



A Relationship of Form and Technique

The ceramics of Patty Wouters, Belgian artist, are examined referencing form and technique. Article by Patricia Hubbard



*Communication:
Rocking Bowls,
Sugar fired.*

TECHNIQUE IS A LOADED WORD. Conceptual content in ceramic art is often lost in the obsession of explaining the technical aspects of making the work. Patty Wouters is attracted to specific techniques as a symbol of process. The intent of this article is to reveal the philosophical impetus that underpins the technical process that Wouters chooses in making her vessels. In Europe, there has been a certain aesthetic tendency towards refined forms. The objects of many European ceramic artists emphasise an analytical and methodical fashioning of the form. Pierre Bayle (France) and Patty Wouters (Belgium) come into the category of European artists whose methodical and technically challenging forms are crafted to portray a distinct dialogue of the human presence in the environment – as reduced metaphors of nature that connect classical proportions to the environment on an esoteric level. The burnished terra sigillata smoke-fired surfaces seductively draw the eye to the technical virtuosity of minimal forms. Patty Wouters, like Bayle, incorporates such forms and surface techniques in her work. Her intent is to provide meditative objects through which to contemplate the existence of a non-dominating human presence in nature through the history of ceramics.

After meeting Wouters in Italy, Belgium and New York, I have come to understand how her ceramics are an embodiment of her outlook on life. She believes it is important to create aesthetically pleasing objects that denigrate the need for the sublime through the continuum of time. Tranquility and the importance of art to everyday life is emphasised at her home and at the Atelier Cirkel Ceramic Center which she started and runs at Brasschaat, Belgium. She believes a certain amount of humility is needed on the part of the artist to receive inspiration from history. Wouters views her vessels from a Jungian perspective: as universal forms, forms that have existed from prehistoric time. Part of her role as an artist is to take many of these forms from our past and place them as a platform for meditation in contemporary society. The *Rocking Annular Bowl*, the swirling vessels and vases, are three forms that exemplify her dialogue on common experiences including life and death. These three forms, like many aspects of life, contain elements of control and surprise. All of her ceramics show technical mastery of the thrown form with colour variations that are a result of reduction and smoke firings.



The *Rocking Antenna Box* is a container, round on the bottom and sides. It is a minimal form that is generous and fertile in shape. A rocking motion is generated when these vessels are touched. According to Wouters, this motion symbolises the sending of good wishes to those around it and its environment. On the top of this container is a thin white porcelain sheet with undulating lines engraved on its surface. This porcelain sheet is a component Wouters incorporates on many of her vessels and acts as a contrast to the vessel's smoky muted-colour surface. She views the porcelain sheet on the *Rocking Antenna Box* much like the Tibetan Prayer Flags that made a visual impression on her while travelling to Tibet many years ago.

Rocking Antenna Boxes and *Flow Connection* are vessels developed as a reaction against the question of what her bowls are meant to hold. To emphasise the aesthetic component of her forms, she divided the form in two with a thin porcelain sheet. The interior division of the form focuses on the artist's intent enabling viewer to contemplate the beauty of the vessel in its surroundings. *Swinging Vases* portray other metaphysical aspects of Wouters' work. The vases are a meditation on the cycles of life and death. They are presented in a circular composition. A vase placed on a tilt is presented in a gestural manner referencing the human form more than a container. The top portion of the vase is smooth. Texture is added as a compositional element by incised lines. The colour on its surface documents the atmospheric conditions it underwent in the reduced saggur firing. In many ways, the realisation of this object through the organic process of saggur firings is a technical metaphor for the documentation of life. The technical processes and the clay's contact with organic materials can be viewed as the development of life and its interaction with fire documents the processes it encounters while the whole manifests the final result in a chemically-fixed final state.

I met Patty Wouters when she was resident artist at the Istituto Statale Per la Ceramica at Faenza, Italy, in 1996. In 2000, The Clay Art Center of Port Chester, New York, allowed me observe a workshop demonstrating Patty Wouters' wheel-throwing and saggur-firing techniques. Wouters throws porcelain clay on the wheel to make many of her vessel forms. Some of her vessels have an additional sculptural component with handbuilt and paperclay elements. She spends

Rocking Antenna Boxes.
Porcelain, Burnished,
saggur fired.



Two Swinging Vases.
Porcelain,
burnished,
Saggur fired.