



Bowl I. 2007. Handbuilt stoneware. 48 x 36 cm. Photo by Johnny Korkman.

Minimalist Wall Compositions

Article by Åsa Hellman

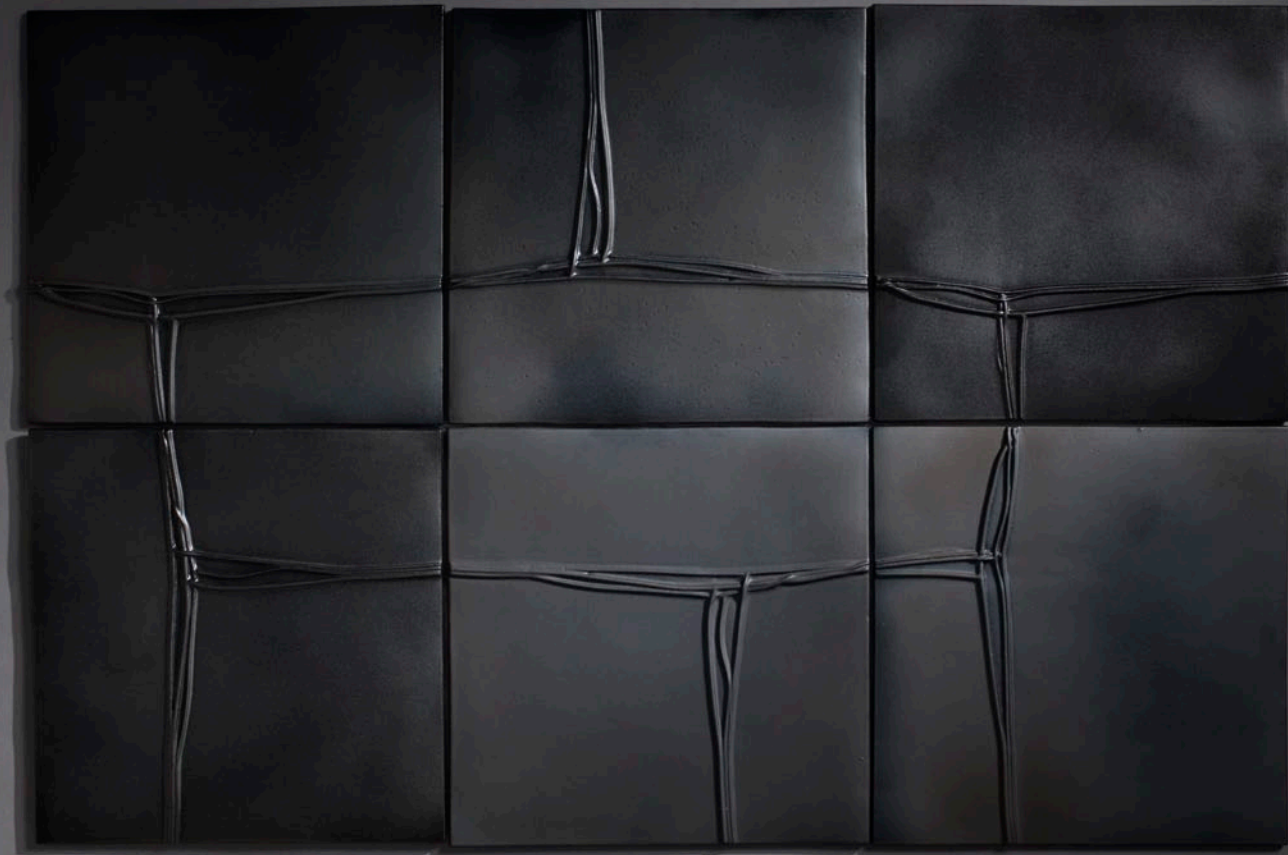
THERE ARE FEW CERAMIC WORKSHOPS IN THE CENTRE of Helsinki, Finland and Kirsi Kivivirta's studio in one of the former working class neighbourhoods is a rarity. The 80-square-metre area on the fourth floor was converted in 1987 into a work space by a group of young ceramists recently graduated from the University of Art and Design, Helsinki. On the ground floor there is another rarity; a large public sauna that has been in constant use since the building was erected in the 1920s. At that time, communal saunas were a hygienic necessity as private baths or showers were not yet part of low income housing.

In this sauna, ceramists working in and around the capital of Finland meet once a year for leisurely bathing,

networking and discussing important issues. In Finland it is customary for ceramists themselves to take the initiative for group exhibitions around specific themes.

Kivivirta has, since the 1990s, mainly produced architectural ceramics such as tiles and sculptures with brick components. On her worktable there are unfired, partly completed tile compositions revealing the special puzzle-like pieces that characterize her work.

