

Irene Nordli

THE PORCELAIN ROOM | PORSELENSROMMET

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PORCELAIN BONDS / PORSELENSBINDINGER
H. 207 CM

THE EXHIBITION *The Porcelain Room (Porselensrommet)* is an organic world of ceramic sculptures, arranged and combined with carpets, textiles, shelving, sofas, chairs, tables and a tree root. Everything is built, burned and broken into compositions that fill the room. The works are placed in an interior that hints at imaginary rooms reflecting history, destruction and suffering in the world beyond the gallery.

I have made a series of miniature sarcophagi stuffed with fragments of body parts – that is, fragments from a world of toys, combined and crammed into or writhing inside and out of small casket-like forms. The sarcophagi are placed on a charred wooden shelf. Elsewhere in the room, a large round egg shape functions as a candelabrum. It makes no secret of its constructive principle and how it has been put together. It sits on the floor and holds black candles that are burned down every day. Another sculpture consists of porcelain skulls covered with scruffy, uneven white glaze; these are stacked on top of each other and placed on a fragile shelf.



CANDELABRUM / KANDELABER
H. 80 CM















DETAIL OF CHAIR, ROOT AND CARPET /
DETALJ AV STOLEN, ROTA OG TEPPE



DETAIL VESSEL 1 / BEHOLDER 1
H. 90 CM

Organic sculptures such as *Red-Glazed Porcelain Coil* (*Rødglasert porselenskveil*), *A Heavy Hollow Form in Black Stoneware* (*En tung hul form i svart steingodsleire*) and *Form that Encircles Itself* (*Form som omslutter seg selv*) stand on each their own small fragile table. These works are treated with reduction glazes that result in strong colours. The walls in the innermost gallery space are painted a flesh colour and mounted with a series of sculptures entitled *Wall Connections* (*Veggforbindelser*). The largest sculpture in the exhibition is covered with black glaze: it lies like a body on a bed, the outer covering of which has been removed so that the sculpture lies directly on mattress stuffing.

On a tree root I have mounted several shelves: these are occupied by organic porcelain sculptures. The tree root was partly burned when I found it, but I finished the process. On a Rococo chair – I also burned this and tore its outer upholstery – there is a large ceramic vessel dripping with glazes. The tree root and the chair stand on a soft carpet made of wool and silk.



I have also made a large white porcelain egg encased in a black organic form. You can see the egg with a stripe of turquoise glaze running down one side, but it cannot be removed from its casing; a grill keeps it captive inside the black hollow form. The sculpture sits on the uppermost shelf of a rickety old flower table. On the lowest shelf is a long recumbent organic form with dark porcelain flowers and butterflies glaze-glued into it.

Several large vessels stand on the floor and by the entryway. Out from one of these, there emerge black ceramic clumps covered with white craquelure glaze. A tower of sorts stands on a Rococo table and looms large in the room. Entitled *Porcelain Bonds (Porselensbindinger)*, it is built from fragments of moulded parts, all combined into a construction that seems almost to burst apart. The diverse parts are actually unrecognisable on account of the composition. In the firing process, the tower of fragments, traces, remains and memories has become twisted and cracked. I used various celadon glazes on parts of its surface.







DETAIL OF CHAIR, ROOT AND CARPET /
DETALJ AV STOLEN, ROTA OG TEPPET)







FORM THAT ENCIRCLES ITSELF / FORM SOM OMSLUTTER SEG SELV
H. 74 CM

Watercolours I have made have been transferred and printed on silk. Entitled *Joints (Sammenføyninger)*, these are mounted on a wall which visitors walk past, animating the silk to create varying three-dimensional shapes. Finally, *The Egg Wall (Eggeveggen)* consists of 242 moulded eggs painted with different glazes. These are mounted at the salient corner of two free-standing walls. No two eggs are alike. In this exhibition I explore tensions between the grotesque and the beautiful – the good and the evil. But the black and the white mix together. Over the white porcelain are layers of colour in the form of glazes, pigments and lustres. The porcelain is no longer white and isolated but acts together with the rough black clay. The organic and bodily elements are important – both for the vessels and for the sculptures.

