



## Yael Atzmony Interviewed Identity Converts a Vessel into a Value Laden Object *Article by Arye Franco*

**T**HIS IS AN ATTEMPT TO CONFRONT AN ARTIST WHO moulds earthly materials, such as clay, with her thoughts that emanate from a wider sphere and originate from cultural-historical ideas. I arranged to meet Yael Atzmony in Tel Aviv, away from her studio, so as to distance her from the clays which always surround her, and pose her questions which were spiritual in nature. What has slow-paced ceramics to do with the fast moving reality around us? In what direction does it move? I hoped to gain an idea of the motives that guide her hands when she handles and moulds her material to bring out whatever entity that may be concealed within it.

Yael F. Atzmony was born in Ramleh, a town impregnated with emotions which have influenced her since childhood and still exert their influence on her art in a way that critical reasoning cannot disentangle. Ramleh, an ancient city of the plain of Israel, generates for her a background of people and memories that manifest themselves through minute details of textures and materials and through fire.

Atzmony's work grows out of the red soil of a town which carries a history of civilisations of people, shades, unseen appearances and voices of a Moslem caller from a minaret, bells of a Christian church and clamour of conquerors, all of which are mixed and heard in her jars. These are seemingly ordinary vessels, clearly recognised from everyday life but they aspire to present an inner truth and to confront simple form with the meta-systems that enclose them and are enclosed within them.

*I asked Yael Atzmony how could she produce freshness of expression and innovation through such an ancient and tradition-laden craft as ceramics in its encounter with everyday life? What problems do processes involved in the work with ceramics raise?*

"I was faced with such questions only during the first moments of my dealing with earth at the Arts Department of Haifa University where I completed my education. Until then I merely touched earth, but had never wondered for a moment about its nature or properties. Only later did I discover clay as a medium for creative art. When I was about to operate a studio of my own, there arose other questions that are more typical for situations where one is exposing oneself:

What shall I choose for display on the shelves? How shall I stand beside it while all the others will be watching? Should I embark on a work which will constitute a dialogue with potential purchasers or rather pursue further the monologue of my thesis-project which dealt with ceramics shells over and within the human body – transparent and opaque tridimensional vessels of matter purporting to reflect inner moods. My ceramics echo my encounters with people. Their personalities give rise to questions which elicit a complex as well as pragmatic set of interpretations which are pertinent both to the material itself and to the object made from it. The junctions between matter, object and people guide my work in ceramics.

"The advantage I gain from this approach stems from the fact that questions originate not merely from the narrow boundaries of the object and its use, but from activated emotions, reasoning and illusions experienced by every human being. Thus a circular system emerges where an interdependent triangle exists between object, matter and humans. Ceramics is a friendly medium. Ever-present interactions take place between them, where a dominating duality of instincts continually fills and empties, builds and degrades their mutual relations. I can hardly envisage a misanthrope practising ceramics. I am blessed with a love for people and I am nourished by it. People who move and act around me raise my curiosity. Accordingly, I am attentive and responsive to them.

"I believe that, upon examination of a series of my works produced over a continuum of time and space, one can discern the effect of questions I encounter in relation to other people. I feel that inspection of just a single work/jar would represent a disruption of a complex on-going process, as if one reads just one word of a complete text. My questions always stem out of basic attributes of life even simple drinking or eating. On the other hand I may contemplate the implication of landing on the moon, where different forces of gravity and type of matter could bring forth new tools for an avant-garde project. I am tempted to follow people to their remotest places of existence and to construct ceramic stories out of their wishes and dreams. 'Every room', says Charles Jencks, a postmodern theoretician, 'needs symbolic



Vase. From the series Dictionary. 47 x 32 cm.



Vase. 1996. Raku, silkscreen. 56 x 31 cm.

objects that can become the semantic focus of the space: their function is to transfer meaning, interrupt continuity and become an exception.' Location is the axis around which the ceramic object evolves, serving as a transmitter expressing its position in time.

"One cannot apply definitions like 'Chinese' or 'Egyptians' without referring to time. They characterise an evolutionary process of contextual functional meeting points. Their existence provides a basis for reality in which the concept of identity is linked to a complex and imparts to it a value that transcends its material nature. The bi-directional link between object and its user acts in relation to a place that serves as a temporary item of a stage-scenery. Making use of an object affirms its current existence."

*Inasmuch as ceramics enjoys a rich historical continuity in handling materials, our present day reality knocks on other doors of creativity and displays ceramics from its past central role. Apart from its nostalgic and archaic qualities, ceramics occupies hardly any significant niche in present day world of the art. What is your assessment of ceramic work today?*

"Unlike other materials, working in ceramics is an ongoing drama. Ceramics not only produces functional objects. Currently used materials around us are mostly products of cool programming in some rational and alienated laboratories. I view them as reflections of an unworthy social-cultural behaviour, devoid of emotional content carrying nothing else but their direct application. Ceramics in contrast, allows the existence of objects that tell of old age.

"Ceramics represents emotion and reminiscences of private and collective experiences. Its apparent simplicity is a superficial impression. The planning in ceramics necessitates a highly complex structure of elements partly technical and partly emotional if one is to produce a sophisticated object. Even upon your first

glance at such an object, you are likely to discover in it experiences and emotions as well as events and permutations that have taken place along and around its creation and that reflects the movements of its maker's hands. Ceramics has a paradoxical relationship with the concepts of time and place but is capable also of causing them to disappear; it contains both of them simultaneously. When an object is broken, it is not only an outer shell that is lost but a shell that encloses an inner space of yourself.

"Living next to breakable objects demands the exertion of continuous harmonic controls. A ceramics product is a living thing. Both its maker and its user may treat it in a variety of ways, to use it or to display it behind glass in a cupboard. I consider it to be a living thing because it is completed by touch – a signature of a human hand, even after coming out of the kiln – and it may die because of a common place everyday event. I liken our relation with ceramic objects to acts of love. A accident can destroy it. An object gets lost suddenly, without warning. This does not happen with plastics, metals may be bent and with glass the primary properties of clay do not exist.

"She or he moulds a material and provides a dialogue with tactile memory. Ceramics provide mental and visual clearness, because clay holds a time element that activates nostalgic codes. The ceramic objects carry cultural genes that ensure the survival of its material into the future, as a creative inspiring medium for the artist, beyond time, for all time."

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Arye Franco is a writer from Israel. An exhibition of the work of Yael Atzmony will be held at the Ceramic Art Gallery, Sydney opening on 9 March, 2000. Other Australian exhibitions include venues: Global Art Link, Ipswich, Nov-Jan; Jabaru Gallery, Sanctuary Cove, Jan.2000; Fusions Gallery, Brisbane, February, 2000; and Craft ACT Gallery, Canberra, March, 2000.