

Evolution

Evolution, a term for mapping out a piece of artistic history in a Darwinian manner. But not in a rigid way, just as nature does not let itself be governed by systematic laws that are all too strict. The oeuvre of Barbara Nanning is a continuum of objects that can be classified into groups, as if species and families. Her new objects follow from the preceding ones. Ideas often continue to have an effect for a long period of time, but never in a strictly linear way. Sometimes the forms are hybrid, emerging like some caprice of nature in an entirely new guise – and in isolated cases, via a large detour after much searching and dead-end experiments. But they almost always come into being without a shred of hesitation, confident and bold.

Genesis

When Barbara Nanning began her career as a ceramist, circumstances were opportune. In the late 70s, ceramics was highly esteemed in the Netherlands. At the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, under the inspired leadership of Jan van der Vaart and others, the students developed into strong individuals. Unusual artists all, fortified with a healthy dose of professional skills and brimming with creativity and enthusiasm for their work. The group of students graduating in 1979 was particularly exceptional: Geert Lap, Babs Haenen and Paul van Leeuwen were her classmates. They formed the core of a new generation of ceramists that would gain international fame. In their work they explored the boundaries of function, decoration and autonomy.

The final examination work of Barbara Nanning consists of carefully turned stoneware bowls and dishes with sections of colour. All of the qualities of this work, such as an air of stillness and an intense usage of colour, were to manifest themselves much more emphatically in her later work.

“Between 1979 and 1983 I placed the emphasis on applying colour to turned pots. I based my methodology on the colour theory of the Bauhaus, in particular that of Johannes Itten. At the same time, I was fascinated by the traditional forms of the dishes and bowls made by the Indians in Mexico....What struck me the most there was not so much the ceramics, but the vivid, intense colours of the textile and the plastic utensils.”

Dating from this time are the bowls and vases in which coloured thread and yarn brought from Mexico is added as a decorative or constructive element.

Fossils

Nanning's work took a leap forward in 1988, when she constructed composite forms out of cut-up cylinders. Worthy of note is that her desire to work in monumental formats grew apace. The first sculptures for public spaces date from this period. With the *Fossil forms*, she added no colour and left the beige fired stoneware clay for what it was. She found the inspiration for these works during a study trip to Cappadocia, a chalk-white Turkish landscape with dwellings hewn from the cliffs and weather-eroded masses of rock.

“The barrenness, the monochrome quality, the purity appealed to me enormously. These impressions led to unglazed, turned pots and vases, which were circumvented with rope, causing bulges to arise between the constrictions. This was the beginning of the series of *Fossil forms*, which emerged from a sort of spiral shape. First the cylinder of wet clay, wrapping a rope around it and then turning the clay outward through the pressure of my hands. In a subsequent phase I cut out the bottoms and laid these turned forms on their sides, so that a pot or vase became a free object.”

Galaxy

The *Galaxy* series, with dizzying centrifugal systems of planets and heavenly bodies as its inspirational source, appeared in 1990. It caused a breakthrough for Barbara Nanning in the world of Dutch ceramics during the *Keramiek '90* manifestation in South Holland. Her *Galaxy* installation in the Museum Het Prinsenhof in Delft arrived like a bombshell in the established world of clay and glaze. Monumentally turned, ring-shaped objects were far ahead of their time, through the use of a skin that was light-years away from what

purists within the world of ceramics considered authoritative and sanctified. Nanning was no longer using glazes and engobes, but pure paint pigment – a cold finish on cold material. And assembling stoneware components with epoxy resin – blasphemy. No more for her the magic of the glowing kiln. The technique she developed is laborious but precise. A skin of lacquer, pigment and sand connects the world of the painter with that of the ceramist. Colours that until then belonged only to the world of painting were reintroduced in another world. Within the infinite range of colours that Nanning now had at her disposal, she invariably chose a very limited pallet of pure, unmixed pigments. Vivid colours such as clear red, intense yellow, deep blue and brilliant purple give an unexpected, almost unreal dimension to her work. Mixed with fine sand, the colour cocoons the object and softens its contours.

“My fascination for everlasting motion, the revolving of the planets, stars and molecules and my desire to record the essence of this motion has resulted in vividly coloured objects comprised of truncated curvings.”

Terra

Various trips to Japan laid the foundation for Nanning’s ceramic work from the mid 90s. Inspired by centuries-old Zen gardens, she made bowls with parallel grooves and gnarled objects of petrified wood with ceramic components that seamlessly coalesce into a new entity.

“The bowls with strict geometrical shapes sometimes only have a pattern of parallel lines, like a stilled movement of water, others have a more complex structure lying between ceramics in its classical sense and current autonomous art.”

“The objects are earthy and stand on their own, they rise up from the earth. The straight lines are reminiscent of ploughed fields and Zen gardens. I take these rational forms and combine them with organic forms from nature, grafting feeling onto reason in this way. Dynamics with a static resting point. There must, I think, be a balance, a harmony between the positive and the negative, the static and the dynamic, inner and outer forms, growth and gravity.”

Botanica

What initially began around 1996 as a few isolated objects inspired by flower buds and seed capsules gradually developed into a separate group. Compactly composed buds evolved into lush flowers with leaves that seem to wave in the wind. In their turn, the flowers transformed into underwater beings swaying along on the currents.