They are either slipcast in porcelain or rolled in to stoneware slabs. A particular 'impure' body which, during the firing, attains an irregular, somewhat pitted surface, is one of Kivivirta's favorites. On the walls a visitor can admire finished work including small, plain plaques and larger entities assembled from numerous pieces. The



Black Stones. 2007. Handbuilt stoneware. 42 x 42 cm. Photo by Johnny Korkman.

wall compositions are adhered to thin wire-reinforced aluminium sheets with construction strength silicone. This technique, developed by Kivivirta herself, minimizes the weight and enables easy hanging.

Finland is known for its well-established system of grants for artists. Capable ceramists have a possibility of receiving financial assistance for their projects from private foundations as well as from the Ministry of Education. Kivivirta was, for three years, the recipient of a Government grant guaranteeing her a regular income. This enabled her to focus on her art and creativity except for a few hours when she taught ceramics to children at the Annantalo Arts Centre in Helsinki. .

"I maintain a regular work rhythm," Kivivirta says. "With three children in the family one is forced to be disciplined and to stick to routines. The moment I enter the studio I get into my work mode, mentally as well, so that I'm able to push everyday problems aside. I've learned to delve right into working with the clay, even on days when I feel tired.

"As time is always at a premium, planning is important. In any one day I switch around, doing different kinds of work: I roll out clay, cut and cast, all dictated by the clay. In between I sketch and plan, focus on various projects and commissions. Participating in fairs and exhibitions also demands energy. It's necessary to function on several levels at once."

In Kivivirta's wall compositions we experience movement and rest, dynamic force and contemplation.

She plays with displacement and *trompe l'oeil* effects as well as distorted perspectives and horizons. The carved lines suggest lively, rhythmic patterns akin to music. Concretely her stick-shaped tiles seem to mirror piano keys and it is hardly a coincidence since music has always been an important part of her life.

"I'm drawn to minimalist art and to minimalism as an idea," Kivivirta explains. "I prefer to let the medium speak for itself; allow the clay to express its nature without any oxide or glaze covering. The most powerful effect is felt when natural materials are combined, for example stone, water and wood. Donald Judd and Rachel Whiteread are among several icons whose work have impressed me. In Finland I especially admire Rut Bryk and Toini Muona who were active during the golden age of Finnish ceramics.

"Travelling and staying in Japan, Korea and China have enriched and freed me. I've taken into my heart much of Japanese culture, including the Wabi-sabi philosophy."

Kivivirta embodies sharply opposing traits, a requirement to achieve success in the demanding profession of a ceramist. She is precise, yet free in her expression. She is disciplined but likes to improvise. She is ambitious while able to work on several levels with varied techniques and projects. The hard physical work with clay, a heavy medium, is kept buoyant by her personal view of the material, of ceramic art and a profoundly thought-out basic concept.



Top: *Crossing Rooms*. 1999. Stoneware mural. 140 cm/h.
Island. 1999. Wall pieces. Photo by Nina Skogster.
 Above: *Tempo III*. 2007. Cast stoneware. 90 x 90 x 5 cm.
 Photo by Johnny Korkman.

Top: *Talking Landscape*. 2005. Handbuilt stoneware. 30 cm dia. Photo by Johnny Korkman.
 Above: *Cubitum Stool*. 2007. Handbuilt stoneware. 44 cm/h. Photo by Johnny Korkman.

Kivivirta has successfully 'functioned on several levels.' In addition to participating in pure design and interior design fairs she has produced art for public buildings and executed private commissions including kitchen and bathroom tiles.

Her exhibitions include *Design Forum Finland* and *Forum Box*, a gallery in Helsinki specialising in modern art, less frequently giving space to ceramics. In 2005 she participated in the international ceramics exhibition in Faenza, Italy and has shown her work in Chateauroux, France and Hetjens Museum in Düsseldorf, Germany. She received two honourable mentions in 2008 at the *8th International Ceramics Exhibition* in Mino in Japan and in 2009 she will participate in the exhibition *Finnish Ceramics* in Gallery Besson in London.

Kirsi Kivivirta still remembers her first encounter with the medium that later would be central to her life. Near her home, in an area of family houses, there was a field where children used to play. "We dug holes in the sand, deep enough to reach the clay below and used it to make doll-size dishes. I was five years old at the time and I never forget that experience."

Åsa Hellman studied art history at the University of Helsinki, graduated from the ceramics department of the University of Art and Design Helsinki and did post degree studies at the Royal College of Art in London. Alongside her work as a ceramic artist she has been a part-time teacher at the University of Art and Design Helsinki and has reviewed art for newspapers such as *Hufvudstadsbladet*. Her book *Ceramic Art in Finland* was published by Thames & Hudson in 2004.

Translated from the original in Swedish by Solveig Williams.