

Steven Heinemann  
Enigmatic Vessels  
Poised between Yesterday,  
Today & Tomorrow

*Article by Stephanie Gilles*



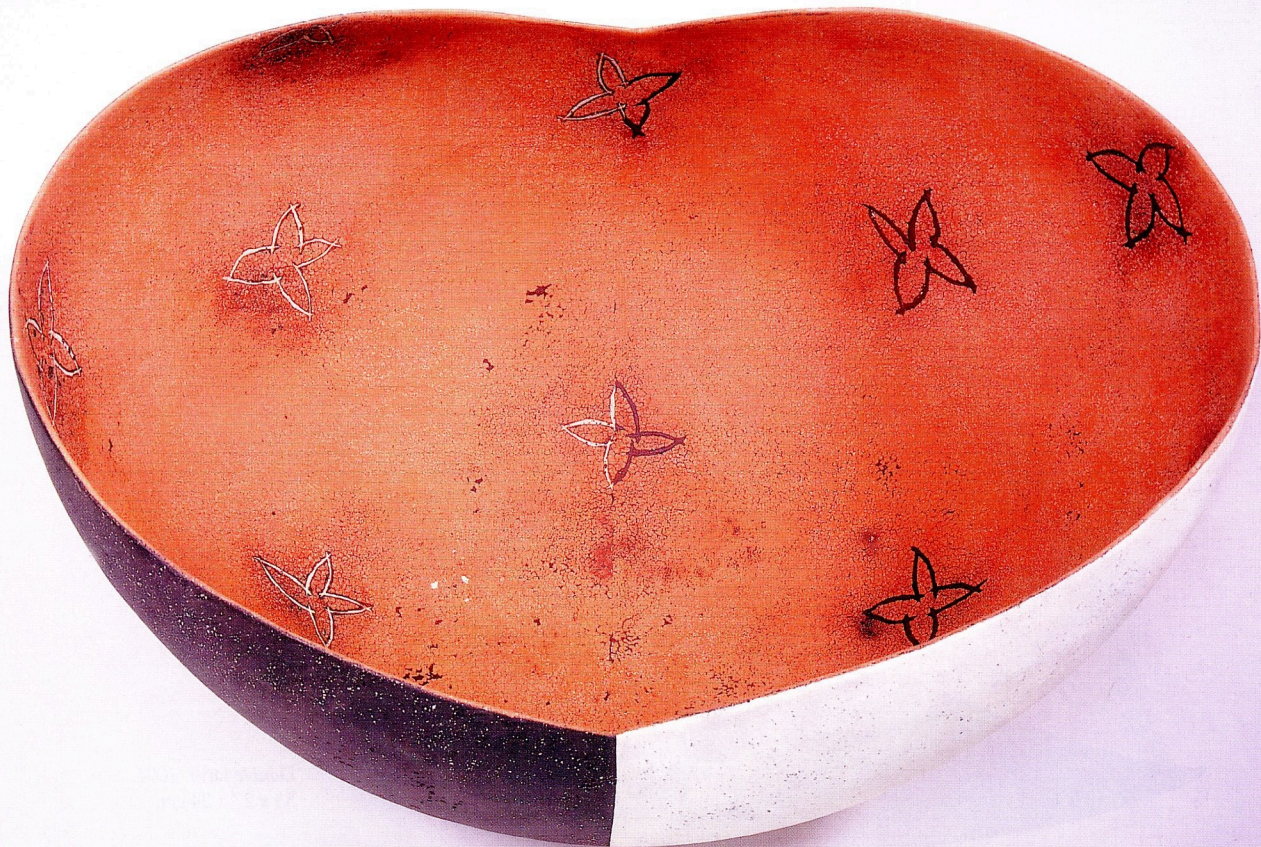


*Terra Negra*. 2002. 61 x 59 x 27 cm.

**B**OTH THE HAPTIC QUALITIES AS WELL AS THE METAPHYSICAL dimension of ceramic objects have fascinated mankind since the beginning of time. Evidence of this can still be seen today – for example in some traditional African societies, where female potters are treated with reverential respect for using their hands in the shaping of earth life-giving matter. In contemporary academic art, artistic work with clay is often dismissed as being trivial because of its inherent affinity to the crafts. Yet, in fact, it is precisely this aspect which, in our highly sophisticated technological 21st century, represents an attractive possibility: artistically exploring a topic that has fascinated man since time began. Finding contemporary forms of expression which are innovative without precluding the traditional is a challenge not only for the intellect but also in terms of the craft itself.

Transforming the pre-Socratic elements of fire, water, earth and air (which are, of course, also the basic elements of every ceramic object) into concrete fired pieces, giving them form, is also Steven Heinemann's objective. Born in Canada in 1957, he is among the most noteworthy contemporary ceramics artists.

