



Review: Anders Ruhwald

by Sean Francis



L-stand and N-stand.

Visitors to the recent exhibition of Anders Ruhwald's ceramics-based art at rowlandcontemporary (www.rowlandcontemporary.com) in Chicago, Illinois, were immediately confronted by an object that in its unstable combination of drollery and menace is typical of this young Danish maker's fascinating output: a circle of earthenware three feet in diameter, glazed in a matt black and surrounding a vinyl mirror, mounted high on a white wall and staring mutely down at all who were sufficiently intrepid to keep on coming into the gallery. Though not quite as unsettling as the "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" posted at the threshold of Dante's Inferno, the piece did suggest it would be best to check any preconceptions about a ceramics show at the door. Half surveillance device, half funhouse fixture and wholly compelling, *Interior #10* kept its perceivers off-balance, some more pleasurably than others; only when they had realized the title might refer more to their hidden psychic spaces than to the uncanny object it named were they truly ready to proceed further.



Installation view of *Social piece of furniture #7*, *Interior #10*, *Interior #11*, *Interior #9* and *Untitled #9* (from the functional series).

That the London-based Ruhwald might have been as interested in discomfiting as in delighting was suggested by the rubric he settled on for this grouping of thirteen creations, all made since Christmas in Chicago, where he has been a 2007/8 Visiting Artist at the Art Institute of Chicago: One is never so close to change as when life seems unbearable, even in the smallest and most everyday things. Taken from a letter by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, whose most famous poem, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," ends with the exhortation "You must change your life," the statement is more suggestive than definitive—and hence appealed forcefully to Ruhwald, who regards ambiguity as the key to all he does. "I don't want people to dwell on what this work looks like," he notes; "I want them to ask what it is." (Not that they'll find any certain answer.) To this end he eschewed the often bright colors, shiny surfaces and witty titles of previous work in favor of an all-over blackness, occasional bluntness of modeling and neutrality of naming; the sculptures do not reach out, but must be approached and engaged on their own terms by those who would comprehend their quiet but persistent power. (The one exception to this was the dazzling stoneware vessel *Cooler*, which seemed hewn from obsidian—and true to its name brimmed on opening night with the iced intoxicants that evinced the largesse of gallery director Mark Rowland.)



Cooler and *Social piece of furniture #7*.

The anomaly of *Cooler's* ravishing aesthetics and unambiguous usefulness within this show's context also indicated Ruhwald's decision to address, albeit obliquely, the problem so often raised with ceramics in relation to the discourse of high art: the vexed question of whether form must be divorced from recognizable functionality in order to count as significant. As he sees it, by making ceramics that "verge on the functional—but always stop just short, or move just beyond," he is engaging in a "conceptualization of the utilitarian" that lends his projects a resonance beyond their individual components. And while almost every object here could conceivably serve some purpose beyond that of providing sensory pleasure and provoking musings on meaning—the hilarious *N-stand*, for instance, which might do nicely to prop up a television in the family room of the Flintstones, or the small *Untitled #9* (from the functional series), upon whose skinny and bumpy earthenware bar one might drape a hand towel or two—Ruhwald is more keen on stimulating thought around the notion of utility than in fashioning explicitly serviceable products. (It was revealing to learn from him that an early apprenticeship in Minnesota was entirely given over to the throwing of commercial pottery, and that he hadn't operated an enterprise in Denmark strictly devoted to functional ceramics for very long at all before realizing it wasn't, so to speak, his cup of tea.)



Untitled #9 (from the functional series).

For a number of this show's pieces, the ceramic medium or material provided only one part of a larger assemblage. Particularly intriguing was a work that featured two devices of illumination. In *Candle/Light* a candle burned atop yet another earthenware beam, and, on its other end, a sleek light bulb drooped downward as if to keep its "eye" on the coil of black cord plugged into the wall and keeping it going. The contrast in the modes of lighting—one as old as man, the other a ready-made emblem of modernity—added a two-fold temporal dimension to the piece's spatiality: while the wick and wax were visibly finite and clearly diminishing, the filament under glass, while destined to endure longer, was also under the curse of obsolescence.



Mirror (Ornamented) and *Mirror (Candle)*.

Candle/Light's simple allusion to the charged philosophical category of time was echoed in another of the exhibit's engaging aspects: the way different pieces subtly evoked widely divergent historical epochs. Some suggested the era of Neanderthal man, others the Northern Renaissance of Jan van Eyck (whose seminal *Arnolfini Betrothal* was evoked by a set of exquisite mirror objects "conversing" in a corner); meanwhile, the gawky mushroom-on-a-tripod *L-stand* irresistibly channeled the B-movie pod-people of the 1950s. (The spindly legs of this piece are also dead ringers for the knobby and attenuated limbs of Alberto Giacometti's pinched, striding bronzes.) In addition, Ruhwald had prepared a time frame of sorts for the show as a whole, constructing two very large mirrors of small, brassy tiles in mosaic meant to bathe the space in golden light while referencing the idea of the "total art work" which so obsessed early modernists in Vienna like Josef Hoffman. (Think of the pattern and hue of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* and *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*.)



Candle/Light and *Interior #8*.

This effort to incorporate installation is part and parcel of Anders Ruhwald's conceptual bent, patent throughout this profound show, and demonstrated his eagerness to grow by exploring new ways of contextualizing his remarkable artifacts. However, it is ultimately his thoroughgoing physical, hands-on engagement with clay—part loving craft, part struggle, and integral to his intuitive, at times frustrating process—that sets his work apart. Nor are the results going unnoticed: The Victoria & Albert Museum just purchased one of his seven pieces on display in London's sixpm project space in late January, and in November he will unveil his first solo museum show at England's Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.

All works by Anders Ruhwald. All images courtesy of rowlandcontemporary.