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Profile:

□ by Paul Mathieu

Roseline Delisle



"Sextuple Porcelain" - 1991

32" x 9.5"

A few months ago, Roseline came to Montreal to give a two-day workshop at Concordia University, where I presently teach. She talked freely about her work, about the process itself as well as the aesthetic underlying principles. She answered many questions on all aspects of her work with conviction, including the most controversial, perfectionism and marketability. If most people cannot but admire and respect Roseline's work, not everyone agrees with its premise ... I took many notes, of which this is a summary.

First, I want to talk about the process of making the work, seemingly similar for each piece. Each step involved in the making is accomplished on the wheel, with the exception of wedging, taking

photographs and packaging. I added the last three in order to stress the fact that *all* steps are actually performed at the wheel: succinctly, the pieces are thrown, in section, trimmed, turned and polished, banded, painted and after firing, waxed. In Roseline's work, the wheel as a universal tool has attained the proportion of an obsession.

A number of pieces are thrown over a week or so, from thirty to sixty units, yielding ten to twenty pieces once assembled, or just enough for a solo show. This allows for loss, frequently high when using porcelain under such exact conditions. The pieces are thrown rather thick, yet as thin as possible, to prevent cracks caused by insufficiently compressed clay.

Still, in order for the finished piece to be perfectly true and regular, a necessary condition for the banding and striping used in decoration. The pieces cannot be thrown very thin as this would cause warpage and unwelcome deformation. All thrown pieces are kept in a tightly sealed shelving unit, covered with plastic. Each shelf is made of plaster, saturated with water to maintain a constant degree of humidity and keep all sections at the leather-hard stage.

Over the next months, these sections will be progressively trimmed in order to thin the walls, carve the foot, the finials and the "fins" (these are pointed, decorative elements encircling the piece, like a ring preventing it from bursting at the seams). The painted stripes play a similar role, containing the implied pressure, the tautness of the form blown from the inside like a balloon. Notches are then turned in the thickness of the walls so that all sections will tightly fit one into the other, in order to compose a piece made from as many as five or six diverse elements, a taller completed piece being assembled from smaller units. Each piece will then be polished inside and out, with a small smooth stone, while slowly spinning on the wheel. Once perfectly dried, the pieces are painted with vitrified slips, mostly black and a deep, luminous blue.

The smoothness of the finely ballmilled slip is similar to the tightness of the smooth, vitrified white porcelain clay. The pieces are banded in a variety of patterns, inside as well as outside each section, and the black slip is painted on all surfaces that fit together, where a permanent bond is required. The slip will vitrify in the firing, thus joining the two sections

permanently. Access to the interior, in order to be able to see the intricate decoration inside, is attached from a lid at the top, pieces open at two or three different places, at the shoulder or waist for example. This creates an impression of mystery in the finished work. After a single firing, the pieces are sanded smooth under water with fine sandpaper, then dried. Their finish is then dull and matt and in order to accentuate the vividness of the colours and the silkiness of the porcelain, the pieces are waxed with a mixture of beeswax diluted in turpentine.

It seemed important to stress these technical aspects and the process since I know of no other person using the wheel so consistently in so many aspects of their work. Roseline developed a technique that is specific to her needs. Only Roseline could and would make these pots. It comes from an extreme sensibility to pottery form, and from using the wheel in an intellectual not instinctual way. A sensibility to clay as a plastic, soft, organic material.

Many people disagree with her approach. For reasons of truth to materials and historical tradition, they prefer clay to retain the trace of the hand, the torque of the wheel and a texture closer to its natural source. The tight, controlled, mechanical throwing and turning preferred by Roseline offends their taste and preferences. But in many ways, it is a cultural sensibility. Greek pottery, for example, was made in a similar, if somewhat looser, fashion (remember the concentric circles and the banding on Cretan pots).

Roseline's work is true formal work, it is the intelligence of geometry and engineering, more than that of senses, materials and language, without denying these either. Other historical precedents in ceramics could be porcelain Sevres or certain types of Chinese wares, especially those coming out of the Imperial workshops. These porcelains lose the mechanical quality of tightness in the process due to the sensuality of the colours and gilding the sensuous thick glaze that covers the oriental forms like a skin.



"Quadruple Porcelain" - 1990

25" x 10"

In Roseline's work, this mechanical quality (perceived by some as a flaw) is retained because the piece is left unglazed. Clay isn't flesh any more but stone hard dry matt, yet tight and smooth. It is closer to the industrial aesthetic since it is so machine-like. Inspiration for many shapes actually comes from planes, bombs and water towers.

