

Helga Ritsch, «stages»

Solo exhibition in Aux Losanges, 22 February–2 March 2025

To Helga Ritsch, independence and the freedom to create in response to her environment, both external and internal, is essential. Forms and concepts are united in her works that emerge as a result of deep introspection. Her objective is to create something complex and unbound by narrow definitions.

Producing objects that are perfectly symmetrical and identical to one other involves skill. However, that skill limits expression and renders the object and its manifold iterations mere copies of one another, resulting in a manufactured set of items without much individual meaning or creative value. Their merit exists mainly in the precision of their conformity to one another.

The individuality and singular character of each of Helga Ritsch's works are an expression of her creative intent. And yet the DNA – that “red thread” (“rote Faden”) that each of her works possesses – is evident. (All of her works bear the “red thread” figuratively, while some of them are more literally adorned by the thread, sometimes red and sometimes not.) The artist herself draws on a rich repository of creative energy, fed in part by the duality of deep introspection and reflection on her surroundings, and in part by her artistic character as shaped by the nature of her work as an architect and philologist. Her background in these fields is most easily recognised in precision of execution punctuated by poetic details.



The polaroids that are included in the exhibition are evidence of the thinking artist – one who has the urge to document her progress by capturing mental notes in an image. This is one way in which she creates structure without interrupting the creative process.

There are three fundamentally meaningful aspects worth observing in Helga Ritsch's works: form, texture, and colour. These are arguably the primary modes of expression in each of the objects she creates.



Form

The architectural approach can be discerned in an emphasis on form as opposed to decoration in her ceramic works. Seemingly simple outlines are, in fact, anything but simple. Painstaking care and attention to detail, along with the skilled execution that comes with decades of experience and the profound intention of the artist are united in bringing forth distinct silhouettes that appear effortless. Helga Ritsch creates groups or series of vessels of similar shape and size, but with variations that give each individual piece their own character and distinct appeal. Sometimes one or two works in a series are distinguished by an unexpected feature. However, such a detail will never disturb the harmony of the overall form, nor does it isolate the work from the rest of the group. Each individual piece stands alone and as part of the series in equal measure.

She makes use of a material's intrinsic qualities to achieve the desired forms. For example, when executing fine rims and edges, fashioning clean-lined angular details, and composing shapes that rely on meticulous manipulation, she works in porcelain, in which this level of detail can be articulated. And yet she works with certain stoneware clays in a similar manner, persistently pursuing the concept until it is expressed to her satisfaction, resulting in graceful stoneware vessels with subtle outlines.

Texture

Helga Ritsch's ceramic works challenge expectations. She creates surprising contrasts in visual and physical texture through her choice of materials and techniques. She works in porcelain and stoneware, with or without glaze, or with pigmented engobes. Her works are formed primarily on the potter's wheel or by pressing clay into moulds cast from wheel-thrown models. The final surface details are completed by trimming (shaving away excess material and refining the surface), carving (cutting away clay to more dramatically resurface and shape the work), and hand-sculpting (manipulating the clay to create irregular and organic shapes).



Aside from creating surface texture using these finishing techniques, she makes deliberate choices in glazing her vessels or leaving the clay body exposed. Glazing or partial glazing (for example, only of the interior of a vessel) can be used to create smooth, glassy surfaces that are familiar and comfortable to the touch. Helga Ritsch, however, also uses glaze to highlight unevenness, capturing the natural movement, drips and washes of the liquid glaze, and suspending them in time. When she chooses to leave works unglazed, she is encouraging us to observe and touch – to appreciate the beauty of the material, whether this is the fine, powdery smoothness of porcelain or the more raw, grainy surface of stoneware.



Colour

Helga Ritsch is bold in her use of colour, both in her painting and ceramic works. There is no intention of creating patterns, representations or recognisable images, but rather to call the observer's attention. Colours, on the other hand, are chosen meticulously.

Saturated hues of tangerine, deep persimmon, and rose are chosen for their vivid appeal. Applied in broad strokes on a light sandstone-coloured clay body, orange tones are luminous, while pink presents a pleasingly gentle complement to the grainy textured body. This series and the colours used are a celebration of summer. The same hues of orange are used for the group of larger moulded stoneware vessels, but the colour palette for these has shifted – the orange now stands alongside black and a pale bone or creamy white to create heightened dramatic contrast. The colours are applied in the same confident strokes, but are now given more distinct shapes, which closely echo the intersecting circles and lines in her paintings.



Her monochrome porcelain vessels, although most of them are in white or black, are meaningful representatives in the discussion of Helga Ritsch's use of colour in her works. Though when we envision them in our minds, we associate them with a single consistent white colour, the influence of light and shadow (which will be discussed in more detail) on the contours of a white porcelain vessel creates innumerable shades of grey ranging between white and black. Black porcelain vessels contain a suggestion of dark purple. And amongst the exhibited works is a monochrome porcelain in vivid blue, that like the white vessels, presents an astounding range of hues of blue to black when illuminated at an angle.

Light and space

In placing emphasis on the three aspects that have been discussed, the artist consciously cultivates physical attributes in her art that invite us to engage with it. These are contained within the works themselves, but to their creator, the setting – in fact, the stage – is equally important. Helga Ritsch understands how light and space can be altered and transformed by one another. She chooses to create art that interacts with both.

Artworks transform the space in which they are placed by shifting focus and even movement in a room and around them. In turn, the space can define how the artwork is lived with and viewed. Lighting is usually (but not exclusively) defined by location. The best (or at least most interesting) light, namely natural daylight, is constantly changing. Whether through the course of a year or within a day or even an hour, daylight grows and diminishes, alters in hue and direction.



The intense use of dark colours in Helga Ritsch's paintings means that changes in light can hide or reveal details. The shades of colour that are sometimes hidden in the black brushstrokes appear and disappear with increasing and decreasing light, and light falling at certain angles turns black into grey.

Helga Ritsch's ceramic artworks respond to light in several ways. The most significant effect that light has on these works is in forming shadows. Different angles of illumination can remove or increase shadows that flatten or amplify surface texture. The ceramic vessels themselves cast shadows that become extensions of the artwork, connecting it more to the space in which it resides. The artworks that are most responsive to light and shadow are her monochrome porcelain pieces. Of these vessels whose essence is found in form, there is poetry and performance in the endlessly shifting outlines created by shadows cast on and by the works.

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