

Jason Walker's "Timing Chain"

In assessing this porcelain work by Jason Walker, I will make use of the following definitions and criteria: What is ceramics? And, What is its specific role within culture?

Ceramics, as a distinct and autonomous art form, implies the coming together of a form and a surface. This form generally (if not always) is volumetric in nature, that is to say that it is hollow inside and has been generated from the inside out, as a volume. The surface, whatever quality it takes, although it may describe the volumetric form, as it does here, partially at least, remains distinct from the form itself, as it does here, as well. The surface is another layer of information added to the form. Only ceramics behave in such a fashion in all art disciplines and these characteristics are specific to ceramics (and pottery) as art forms. The fact that the object is made with (fired) clay is of some importance too, but I will argue that it is not, by far, the most important aspect to define an object as ceramics. Conceptual aspects such as volumetric form and distinct surface are much more important than mere material. In fact, in the object under discussion here and in Jason Walker's work in general, the "clayness" of the work is of little significant importance, for a variety of reasons. For example, there is little if any obvious tactility perceivable, a characteristic so often found in objects made with clay. The various forms used in this assemblage do not specifically refer to the vocabulary of forms usually found in the ceramics lexicon. We are confronted here instead with a variety of geometric forms, spheres and cylinders, combined with mechanical parts, all referring or imitating metal, as well as a stylized duck head. All these are organized in the overall shape of a teapot, with its body, spout, handle and lid. The teapot connection, somewhat ambiguous anyway, is the only obvious formal connection to ceramics (thus to clay as a material) we have here. The "teapot" reference, as is so often the case now with pottery forms, is primarily a commercial strategy, since anything "teapot" is much more marketable and ceramics collectors, who have no clue as to the true nature of the art form, are instantly reassured by the familiar. The "teapotness" of this object also serves to give it a clear identity, as a thing that can be clearly named (this is a teapot), an identity that would be confusing otherwise. This is also a strategy employed by much contemporary ceramics, to gain instant meaning through identity and identification, meaning which would be much poorer to inexistent otherwise. The ambiguity of this object as a ceramic object is also manifest at the level of surface, which remains graphic and illustrative, with no readily identifiable ceramic aspect (it imitates drawing or prints imitating metal) and has none of the expected shininess, fluidity, depth and reflectivity of glazes, for example. In fact, this object could be made of plastic.

The other criteria that is useful in assessing a ceramic object, is to answer the following question: How relevant is this object in relation to the particular time it was made, what is its connection to contemporary culture?

In the now quite distant past, pottery forms were primarily made for the functional, practical needs of real users, even if that function was at times symbolic and ritual. Going as far back as Bernard Palissy in 16th Century, France (whose work in connection to Walker's was also informed with natural references related to ecology, in an illusionist manner), but certainly since the middle of the 19th Century, pottery and ceramics, if we are to make exception for industrially made wares, were largely made for the personal, expressive needs of individuals. Going from the practical to the personal, ceramics now finds itself at a junction point where it desperately needs

to rethink its identity and role within culture, since we have no real needs anymore for practical objects made by hand and we have all experienced the inherent limitations of personal expression in generating new forms and new meanings, beyond self-indulgence.

I propose that due to its particular properties (its resistance to time), ceramics is the best archival material ever devised by humankind. Even the printed page or photographs or even less, digital technologies, can make such an historical claim. Thus, the ceramics we now make will become the archives of the future, like all the ceramics made before. This archival nature of ceramics is probably its most potent claim to meaning within culture, beyond its practical aspects and certainly beyond its individual potential for personal expression.

Jason Walker's "Timing Chain", a non-functional object with limited personal individuality (there is an anonymity to both the forms and the surfaces), with its references to the hybridity of opposing realities, the mechanical versus the natural, comments on our present schizophrenic relation to the world and as such is an efficient archive of our present state of mind as a species. It will transmit that information efficiently. By being aware of this archival potential, it is my hope that Jason Walker will take this responsibility, as will others, with all the seriousness it deserves.

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