Numerous renowned private and public collections in North America (Museum of Art and Design in New York), the UK (Victoria and Albert Museum in London), Netherlands (Museum Hett Kreithuis) and also museums in Taiwan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand to mention but a few, contain his works. And along with 19 other artists, Heinemann was selected to present one facet of the cultural diversity of his home country in the Canadian pavilion at the Expo 2000 in Hanover as part of an exhibition organised by the George R. Gardiner Museum in Toronto. He has received a multitude of awards such as the Mino Judges Award (1995), the Saidye Bronfman Award (1996) and the Canada Council 'A' Grant (2002). Last year he was able to add the Bayerische Staatspreis 2004 to his list of distinctions, a prize awarded to him for the two objects *Birthmark* and *Oracle*. The Bavarians, on the whole, seem to have an affinity for this Canadian artist who presented his first solo exhibition in Germany in October, 2004 at gallery b15 in Munich. Heinemann, the son of Hungarian immigrants, is unpretentious and modest and reveals little about himself, preferring to let his work



*Divided Florals. 2000. 67 x 50 x 37 cm.*

speak for him. He can only be enticed to illustrate his fundamental approach to material by recounting an anecdote about the unique Hungarian nut paste made by his mother during his school days, which couldn't be bought in the supermarket around the corner precisely because its consistency and taste would never have met her particular standard. The standard that this artist sets for himself and for the translation of his visions also implies his acknowledgement of the craft itself as the indispensable tool for the creation of a work of art. Heinemann, who considers himself equally artist and craftsman, believes that however much art may evolve away from tactility and direct fabrication, craft-based practices remain viable and necessary. Restricting himself to one material then, is an approach which, while seemingly problematic relative to contemporary art practice is, nonetheless, taken intentionally. His works obtain an intensity due to a high technical perfection and a profound preoccupation with ethnological and philosophical aspects.

In high school, Heinemann's creativity came to light in his first works of clay. After he finished school

he travelled through Europe and, by the end of that year, he knew that art would be his direction. In 1976 he began studies that would take him to Sheridan College, Ontario, the Kansas City Art Institute and finally to Alfred University, New York, where he received his MFA in 1983. Since that time he has taught and lectured internationally, and also furthered his development through residencies in the US (Cranbrook Art Academy), Europe (Europes Keramische Werkcentrum) and Asia (Jinro International, South Korea). In the early years he primarily worked at the potter's wheel. However, the round shape as a pre-determined starting point for his work soon restricted him and he began to model the clay and use cast plaster moulds. This step marked the beginning of a creative process which Heinemann continued to test, modify and develop to perfection in the following two decades. His current work is the product of a drawn-out gradual process of applying clay slips and multiple firing. It is on the basis of these individual steps that the artist, who can sometimes repeatedly glaze and fire a specific object over a period of months, even years, develops a final statement. Special attention is



*Double form. 2004.*  
53 x 27 x 24 cm.

paid to the treatment of the surfaces, and it is this that determines the tone and character of his work.

Heinemann exposes himself to numerous influences, past and present. For example, certain elements of form, image and concept can be traced to the art of ancient cultures such as that of the 1000-year old Mimbres tribe of southern New Mexico. However, vernacular rural architecture, ancient petroglyphs, fossils and numerous other phenomena have enchanted and inspired him. After a long experimental phase, four basic colours emerged which Heinemann has used ever since and which correspond to the alchemical system: black, white, red and yellow. Essentially, the themes of his work revolve around fundamental concepts of space and volume.

At the beginning of the '80s, Heinemann increasingly turned his back upon vessel ceramics in the familiar sense. The objects became removed from their original function and transformed into sculptural structures. Heinemann was especially interested in pod-shaped and closed organic forms during this period. But by the early '90s, more than 10 years later, the artist had begun to return to the bowl shapes he had worked with in previous years.

What remains is the urge to create a haptic, tangible statement involving volume and space. This is enhanced by an increasingly strong interest in the

interaction between inside and outside which is expressed in work such as *Farawaysoclose* (2001) or *Terra Negra* (2002). Focusing on the inside and outside as an inseparable unity, black and white as opposites which condition each other, the alternation of rough and smooth surfaces to illustrate the polarity of things; these appear to be his core interests. In the work *Divided Florals* (2000) Heinemann is preoccupied with colour, texture and pattern: the heart-shaped bowl appears to be unusually graphic, almost removed from the organic with an external surface which is divided in two by the colours black and white. The inside of the vessel with its warm shades of red constitutes a harmonious counterpoint to the outside of the bowl and at the same time unites the two halves.

