

JOAN SERRA



*Researching
on the limits
of chaos*

photos - Joan Serra

by CATERINA ROMA

When Joan Serra opened the door of his studio for this interview, I confronted a big sturdy man, with long gray-haired beard, who greeted me with a deep coarse voice. His manners were rough but kind, and if I wouldn't have known his work, I would have expected him to be a traditional potter throwing immense jars and working in a chaotic cave. Instead, I was invited to enter a huge, bright, spotless studio that revealed a meticulousness behind a seemingly accidental work.

The showroom on the first floor exhibited some of the pieces that have taken him gain reputation as an innovator in the art of ceramics, and when entering the workspace, the idea of a primitive chaotic cave banished completely. The place looked closer to a laboratory than to the cliché of an artist studio, and all tools, tests and materials were perfectly organized and labelled. We finally got to a cosy library, where we talked over a steaming cup of coffee about his particular working process.



Oddly enough, when I repeatedly asked him about his career and how he arrived to his particular artistic expression, I got no definite answer. He seemed to have been always passionately researching the influence of temperatures on clay and its shapes, increasing his knowledge of the materials he works with. He knew what he wanted to express through clay from the very beginning, and he hasn't been going forward but deeper, working in a "what if" approach: What if I try this? What if I mix these two materials? What if I fire it 10°C more? During our talk he didn't theorized about his work, there didn't seem to be a search of meaning beyond what's there, in front of our eyes. He slowly revealed how his artworks take shape.

The starting point is inconceivably simple: just a cube, or some other kind of polyhedron. Solid pieces of clay that can take months to dry up, and be fired a whole year after being shaped, in a very slow cycle of research and testing. Serra waits patiently, observes, analyses and hardly gives up, aware that there's no failure but new paths for experimentation. He mixes clay with materials not common in ceramics: rocks and minerals in its natural state, glass, industrial products, grains and seeds... Each one gives specific results and different behaviours that this potter first explores in small scale before taking them to the final pieces. It's a game of textures, contrasts, densities, and the deep palette of the natural colours of clay: white smooth porcelain cracked on top of a melted black earthenware with a final touch of gold lustre. These elements have accompanied him for years, but there always seem to be new ways to combine them and discover their potential. Serra exhausts possibilities of his building blocks with the unifying thread of a painstaking research... and a bit of playful chance.

opposite top -

Earthenware with manganese addition
1120°C, gold luster

below from l. to r. -

Porcelain structure. Combustible material on the inside, 1300°C, 12 x 12 x 13 cm

Porcelain structure - combustible material on the inside, 1300°C. Earthenware with manganese addition, 1140°C, 22 x 22 x 27,5 cm

Porcelain structure - combustible material on the inside, 1300°C. Earthenware with manganese addition, 1150°C, 28 x 25 x 29,5 cm



Porcelain structure - combustible material on the inside, 1300°C. Earthenware with manganese addition, 1140°C, 46 x 16 x 43,5 cm

Porcelain shell - 1300°C. Earthenware with manganese addition, combustible material on the inside, 1140°C, 29 x 28 x 20,5 cm





Eartenware with manganese addition, combustible material on the inside, 1140°C, 34 x 26 x 22 cm

The final appearance of his pieces is all a matter of temperature. There's no previous inducement, no artifice, no glazes or surface slips: the difference in the melting temperature of the clays does all the work. Although the result is pure art, he takes a very technical approach, a meticulous control where 10°C can make a huge difference: one clay starts vitrifying, where the one next to it is already melting, and a third one is hard enough to keep it all together. The inside melts, breaks the coating and expands, the volume distorts, the cracks reveal the power of the elements upon substance. Serra is interested in exploring that zone near the limits, and finding the right balance between the first constructive phase, under his control, and the chaotic action that takes place inside the kiln.

The edges of those initial cubes, rectangles or flat faceted shapes help to understand the thermal evolution it has undergone. These simple structures allow a rewarding reading of what has happened. And this is, in fact, what Serra believes to be a highlight of his work: the viewer can recognize a natural behaviour and feel it not as a cold and distant work of art, but as an interpretable sequence of geological events, close to his essential reality.

Joan Serra aims to reproduce a process that happens artlessly in Nature, and that reminds the beginning and evolution of the Earth. His work is like a small scale Land Art, where he finds inspiration, and he reencounters a reflection of his artistic world during his hikes, in any rock, bark or landscape.

With a pure and accurate finish and a delicate and precise aesthetics, his work is not an interpretation of reality, but the reality in itself, the reflection of an instant, captured in a hard piece of clay, where can be glimpsed what has happened and what could happen; a frozen moment.

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in Literary Theory and
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Earteware with manganese addition, combustible material on the inside, 1120°C, 29 x 27 x 20,5 cm

Statement

I do not shape the pieces; my task consists of creating the conditions needed for the forms to appear. My work is based on the behaviour of material, modifying the density of a clay body in a given volume through the addition of combustible materials which disappear during the firing. [...] From the minimum point of vitrification, where clay will no longer disintegrate in water, through to melting or semi-melting point, the process will bring about a wide range of evolutionary changes in the base form, showing new and intimate aspects of the play between material and fire. Dilating and contracting, the loss of volume through vitrification, changes in shape caused by melting, the movement of a solid mass on an unstable surface...these are conditions which bring to mind the original evolution of the earth, recreations of nature's power on a human scale. *Joan Serra*

JOAN SERRA was born in Mataró (Catalonia, Spain) in 1962. He studied fine arts and arts and crafts, major in ceramics, at Pau Gargallo School (Barcelona), and for a few years he worked in the ceramic industry, specializing in murals. A few years later he set up a ceramic school, IXIÓ, that is still running today, where he leads a ceramics research group with advanced students. He has shown his work worldwide and has won several prizes in Spain, France, Holland, Switzerland, and even an honorable mention at the Mino International Ceramic Competition in 2011. Joan Serra is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics of Geneva and was in charge of the Scientific Committee for the IAC meeting in Barcelona 2016.

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