

ZIMRA BEINER

Trial and Error



Anja Sommer



Visiting Kaja Witt and Thomas Hirschler not only regularly provides unexpected ceramic revelations, but it also makes the day less hectic and calms your mental processes. The premises with the artist-in-residency studios in the Pankow district of Berlin is like a little shady green island in the midst of new and historic buildings. Beside the living quarters, which includes the rooms for the guest artists, there is also a large studio in which Witt and Hirschler produce their vessel series and ceramic sculptures and a third building housing two studios for guest artists, mainly from the USA and Canada but also Japan or Sweden.

Even if the guest artists who apply for a residency with Witt and Hirschler, usually lasting several months, come from all over the world, the ceramics scene in the USA and Canada, which is heavily involved in fine art, is very much in evidence. When I paid a visit to the residency in early summer 2014, two artists who lecture in the USA were working there: Zimra Beiner (Canada) and Gerit Grimm (Germany). Although the Zentrum für Keramik is not able to support the guest artists with a grant, there is a great deal of interest from artists who wish to work on their own projects in seclusion for a number of weeks or months. The list of names attracted by this location in recent years is long.

Zimra Beiner, born in 1985, studied at Sheridan College, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Alfred University in the USA. He currently works at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. He was designated Emerging Artist of

above **"Grey Alphabet"**, 2013, 30 x 120 x 600 cm
glazed earthenware *photo - The Burlington Arts Center*

links **"Bookend"**, 2013, 90 x 150 x 60 cm
glazed stoneware *photo Zimra Beiner*

the Year by the NCECA in 2013. In the same year, he won the Toronto Outdoor Art Competition, and is thus no longer an unknown quantity in North America.

During my visit to Berlin, in his temporary studio there were numerous precarious experimental set-ups, dainty structures and fragile constructions often made of unfired clay, found objects like plastic bottles and pencils, tablets of clay – round, thin and as small as a communion wafer – then a small sphere, another wafer, and so on, wreathing a spray bottle for water, which thereby becomes a thing as if cut out of everyday life, having lost its function and purpose. An oversized mortar has violently been rammed through the now-tattered seat of a chair. A clay pipe thrusts upwards towards the ceiling in the corner of the room. A pencil provides the connection between two threads of clay, which look totally un-claylike, more like a rope.

The first of these apparently outrageous setups, dried and unfired, have already crumbled. Beside one object, there is a pencil and a small noodle. Hirschler reports that a few hours previously, these pieces had seemed to be growing towards the window as if reaching for the light.

Now, what linked them is no longer replicable.

Beiner's sculptures and ceramic objects radiate a great sense of self-evidence. They therefore soon seem inviolably integrated in their own reality. In his sculptural world, the question as to why such different objects are linked and juxtaposed simply does not pose itself. They have to be understood from how they look.

Over recent years, Beiner has assembled a diverse range of forms – made of wood and clay, or found objects such as books – a store on which he repeatedly draws. Sometimes his stacks, his arrangements resembling cobbled-together pieces of furniture, seem unfinished and about to topple or collapse.

However, precisely this character of work in progress is intentional. Thus it becomes evident how Beiner treats his individual forms and objects, how he accords each individual piece the status of a starting point for a new combination. A strangely



*"Constructing Comfort", 2012, 150 x 90 x 210 cm, glazed stoneware, papier mâché, books
photo - Evelyne Leblanc-Roberge*

moving sense of equal status emanates from his objects. One thing leads to another, like arranging a row of dominoes. But more than in a linked-up series, his initial forms are tied into a network of roots that permits many associations.

In order to do justice to this claim to mutability, Beiner degrades his individual elements, leaving them unfired in an exhibition context, working with separate components or additively, and using objects that can decay or rot.



"Cup Stool Still", 2014, 60 x 90 x 150 cm, glazed earthenware photo – Zimra Beiner

New theories normally arise in discussion or from criticism of existing theories. Ideas which from their approach seem to function, a question, the results of an experiment are adopted as proof of the conviction that is to be reformulated, they are reexamined, analysed and combined with additional elements. Zimra Beiner, whose parents are academics, as he himself emphasises, working with word and text, have influenced his method of invention and discovery from existing objects and forms.

At the heart of his work, according to Beiner, is the question of collecting findings and thence of how knowledge develops from there.

To this end, he seeks out and selects everyday objects that seem naturally to have inherent meaning and function. He either integrates them directly in his apparently daring and unstable sculptures, or he comments on them and repeats them in larger cycles reminiscent of series of experiments.

He conscientiously toils away in his cyclical working processes – produces, repeats, finds and decides. It is not merely a loop in which he simply moves from one object to the next, particularly in assemblages of up to a hundred individual items (Grey Alphabet), but in a spiral movement that is always striving forwards.

If he describes his objects himself as autobiographical narratives, he is obviously discussing his own origins on the one hand, but also in his own way he is tracking down everyday things and seeing what is obvious. Many of his objects are thus reminiscent of furniture, kitchen appliances, tools – auxiliary equipment. The sculpturally mature outer appearance is always accompanied by content-related commentary.

If an uncanny, massive great cloud pours forth from a coffee cup that is only just keeping its balance on a stool, we are keen to find out in which form this swirling shape will next appear. Other usable items become more con-



left - **Installation SHOT** - 2012
Fosdick Nelson Gallery, Alfred, NY
photo – Evelyn Leblanc-Roberge

centre - **“Cluster”** - 2012, 40 x 69 cm
pencil on paper *photo – Zimra Beiner*



communion wafers and little balls around a plastic bottle like fashion jewellery.

Beiner allows the individual objects to choose their significance as things and integrate this in his subjective narrative. However, he leaves them with the new arrangement of these objects and their alienation from their functional context. His sculptures of objects place the items, their origins and their inspiration in a museum role.

Just as Beiner spontaneously and impulsively arranges his flexible combinations, he makes collages of delicately coloured line drawings on tracing paper with adhesive tape. They are a kind of diagram for the sculptures, mobile, flexible and vulnerable, like a bold scientific theory that can be dismantled at any time.

When Beiner returns to the USA after the university vacation, the studio will be empty. He will be taking photographic documentation of his experiments with him.

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Further reading:

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crete and strangely of equal value with the cubes or amorphous forms in non-ceramic material that Beiner combines with them. It is only through a phase of decontextualisation of functionality that permits this regrouping of things. In Beiner's work, stools, lamps and chests of drawers become display objects.

Since 1970 the Werkbund Archive – The Museum of Things in Berlin has been collecting mass produced items of all kinds and from all eras. Objects by leading designers are combined with anonymous ones, with industrial kitsch or with handcrafted unique pieces. These items from the culture of things are exhibited in unorthodox fashion, according to colour, materials or form. New contexts are thereby created for individual pieces – in the same way as Beiner does when he arranges clay

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