His maxim of encompassing space in order to visualise it and make it comprehensible is combined with a surprising reversal of the expected in his work *Farawaysoclose*. The vessel is based on a spherical shape the upper third of which is capped and the wall of which is extended outward on one side. Similar to a jacket, which can be worn on both sides, Heinemann turns the surmised inside out. The interior, which, because of its inherent lack of light normally suggests darkness, security and safety, has been covered with a white layer of clay and is thus exposed to the eye. It is, at the same time, however,

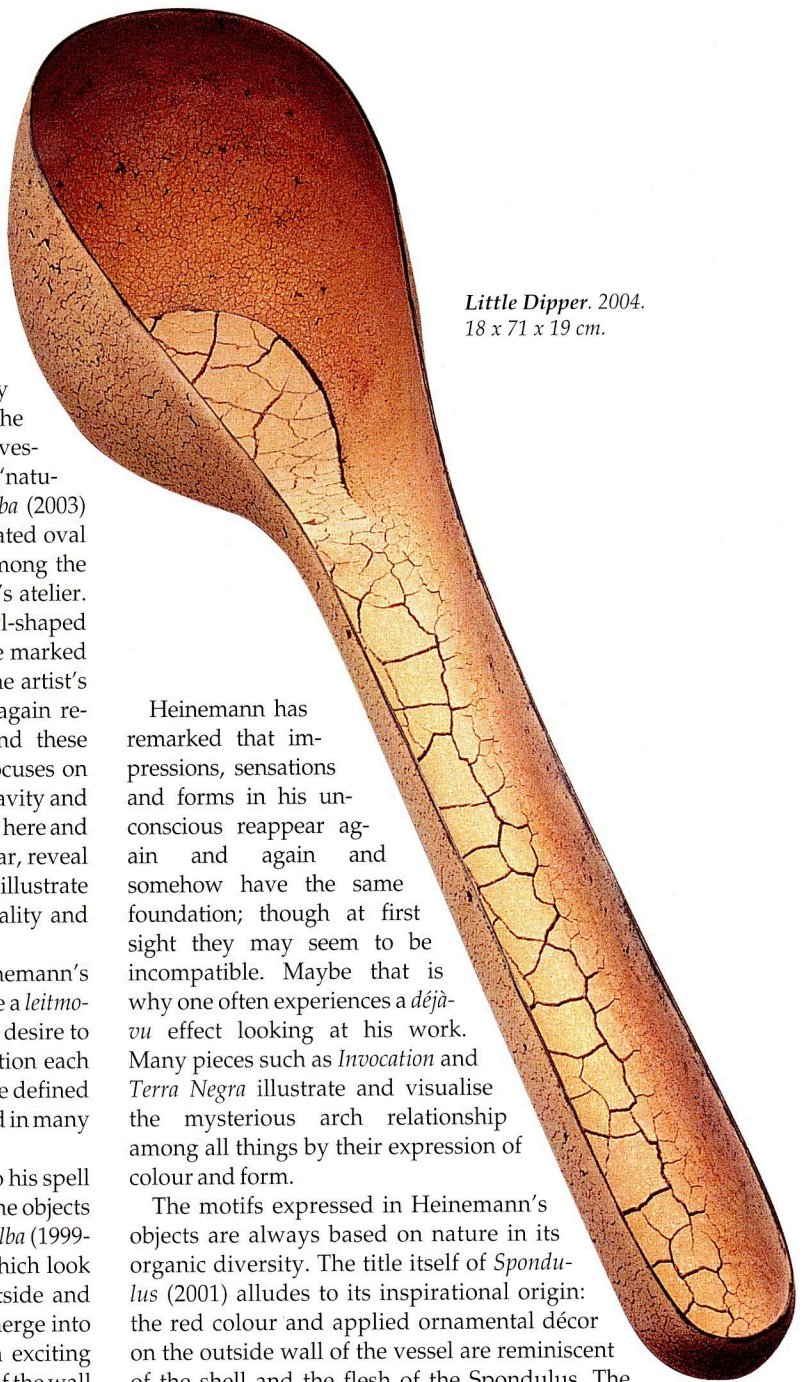
mysteriously evasive because of the smooth black protective shape of the wall. In this bowl Heinemann masterfully plays with the effects of space and volume, the principle of a positive and negative form, and the surprising use of the two colours black and white.

The focus on engobes and, therefore, his preoccupation with the nature and structure of the surface, have become increasingly important for the Canadian artist over the years. However, Heinemann never coats his vessels with shiny glazes, instead emphasizing 'natural' colour, texture, and clay itself. *Terra Alba* (2003) and *Terra Negra* (2002), the former an elongated oval shape, the latter a round oval shape, are among the most sophisticated works to leave the artist's atelier. The compelling feature of these two bowl-shaped objects is the thinness of the walls which are marked by modulated irregularities and illustrate the artist's great craftsmanship. The choice of colour again resembles a spectrum of natural shades and these objects once more show that Heinemann focuses on the polarity of the inside and the outside, a cavity and enveloping walls. Indeed, where is the inside here and where the outside? These works, in particular, reveal the expressive power of clay as a means to illustrate the tension created by elementary emotionality and formal discipline.

