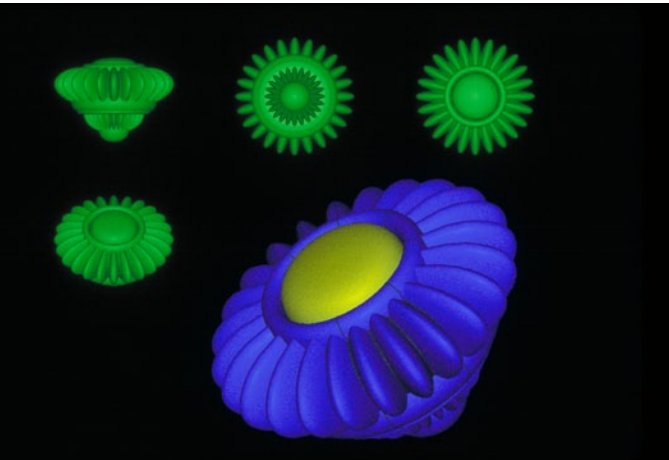


Barbara Nanning Links Tradition and Innovation



Left: *Computer Design Reclining Flowers*. 1997. Design associate: Architect Paul van Leeuwen, Amsterdam.
 Right: *Reclining Flowers*. 1997. Eleven ceramic flowers of stoneware and terrazo. Commissioned by Korps Landelijke Politie Dienst, Driebergen, The Netherlands. 220cm.

BARBARA NANNING (B. THE HAGUE, 1957) IS PART OF THE generation of ceramic artists who have defined contemporary Dutch ceramics since the mid-1980s. Following her study at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, her work has developed in diverse phases, from functional objects to sculpture. The developments in her ceramic work are reflected in the themes that she has pursued over the last 30 years, which flow naturally in to one another. Her overseas travels and confrontations with other cultures have always put an indelible stamp on her work. Nature, in both its organic and inorganic forms and, especially the motion of water, wind and clouds has been a constant source of inspiration. Nanning studies crystals, jellyfish, flowers and micro-organisms from an almost 19th century fascination for form, structure and geometry. She combines regularity with fluidity, order with chaos, hard with soft and rigid with supple. The work is always contrasting and surprising.

In the early 1980s, Nanning emphasized the application of colour on thrown vessel forms. The Bauhaus philosophy of colour, notably the work of Johannes Itten, applied ceramic forms inspired by Mayan culture were combined with new forms for plates and vases. Following a trip to Mexico, she developed a series of large monochrome plates with applied coloured threads from textiles. "What most struck me in Mexico was not so much the ceramics

but the vibrant, brilliant colours of textiles and functional plastic objects."

Her introduction to the limestone rock formations in the mysterious white moonscape of Cappadocia, in Turkey, led to a series of monumental, thrown cylinder forms in unglazed stoneware, called *Fossils* (1989) which were wrapped in rope while still wet. Impressions of that bare, monochromatic landscape were incorporated in constricted forms whose clay walls were turned outwards or in which (in a later stage) the bottoms were cut out. Forms for pots and vases slowly moved into freestanding autonomous objects. These works were a springboard to a series of turned objects with concentric swirls with no beginning or end: her *Galaxy* series, from 1990. Their movements referred to the spiral shapes that can be seen in photographs taken of the Milky Way.

Article by Piet Augustijn

contrast to what is usually seen in ceramics, Nanning selected colours that were

not made from glazes but from pure pigment, mixed with sand. "It was my fascination for millennia of motion, the spinning around of the planets, stars and molecules and my desire to record the essence of this motion that resulted in these objects," as she stated at their presentation. "I consider the turns in my ceramics like a wave that moves towards its highest point – the rising tension, just before the moment when the wave breaks." That presentation not only resulted in her being awarded the



Verre déglomise (Detail). Blown, cut and sandblasted glass with white gold.

1990 Ceramics Prize but also in an invitation from a Japanese delegation to take part in the opening exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Ceramic Art in Shigaraki, Japan.