Buds were also the departure point for several monumental commissions, such as for the Gemeente Aalsmeer (Municipality of Aalsmeer) and for the Korps Landelijke Politie Dienst, or K.L.P.D. (National Police Service Agency) in Driebergen. In collaboration with architect Paul van Leeuwen and the Hague-based company Struktuur '68, man-sized sculptures arose that were assembled from glazed segments. The *Botanica* series acquired an air of grandeur with the prestigious commission to decorate the first-class dining rooms in two luxury cruise ships of the Holland America Line – the MS Oosterdam and the MS Zuiderdam. The ceilings resemble an inverted field of flowers. The lustre of the ‘Fleurs de Mer’ installations comes from the fact that the flowers are gilded, either with gold leaf or a combination of gold leaf and platinum. For these and many other of her monumental commissions, Nanning makes

use of advanced computer designs. Moreover, she has developed types of finishes new to the industry that can be applied in large-scale projects.

Glass

In 1994, Barbara Nanning worked with glass for the first time at the invitation of the National Glass Museum and the Royal Leerdam Glass Factory. Initially, in what was for her an unfamiliar, remote material, she remained true to her ceramic form language, creating blown objects that were made into new forms by sawing and then grinding and polishing them. Often these small objects with globular extensions were given a new visual resting point by gluing a pure cylinder onto them. There were also remarkable dishes with patterns of cut lines and satiny inner surfaces. In the following years, glass increasingly took the lead in her activities. By working at different locations – the Royal Leerdam, the Glass Centre in Leerdam and the Van Tetterode glass atelier in Amsterdam – she gained increasing affinity with the material. Out of her Dutch work she has developed new ideas which since 2001 have been executed in the Czech Republic.

Besides working with blown glass, she also makes occasional excursions into fused glass. Three chests with decorative glass panels and a commission for monumental windows have ensued from well-nigh endless experiments with pattern and structure.

Geode

Motivated by the desire to take on new challenges, Barbara Nanning has journeyed every year since 2001 to Novy Bor in the Czech Republic, where she has exceptionally talented glass blowers

and cutters at her disposal – and above all, colour. The Czech workshops still fire furnaces filled with coloured molten glass in the traditional manner, so that working with several layers of colour is simpler. And the possibilities as regards finishing, such as grinding, polishing and gilding offer a great challenge in Novy Bor, a bulwark of glass decoration. Choosing with great precision from the countless possible classical patterns, she finds those that best support her blown forms, such as large diamonds or fan shaped flowers.

Nanning directs the glassblowers to make thick and thin-walled folded forms, which are then cut and polished. In this work she forges different worlds into a visual idiom totally that of her own. Classical Bohemian glass cutting, decorative Japanese flower motifs inspired by kimonos, the world of modern optical glass, but also nature and crystallography turn up in surprising combinations. Spectacular elements include the sparkling prisms adorning the inner surfaces of objects – as if jewels that have sprouted spontaneously, grown from the crystalline structure of the glass.

Nanning also vigorously brings the gilding of glass into play, a totally forgotten decorative technique that literally and figuratively enriches the sensual inner surfaces of her dishes.

Inspiration

“After each of my trips - Mexico, Turkey and Asia – I returned to my studio with a profusion of new ideas about colour, form and texture that has profoundly influenced my work.”

Nanning sets down her inspiration in dozens of sketches, drawings and photos that function as a memory aid. Direct sources of

inspiration are usually very apparent, but because she always combines different things, the results are never literal.

Nature, both organic and inorganic, is a constant source of inspiration. She examines crystals, jellyfish, flowers and micro organisms with an almost nineteenth century fascination for form, structure and geometry. Nanning combines regularity with fluidity, order with chaos, the hard with the soft, the rigid with the informal. Always contrasting, always surprisingly self-evident.

The Far East

Time and again there appears to be an inspiration from the Far East: onrushing waves such as those represented in the woodcuts of Hokusai, raked Zen Buddhist gardens, age-old gnarled tree stumps and motifs derived from lacquerware and kimonos. Such an interest in the exotic is typically Dutch, in fact. This tradition was nourished for centuries by trade relations with the Far East. Nanning gives it an entirely contemporary interpretation.

“The perfect workmanship...the omission of the superfluous...the composure for doing it the right way...are elements that I have brought back from Japan to my studio. The Japanese cultivate a greater depth, a more intense concentration when making their products. Colours and forms are a true inspiration for them.”

“In those Zen gardens I also saw superb, capriciously gnarled trees. The power of one such carefully pruned tree is tremendous.”

The Essence

Barbara Nanning combines tradition with innovation, Eastern opulence with Dutch austereness, freedom with structure and reason with emotion. Nanning's work is an interesting mix of unequal quantities without becoming complex; a fusion of carefully chosen and at times seemingly contradictory elements, which in the end look so self-evident that no one wonders about the unusual combination of ingredients.

She unites classical artisan methods with an innovative use of materials to achieve an entirely unique language of form, one which often develops in the making process, the turning of clay on the wheel and the blowing of glass. At a later stage she processes those forms by cutting and assembling them. This applies to both the ceramic and glass work. Her language does not comply with the existing one, but breaks new ground and forms a universe all of its own.