Two fundamental pillars determine Heinemann's work and pervade all his creative phases like a *leitmotiv*: nature as a source of inspiration and the desire to pair opposites to illustrate how they condition each other. This Apollonian /Dionysian principle defined by Schelling<sup>1</sup> as pairs of concepts is expressed in many of the artist's works.

Heinemann often draws the beholder into his spell by creating an irritation as, for example, in the objects *Invocation*, *Terra Rubra*, *Terra Negra* or *Terra Alba* (1999-2004). Wafer-thin filigree ceramic works which look like works of wood or metal from the outside and whose smoothness, warmth and fragility merge into a surprising haptic experience creating an exciting antithesis to the interior. While the exterior of the wall is smooth, coincidentally fractured surfaces emerge on the inside of the bowl which are reminiscent of elementary structures, even fragments, and resemble the parched soil of a savannah landscape. This impression is consistently brought full circle and underlined by the muted ivory and earthen shades of nature. These vessels were also subjected to up to 12 firing and resting phases. They were then polished by both hand and machine to create a matt glow.

Picasso once said, "An artist is like a collection box of sensations which come from all directions: from the sky, from the earth, from a shred of paper, from a figure hurrying past or from a spider's web"<sup>2</sup>



*Little Dipper. 2004.*  
18 x 71 x 19 cm.

Heinemann has remarked that impressions, sensations and forms in his unconscious reappear again and again and somehow have the same foundation; though at first sight they may seem to be incompatible. Maybe that is why one often experiences a *déjà-vu* effect looking at his work. Many pieces such as *Invocation* and *Terra Negra* illustrate and visualise the mysterious arch relationship among all things by their expression of colour and form.

The motifs expressed in Heinemann's objects are always based on nature in its organic diversity. The title itself of *Spondulus* (2001) alludes to its inspirational origin: the red colour and applied ornamental décor on the outside wall of the vessel are reminiscent of the shell and the flesh of the *Spondulus*. The organic character of this vessel seems to contain and merge the elongated oval and round forms so typical for Heinemann. This external form is also repeated on the inside floor of the object as a two-dimensional illustration

Drawing is an ongoing activity for this artist; a means of visualisation and visual notation. But there are other dimensions as well: Heinemann is interested in the mutual influence between form and its corresponding surface. The effect of lines carved into the unfired object or of flowers painted on to a three-dimensional surface create a new experience for him time and time again. The piece of work called *Then and*



*Then and Now.* 1995. 66 x 52 x 27 cm.

*Now* (1995) plays with opposites such as form and colour, delicate lines and crusted irregularities on a surface. A stable vessel, on the one hand, and the tilted bowl depicted on the inside, on the other hand. The fragility of the wall of the vessel and the filigree engravings create a contrast to the hard division of black and white on the inside of the vessel.

Heinemann is intrigued by the possibility of using images as an unmistakable imprint on the ceramic object. Anyone familiar with his notion of clay acting as 'nature' and drawing a trace of the human being, and also familiar with his cultural development, will perceive something close to a philosophical dimension in the work *Playa* (Self Portrait) made in 2002. Again, this vessel was initially modelled with a plaster mould and engobed and fired several times. Finally, the outside wall of the object was polished to give it an additional density. Heinemann symbolises the imprint which man wishes to brand on nature, the 'footprint' left behind in the sand by someone walking on the beach, with his own fingerprint. Yet this is not about making a moral point; on the contrary, his objective is to "make the beholder alert and at the same time

induce silent contemplation". Having regained his speech, so Heinemann hopes, the observer will experience a moment filled with a presentiment and sense of what holds the world together.

In his work, Steven Heinemann takes a stand against the disregard of aesthetic principles in contemporary art: his ceramic vessels satisfy the yearning for clarity and beauty innate in every human being. Heinemann himself says that today's culture conveys a lack of roots. However, work with clay allows the observer to reconnect with these roots. In that respect ceramic art is an even more modern-day form of art than ever before; not only in terms of its expressive merit but also in terms of its expressive power. Doesn't it, after all, possess the means of embracing yesterday, today and tomorrow!

REFERENCES:

1. Schelling, F W J. *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*. CUP.
2. Picasso, Pablo. *Über die Kunst*. Zürich 1988, p75.

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Caption title page: *Terra Ruba*. 2004. 69 x 42 x 34 cm.