As had been true of her earlier work, this journey to Japan in 1991 left traces in her new work. Recollections of meticulously raked sand and gravel, characteristic of the Zen gardens in Buddhist monasteries, can be found in the rippling inside walls of the monumental plates in her *Terra* series. "The stilled atmosphere of these stylized gardens is something I strive for in my own work. Leaving out anything that is unnecessary and finding the quietness to do it in the right way are elements that I brought from Japan to my studio." In addition, she created objects from fragments of thrown ceramics, combined with fragments of tree roots, interpreting impressions of the whimsical and knotted trees that grow in the Zen gardens. Her exhibition, *Momentopname 11*, held in 1993 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, presented the *Terra* series at its apex.

What began around 1996 as a few loose objects inspired by flower buds and seed capsules developed into a separate group of its own. From these compactly collected buds evolved composite, luxuriant blossoms with leaves that appear to rustle in the wind. The flowers transformed into water beings that sway with the undulations of the water. This series is in monochrome colours and is titled *Botanica*.

GLASS

Along with ceramics, since 1995, Nanning has also worked extensively in glass. She first came into contact with the material when Thimo te Duits, Curator of the Netherlands' National Glass Museum in Leerdam, ask her to design an object of the year for the museum. She studied books on glass, visited the glass factory to observe the industrial process and technical possibilities and became fascinated by the clarity of line and the optical effects of the material. She became a regular visitor to the factory. Initially, she was faithful to the language of form of



Top: *Birth of Venus*. 2008. Glass, clay, sand, pigments and silver leaf inclusion. Private collection, France.

Above: *Meteorite*. 2008. Iridescent glass, clay, sand, pigments and metal powders. 63 x 43 x 30 cm.

her ceramic pieces but she quickly developed a language of her own with palmate forms that were cut and polished after being blown and cooled. Plates that were cut through, spherical forms that were cut open, with straight lines breaking the static form of the sphere, ovals wrapped with thick threads of glass: These are extreme forms that evoke associations with sea creatures (octopus, jellyfish, sea anemones), flowers that have burst open, or such natural phenomena as waves in water or the turbulence of cloud formations. "I work from strict forms and from that point, I want to achieve motion that evolves out of that point of rest. All of these objects in glass or clay are solidified natural movements." Although Nanning's objects look extremely organic and have a logical form, they come about in rational fashion, with each segment carefully considered.

Her acquaintance with Czech glassblowers at the Leerdam Glass Centre helped lead to both her use of brilliant colours and multiple techniques. Over the last 15 years, Nanning's one-of-a-kind glass pieces



Left: **Terra**. 1995. Stoneware, pigment and sand coating.
Collection of National Keramiek Museum Princessehof, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.
Right: **Transmutation**. 2007. Earthenware and lacquer. 19 x 22 x 29 cm.

have united different worlds: classic bohemian glass finishing, decorative Japanese flower motifs, optical cut glass, natural phenomena and the scientific study of crystals. She has made use of the gilded glass, the *Verre d'Eglomise* technique, with equal strength, literally and figuratively enriching the sensual interior shapes of her forms.

CERAMICS

Although glass has played an important role in her work in the early 21st century, she has never lost touch with ceramics. Her ceramic series, *Transmutation* tells the story of the organs that make up the body, the core of the living body. Instead of the velvety surface of the works in her *Galaxy* and *Terra* series', in these objects Nanning shows what lies beneath the skin. By removing the sandy surface, we see complex forms that move from one into another like organs in the body. In a continuation of the sand-coloured coatings of her earlier ceramic works, in 2008, Nanning made malleable masses from coloured sand and clay, which are hard and strong when dry. By her working of the surface while still wet, the pieces take on a coral-like appearance. For *Meteoriet* (2008), loose, iridescent glass elements have been moulded together with this mass, with metallic powders added. With the help of a hair dryer and gas burner, the metals are reduced and the colours transformed into lustres and the clay mass is pulled into the glass on the

surface. *Birth of Venus* comprises five large, blown-glass objects and the coloured mass. Small flakes of silver or gold leaf are captured between two layers of glass in such a way that they create a crackling as the glass is blown and expanded.