My vessels (containers of a sort) are like petrified organisms – empty and hollow, as if representing a loss and longing. The loss, sorrow and sorrow's physical pain are transferred to clay. I want to enter into the



A HEAVY HOLLOW FORM IN BLACK STONEWARE / EN TUNG HUL FORM I SVART STEINGODSLEIRE
H. 51 CM



VESSEL 3 / BEHOLDER 3
H. 94 CM





THE BENCH / BENKEN
H. 90 CM



WALL CONNECTIONS 1/VEGGFORBINDELSER 1
H. 58 CM

body and crawl under the material's skin. I explore the tension between a bodily dissolution and a kind of *gesamt* (total) experience with historical and material references.

I need to create and be engrossed in the work process. The process is important, and I work until I stop thinking. I am just in it. I model, build, cast, search, find, take apart and put together in new ways. I explore clay in all its forms – liquid, plastic, moulded and modelled. Wet and dry, soft and hard. I allow my hands to be wiser than my head, I allow my body to be involved in the decision making process. I am also often in doubt. I use different firings and glazes, firing things several times to achieve what I want with the surfaces. In the creation process, it is not simply that the work is in a physical space: it is also a separate mental room in its own right. A room I am in, which I make plans for, and in which I can think. **IRENE NORDLI**







RED-GLAZED PORCELAIN COIL /
RÖDGLASERT PORSELENSKVEIL
H. 37 CM



PORCELAIN SKULLS/ PORSELENSKALLER
H. 40 CM



DETAIL OF CHAIR, ROOT AND CARPET /
DETALJ AV STOLEN, ROTA OG TEPPE



“Irene Nordli’s porcelain figures, what can one say about them? They protest against history, they look like they want to wobble between the beautiful and the sinister, want to plunge into and out of shape. And if they want to explode expectations, which expectations do they aim to blow up?”



They will not tell. They want to be half-protest, half-generous gift. They want me to look at them but they refuse to satisfy my gaze.” TYRA T. TRONSTAD



THE PORCELAIN ROOM
KNUT ASTRUP BULL

When entering Irene Nordli's exhibition *The Porcelain Room*, we are met by an overwhelming sight. It is far removed from the clinical, ascetic expression normally encountered in an art gallery. In her last solo show, sculptures were placed on the floor and mounted on the wall or on pedestals. But in this new project she has abandoned what is commonly called the 'white cube' aesthetic, which involves giving every object a discrete placement or treating it as part of a small group. Modernism's sacral quietude she now replaces with visual commotion. Now the works stand in tight groups, and the one work converses closely with the next. But the room does not consist solely of ceramic sculptures and objects: here furniture, textiles and non-living natural objects are combined with the ceramics, and we sense that we enter a room filled with porcelain – Irene Nordli's very own porcelain room. With the title *The Porcelain Room*, she draws our attention away from the gallery context, towards a historical institution for exhibiting porcelain. Why has she chosen to put her works in this context rather than in a traditional white-cube?

Pedestals can sometimes prove limiting for the experience of Nordli's sculptures. For example, layers of meaning linked to a material, a tradition, a history, and, not least, to our physical experience when encountering ceramic works, can be lost in a white-cube context. To re-establish the material's original perception patterns and aesthetic, Nordli has put the works in a situation reminiscent of a porcelain *cabinet* (room). By placing them in this context, her exhibition addresses the history of how people have perceived porcelain, and the relation between clay and bodily experience. Let us start by looking at the porcelain cabinet as a frame for perceiving porcelain in a contemporary context.

THE PORCELAIN CABINET

It was probably in the 1200s that merchants and missionaries first brought Chinese porcelain objects to southern Europe. China was then perceived as a distant land that had two fantastic products: porcelain and silk. The recipes for both materials were strictly kept secrets. On the whole, China itself was a secret. Foreigners were not allowed to travel at will, and they knew little about the country or how Chinese craftspersons could produce such a beautiful and delicate ceramic material. The beautiful and inexplicable qualities probably account for why the porcelain objects that were first brought to Europe were given as costly and rare gifts to Europe's monarchs. These treasures were incorporated into what were called 'curiosity cabinets'. Perhaps they were objects that initially aroused more scientific interest more than aesthetic appreciation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portugal and the Netherlands established trade agreements with the Chinese emperor, and the import of porcelain to Europe became more commercialised. With increased access to porcelain goods, objects made with the material were eventually removed from the aristocracy's curiosity cabinets and placed in





