedd y potiau annibynnol cyntaf hyn a wnaethpwyd yn Goldsmith yn eitemau mawr, awdurdodol. Roeddent hefyd yn hollo gyfesur, camp sy'n anodd iawn i'w chyflawni'n dechnegol. Roedd fel pe bai'n benderfynol o ddysgu geirfa newydd cerameg yn y ffordd anosaf bosibl. Mae'i gallu technegol wedi cynyddu'n sylweddol ers hynny, ond, yn y bôn, bydd y technegau a ddefnyddir ganddi'n aros yr un fath. Yn gyntaf, bydd gwaelod crwn yn cael ei binsio allan o belen o glai. Yna, bydd torchau o glai'n cael eu hychwanegu er mwyn creu corff y pot. Cysylltir y rhain wrth ei gilydd â gofal mawr a chywirdeb manwl. Defnyddir chwythdors wedyn i helpu lleihau'r cyfnod sychu. Yna, bydd y pot yn barod i'w loywi-proses y bydd Gabriele'n ei gwneud gyda hen lwyau dur di-staen, yn hytrach na defnyddio cerigos yn null Kettle Yard. Elfen allweddol yw gloywi: dyma'r ffordd y bydd y slipiau a

dddefnyddir ganddi'n cael eu gwasgu i arwyneb y pot. Ar ei tfurf fwyaf amrwd, proses lyfnu yw hi. Ond hefyd, dyma'r ffordd y bydd ei harwynebau arbennig yn cael eu creu, yn gwir ac yn glir, ac eto'n teimlo'n holol fyw. Yna, bydd y potiau'n cael taniad bisque cyn y taniad blawd llif terfynol. Os edrychwr drwy ffenest cegin Gabriele, gellwr weld casgliad hynod amrywiol o finiau sbwriel a'u caeadau. Dyma'i labordy. Mae ganddi wybodaeth drylwyr a helaeth ynglŷn â sut i danio potiau mewn blawd lli. Mae hi'n gwybod yn union sut i osod y pot, ble mae pacio'r blawd lli a pha mor agos i'w bacio - ond rhagbaratoadau'n unig yw'r rheini o'u cymharu â sut a pha bryd i'w dynnu o'r odyn. Mae'r penderfyniadau hyn yn hanfodol. Bydd ei photiau'n dibynnau ar gyfuno'n llwyddiannus y rheoledig a'r damweiniol. Pe bai'r odyn yn cael ei hagor ar yr adeg anghywir neu pe bai'n cawlio'r ffordd y mae hi'n cael ei phacio, golygai hyn na fyddai'r pot yn taro deuddeg. Rhaid i'r marcio ddod â dyfnader a thensiwn vchwaniogol i'r ffurf - manylder yw popeth.

Yng ngwaith diweddaraf Gabriele, mae'i diddordeb mewn foliwm wedi datblygu mewn ffordd ryfedol a chyffrous. Yn aml iawn bydd proffiliau'r potiau'n hynod benysgafn gydag vsgwyddau rhai o'r llestri mwyaf fel pe baent ar fin dymchwel a'r gwaelodion yn diflannu i'r cysgodion er eu bod yn gyfan gwbl sefydlog. Ond, erbyn hyn, ceir ffurfliau newydd, sy'n mynd â'r agwedd hon hyd yn oed ymhellach. Mae gan un eitem ryw rith o ysgwyddau, dwy ran wedi'u codi, sy'n atgoffa rhywun bron o un o ffurfliau Hans Cope. Mae 'na lestr tal, gosgeiddig sydd fel nodyn yn yr awyr. Mae'r gweithiau hyn wedi elwa o ymweliad diweddar Gabriele a'r India. Does dim cysylltiad hawdd, arwynebol rhwng ei theithiau a'i photiau, ond go brin nad oes cysylltiad rhwng rhai o'r lliwiau tywyll, dirlawn a geir yn y potiau newydd hyn sy'n awgrymu atgofion tawel o'i chyffyrddiad ag India, rhyw binc o Jaipur neu ryw arlliw euraid, tywyll, cymylog.

Mae potiau Gabriele yn huawdl; mae eu cyrhaeddiad yn eang ond yn ddwfn ei ffocws. Hwyrach, mewn rhai ffyrdd, cyfeithydd yw Gabriele o hyd, sy'n creu celf newydd ar ffiniau hen ddiwylliant.

Edmund de Waal



Burnished vessel, curved shoulder ▲ 41cm

12 Ebrill - 24 Mai 1997

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