PORCELAIN

Over the last few years, Nanning has developed a considerable body of work of drawings, sketches and ideas on colour, form and texture. In the summer of 2008, at the Novito Porcelain Studio in the Czech Republic, she made a first step in translating these impressions in paintings on porcelain plates and wall panels. "For this experiment, I worked together with my colleague, Petra Morenzi. In the Czech Republic, we painted over one another's images, to the point where two completely different worlds became thoroughly interwoven. Initially, I was the person doing the structure and Morenzi created realistic images. After a few days, we reversed that, and I worked figuratively and Morenzi made structures. We made an entire journey and, in the end, we can no longer tell who painted what. It was an inspiring and fruitful experiment, which we hope to continue."

MONUMENTAL

Nanning's ceramic work is often the starting point for her monumental commissioned projects for both interior and exterior spaces. In recent years, she has made extensive use of computer technology in order to design, visualize and construct monumental



Botanica. 2003. Stoneware, polyurethane, pigment and sandcoating. 165 x 168 x 38 cm.
Collection of Marius van de Ven, France.

installations. In collaboration with industry, she continually develops new technologies in form and decoration for often extensive installations. Her most important commissioned works of the last decade include her *Reclining Flowers* installation for the KLPD Special Police Task Force in Driebergen, the Netherlands (11 ceramic flower forms), the *Galaxy* installation for the TNO Building in Eindhoven, (250 ceramic elements, 2001), the *Fleurs de Mer* installation on the Zuiderdam and Oosterdam cruise ships of the Holland America Line (2002–2003) and her imposing *Petrified Dynamic Flows* sculpture, a monument to Mount Fuji, in Gotemba City, Japan (2007), the colourful ceiling *Nautilus* in Amsterdam, 24 decorated glass panels, illustrating the four elements: heaven and earth, water and fire in Huizen, both in The Netherlands and her recent *Mimicry* project, 68 glass sculptures, decorating the Atrium and Theatre of the cruiseship *Seabourn II*, Sojourn, Norway.

Nanning's most recent commissioned work is the design and execution of 1000 m² of glass panels with stained colour reliefs for the water tower in Naaldwijk. The water tower was built around 1920, is no longer used for water supply and is a listed cultural heritage site. Commissioned by Woonheer Projekt B V developers, the architect, Rene Hoek of Het Architecten in Naaldwijk was asked to transform the water tower, which is 35 m high, into a residential complex with five stories. Nanning's glass panels will be used for both the new construction and between the window sections of the original water tower. The central theme for the project is life in the underwater world. The Transfer Building will be entirely encased in glass panels, executed in a sparkling colour palette that is partly transparent. The idea of the glass windows for the water tower evolved from old stained, glass-in-lead techniques. With the help of contemporary technology, it is now possible to create windows from float glass



Nautilus. 2008. Polyurethane and sand coating. Theo Frenkelhof, IJburg, Amsterdam. Commissioned by de Alliantie Ontwikkeling, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Ceiling 50 m².

and glass in relief, making use of digital technology.

INNOVATION

Nanning's work unites classic craftsmanship with innovative use of materials, to create a unique language of form. This often evolves out of the creative processes themselves, such as throwing clay on potter's wheels or blowing glass. At a subsequent stage, she reworks the forms thus produced by cutting them open and reassembling them. Her signature is not associated with the familiar language of ceramics or glass but carves new roads and forms a universe of its own. Barbara Nanning combines tradition with innovation, Dutch sobriety with Oriental wealth, freedom with structure and rationality with feeling.

Piet Augustijn is curator of contemporary art of the Gorcum Museum in Gorinchem, the Netherlands, responsible for designing and organizing exhibitions. He is also publicist in the area of modern art. He has been writing reviews in regional papers for years and is editor of the magazine *BEELDEN* (dealing with spatial art), editor-in-chief of the glass magazine *FJOZZZ* as well as editor-in-chief of the periodical *KERAMIEK*.

Barbara Nanning's web site is www.barbarananning.info.