their staterooms. But porcelain was still exotic and exorbitantly expensive, so the amount of these and other treasured objects in a home testified to the family's status and success. Starting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, large rooms filled with porcelain could be found in European palaces. Here the precious vases, figurines, platters and plates were artfully displayed on shelves and console tables and complimented by mirrors, panelling and special lighting so as to create a harmonious interior. Europeans had seen such rooms while traveling in Persia and the Orient, describing them in their travel journals. It became popular in the 1700s for European aristocrats to re-create this type of room. They admired the porcelain objects for being both aesthetic and functional; they were not interpreted as representations of vases and platters, but as beautiful objects of use. Art objects were what visitors immediately understood and could relate to, based on both a mental and a physical ground of experience. Perhaps this is what underlies Nordli's desire to create her own porcelain room.

Her choice of the porcelain room as an arena for the public experience of her works can be seen as an artistic strategy, a means for steering how her sculptures and objects are received. They are not meant to be seen only on an abstract level. We viewers are 'forced' to be around them and therefore to relate to them with our bodies, on a mental and a physical level. They become part of our actual reality inasmuch as they surround our bodies. Just as the original porcelain rooms were designed to give a powerful and total experience to visitors, so also Nordli constructs her personal porcelain room by putting the objects into a framework where they can be appreciated and valued as works, and where references to the material, history and function are given free reign. They become part of our concrete reality. At the same time, she puts the works into a context where the material and the tradition play a significant role in how the works are read.

THE GENRE OF PORCELAIN FIGURINES

Amongst the works in Nordli's porcelain room, there are some sculptures that draw associations to the genre of porcelain figurines. They appear to be her interpretation and processing of this type of historical object. The fashion for porcelain figurines reached its apex during the period from approximately 1700 to 1830. The phenomenon gained explosive momentum with the growth of Europe's porcelain industry, which emerged in the early 1700s in the wake of the alchemists Böttger and von Tschirnhaus solving the mystery of the recipe for Chinese porcelain. The prototypes for these small figures stemmed from Asia, but European porcelain producers came up with their own interpretations of the Asiatic tradition, producing diverse series of figurines. These conveyed themes that were popular conversation topics

in high society, for instance mythology, science, business opportunities, love, gallantry and the everyday activities of peasants. Table settings for formal dinners could have centrepieces that included several porcelain figurines. While beautiful to look at, they were functional objects meant to inspire dinner guests to engage in conversation and witticism.

Many of Nordli's sculptures are inspired by this figural tradition, but they represent both an abstraction and an innovation within the genre. In a clever way, her sculptures draw on the figurine's original function as a conveyor of society's values and norms, thus exploiting our familiarity with its visual language and history. Most of us, openly or secretly, have allowed ourselves to be fascinated by the delicate surface of porcelain figurines, their representation of sensual persons from a bygone era. This familiarity and our attraction to them provide an ideal starting point for an artist. Nordli imbues her sculpture with new norms and values, enabling them to communicate new and relevant stories about identity, anxiety, the body and clay.

THE BODY AND CLAY

It is difficult to imagine civilisation without the ceramic containers that were needed for storing medicine, preparing food and so forth. It can therefore be claimed that there is an existential relation between clay and a human being. Artists who use clay often acknowledge a special relation to the material. Wet clay is formed and treated with a range of processes by a cogitating body, and the act of giving shape is a highly sensory experience. The existential relation between clay and the human body is a core theme in modernist ceramics, manifested through experimental projects in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Among others, the Japanese *Gutai* artist Kazuo Shiraga's performance *Challenge to the Mud* (1955) comes to mind: wearing almost nothing, he bathed in clay, using his entire body to create form. Another example is the American Charles Simonds' performance *Landscape-Body-Dwelling* (1970s), where he bathed in wet clay and allowed it to dry on his skin, in an attempt to convey the sacred and existential relation between the human body and Earth. This work was described as 'a process of land into body, and body into land'. A concurrent and less experimental example of the body-clay relation is the practice of the sculptor Tony Cragg. Clay, he claims, is particularly receptive to the body's or the artist's ideas and actions. Clay and the body live in symbiosis. Another example is the ceramist Anders Ruhwald's statement: 'To me ceramics are almost like an extension of the body'.¹