It could be debated that the pieces could be as easily cast or made with some other industrial process. Although this is possible, I believe it is justified and legitimate that they be thrown. They would otherwise have a very different quality. With throwing, one can see the slight torque lines showing in the porcelain, the dancing of the fins from unavoidable warping and collapsing; this gives life and movement to the work, it releases the unbearable tension generated by the extreme control.

Roseline's work is very much the work of an individual, and that personality is obvious and reflected in her work. The evident pleasure she takes in making the work is obvious as well. The invention of new forms and the potential play with a limited vocabulary is seen as a challenge. These restrictions in form, techniques, materials, colours become liberating because they permit an endless number of permutations and possible solutions.

If the pieces were thrown thinner with little or no trimming, they would have a different quality. A quality that might be closer to the still prevalent aesthetic (truth to process and materials as inherited from Leach and the Japanese Mingei tradition) but not closer to this artist's original intent. The apparent control is an aesthetic solution doubled with a structural one. When both are in agreement, the piece is successful.

Equally, contrary to what one would expect, the stripes are eyeballed, rarely measured. Their precision is partly an illusion caused by the optical play of dark and light and the kinetic jump of the eye. These stripes, in their variety and slight differences, make your eye move over the piece and this adds to the impression of movement and contradicts the apparent stillness of the piece. A large variety of stripes and bands are used and they interact with the pieces, complement or transform them, giving them personality. This

tension of the horizontal band with the vertical shape is the main energy animating the work. The same piece with a different set of stripes would become a totally different character.

The latest work is more directly anthropomorphic, more referential, less abstract. In this sense, it is also more confining and leaves less to the viewer by directing their interpretation. They are also taller, bigger and some of the early pieces achieved monumentality of scale despite their rather small size. They have less and less stripes and display large surfaces covered with a single colour, in order to get away from the decorative and concentrate on the strength of the form and the power of the shape.

Before working with the clay, Roseline makes large pencil drawings, equally monochrome, black, non-decorative and non-ornamental. Yet, these drawings are not close to the finished pieces, they are seen as tools to develop ideas and produce growth, to establish the desired flow of a single line from the foot of the piece to the top of the finial. These drawings represent the profile of the piece. Similarly, the pieces themselves are also thrown in profile. Roseline has installed a large mirror, slightly angled, in front of her wheel. This prevents her from bending over to the side in order to see the profile as she throws and prevents back problems. It is a practical solution that yields aesthetic results. The flatness of the reflected image in the mirror turns the form into a flat plane and the pot into an image.

The "object" aspect of the work can be easily ignored to the advantage of its "image." This object aspect is nonetheless very much there. These pieces have to be touched in order to remove the lid and disassemble the parts to gain entrance to the interior, equally striped and alive with patterns and colours. The lid itself is often extended inwardly as a pointed form, transforming itself into a spinning top.

The pieces are never shown open, in photographs or while exhibited. The pleasure of touching is dependent on the pleasure of owning. These are private works of art. For these reasons, the piece is always experienced as an image, in reality as well as in reproduction. This makes photography a privileged mode for its experience and diffusion. It also makes them exceed-

ingly accessible. In our culture, image is primary to anything else, and image is our common language, language is theory and theory is art. It is through this circuitous route that these objects attain the status of art.

Roseline is aware of the degree that she cites as source for her work: Russian constructivism, the Bauhaus works of Oscar Schlemmer, the sculpture of Tony Cragg, specifically his stacked objects and most importantly, the photographs of water towers by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Some of these "influences" actually come after the fact, and are chosen by Roseline because they share with her work certain stylistic features and a common interest in specific forms and shapes. These "high" art and architecture examples are easy to understand and assimilate, because they are familiar, yet they also establish the status of the work and legitimize its value, thus its price. They transfer prestige and power. In my opinion, this is unnecessary since the work is original in and of itself.

Roseline uses the vocabulary of contemporary art in the titles she gives each piece; words like diptique and triptique, quadruple and quintuple are followed by the number attained thus far in each series. Each title thus becomes a record of parts and sequences, half taxonomy, half computability.

Perceived as static yet in potential movement, grounded in symmetry yet unstable on its small insecure footing, hard as stone and strong as porcelain yet fragile in its vulnerable sharp edges, impermanent in its temporary waxy surface, each piece is "a dialectic of opposites, a dialogue between contradictions," to quote the artist herself.

Through exquisite craftsmanship and control, the striving for perfection and the implied preciousness, the work achieves considerable success. In trying to understand its immense appeal, I would like to appropriate for my own work its equally great commercial success. I am envious of the results, yet cannot succumb to the same strategies for my own purposes. They are all her own.

Roseline has almost attained the perfect life through the making of the perfect pot.