Nordli's art can be seen as perpetuating contemporary ceramics' exploration of the relation between clay and the body. However, she is not interested in elucidating a primary relation between them; rather, she sees an analogy between the perfect and controlled porcelain on one hand, and today's bodily ideal and obsession with control, rationality and perfection on the other. As mentioned, when the porcelain figurine genre reached the height of its





status in the 1700s, the works mediated social values and relevant topics for conversation, thus undergirding societies' norms. Nordli's revitalisation and treatment of the genre consists of using it as a conveyer of critical perspectives about the norms that contemporary popular culture encourages us to follow. Whereas the historical figurines from Meissen and Royal Copenhagen present human beings based on eighteenth-century stereotypes and ideals of beauty, Nordli instead presents deformed, abnormal and twisted bodies that in no way whatsoever follow today's ideals of beauty. To the contrary: she challenges them

PERFECT PORCELAIN AND MISSHAPEN BODIES

Irene Nordli has followed two directions when working with her sculptures; these parallel each other to some extent but result in different outcomes. The one direction has been to create fairytale beings with bodies that are part human and part animal. Here she has deliberately sought to create harmonious and poetic figures exuding charm and confidence, even though they come from a world other than our own. The porcelain-room project, however, should be seen in the context of the second direction: she works with figures expressing disquiet and maladaptation in a bleaker world. In earlier series dealing with this theme, for instance *Misfits* and the *Venus* series, she drew on the contrast between the material and the subject matter to give the sculptures greater energy. These works highlight porcelain's refined and perfect surface and the glaze's delicate lustre, but such qualities stand in contrast to the humanoid figures that definitely do not appear delicate and well-formed. In this way, she comments on contemporary ideals for beauty, stereotypes and patterns in gender roles. In mass-culture, the individual is exposed to norms and expectations related to appearance and gender. The beauty industry now gives us the possibility to 'operate away' our complexes about our body and appearance. Fat can be sucked, breasts enlarged, faces changed and muscles built with the help of hormone supplements. Maybe the beautiful porcelain surface in the *Misfits* series is a means to address the problem of our era's quest for inner wholeness through external change. In reality, identity is split in commercial society, and the demand for external perfection has increased parallel to the possibilities for changing our surface. Nordli's sculptures remind us that an agitated and fragmented interior is visible even through an immaculate exterior.

INSIDE OUT



Many sculptures in Nordli's porcelain room elaborate on the 'interior versus exterior' theme but convey a greater drama than the works in the series mentioned above. While in the earlier series she used a Pop Art idiom, she now abandons recognisability, control and the beautiful surface in favour of an expressive and abstract language. Rather than being composed of clearly defined body parts, the figures are melted, gnarled and twisted. She has also given them a more hefty and dramatic expression by using classic porcelain glazes such as oxblood and Celadon. But the glazes have become mixed: the

result is a restless surface that adds force to the emotional drama the works convey. Now the tension between the external and the internal dissolves and the earlier figurines' inner turbulence bubbles to the surface. In some works, the porcelain has become completely or partly suppressed, as if the figures no longer have the capacity to hide their anxiety and despair behind an unblemished façade. The inner and outer have melted together. As such, all the works in the porcelain room seem to be invested with greater seriousness, and the humour that previously went hand in hand with that seriousness is upstaged. She leads us into a grimmer world that reminds us of our bodily and mental fragility. Scars, longing, mourning, disquiet and destruction, which we experience throughout our lives, all help shape us as individuals. This shaping of ourselves is reflected in the process of creating the porcelain sculptures and figurines. They are perfectly created by the artist before they are put in the kiln. There the temperature 1,300 °C renders them soft and vulnerable, susceptible to wounds, injuries and malformation, just as do events in our own lives. After the cooling process, life in the kiln remains etched in the works; traces of the process are visible for all time. Human frailty and the porcelain's fragility mirror one another.




The drama playing out in the sculptures resonates in Nordli's treatment of the porcelain room's furnishings. The expressive glaze echoes in the faded and rumpled silk, dog-eared upholstery and furniture charred by fire. We find ourselves in a room where all life seems to have burned out. However, if we look carefully through the ashes, we see that the artist has also included objects symbolising hope. A wall covered with egg-shaped objects augurs that in the aftermath of destruction, there is always new life and the possibility for a new start, or a process of mental cleansing.

In the same way as the classic porcelain room was constructed to give visitors a powerful physical and mental experience, so also does Irene Nordli's room function. She takes us on a porcelain journey from the 17th century up to our own era. The entirety envelops us and becomes a room for mental and physical experience, where both the furniture and the objects of art reflect upon each other. In the porcelain room, she gives us a physical experience of the inner anxiety and disquiet which her sculptures and objects communicate, and those of us who are guests in her porcelain collection immediately feel the clay on our bodies, as an extension of ourselves.

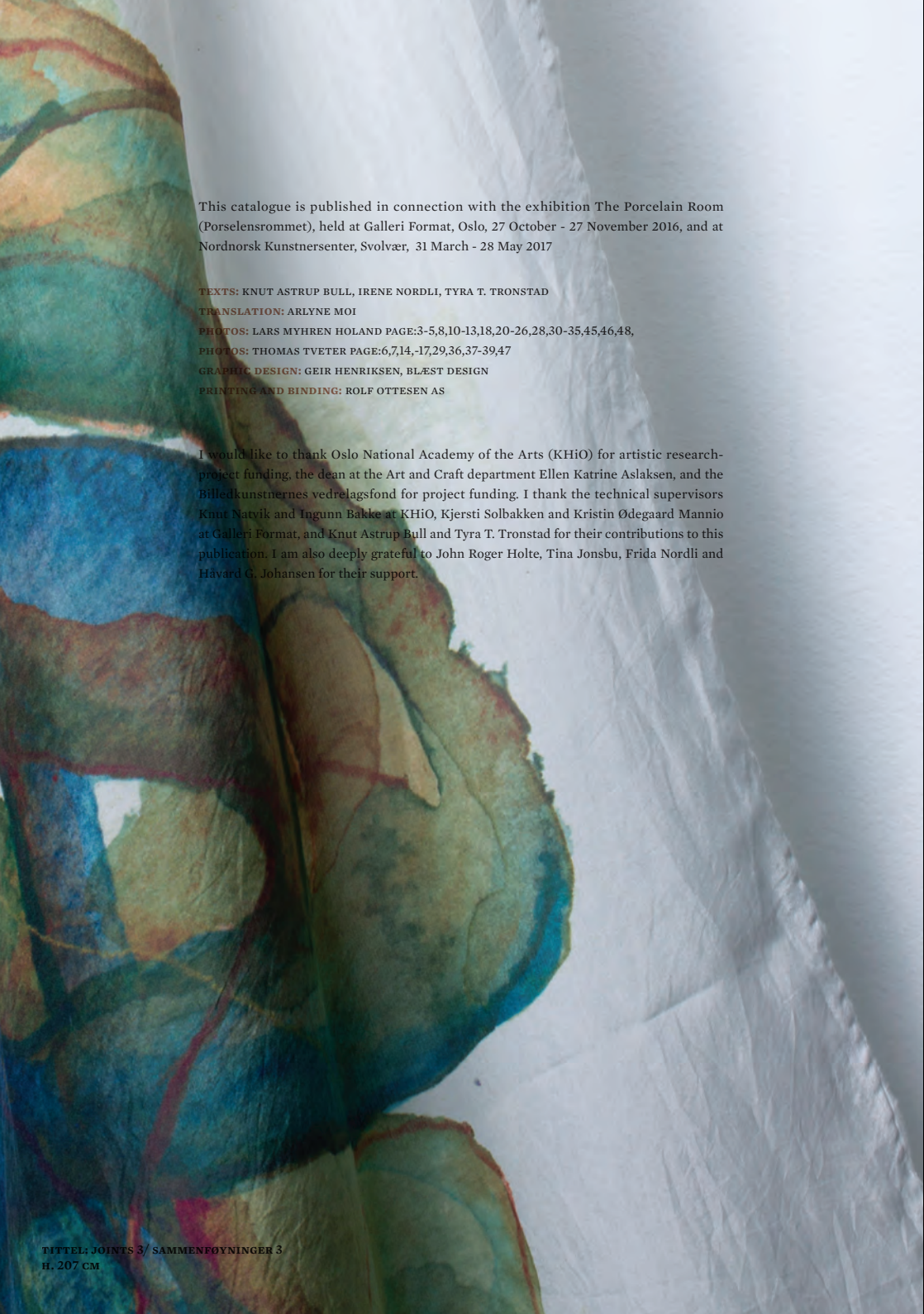


ENDNOTES

1: A. Ruhwald interview 'You in Between' (2014).
<http://channel.louisiana.dk> (last accessed 13 Nov. 2016)



DIN / YOURS



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