

A rush of colour, flower power Glaze paintings by Carola Gänsslen

Everything is grey. The rain, Stuttgart railway station, the awful post-war architecture in the city centre, the street, the bus – grey.

But I'm out in pursuit of colour. And my travels take me to Carola Gänsslen. Here at last: her front door is painted in brilliant orange. Yet when she opens the door, she's dressed in ...white.

We're very familiar with her ceramics. Or, to put it more accurately: it's a case of once seen, never forgotten. An absolute riot of colour, a storm of brilliant reds, oranges and yellows sweeps across her wide open bowls and taut pots, a veritable hurricane of hyperactive colour, depositing its load in exotic floral patterns, runs of pigment trickling into each other, in recurring patterns and painted motifs arranged in circles. She launches a real firework display on to the wide expanses of her elegant dishes. And just like a firework display, when the next brilliant curtain of sparks falls to earth prior to the next rapidly fading rain of colour, the process repeated in rapid succession, the colours seem to merge into a multi-layered cacophony. With the exception of her extremely lively palette of colour, this is probably the most amazing thing about Gänsslen's technique which, as far as I am aware, has no parallel. And really, ceramics is the last thing it reminds me of; instead, it recalls watercolour techniques and – even more strongly – luxuriant oil paintings, at least as far as Gänsslen's floral motifs are concerned.

But it nearly all went wrong for Carola Gänsslen, or could at least have turned out differently. Gänsslen's former teacher, Fritz Göllner, seemed to have a real knack in helping raw talent to develop: Stefanie Hering and Joachim Lambrecht both started their ceramics career under his guidance too. However, on completing her apprenticeship as a potter and leaving college in Höhr-Grenzhausen, the newly qualified ceramist decided that, really, she „wanted to do something quite different“.

Yet after being offered the opportunity to exhibit her work at Cologne fair where her work is an immediate success, she decides to go to Frankfurt where she has been exhibiting at the fair. „It's ideal for me“, she says, as one of the few makers still to attend AMBIENTE and TENDENCE and even do real business there. Her work can always be seen at the special exhibition FORM. Twice a year, Carola Gänsslen fills her order book at international consumer good fairs – just like

it once used to be for ceramists who made a real name for themselves. She then goes back to her workshop in Stuttgart and busies herself with fulfilling her orders. „There is no other way I could possibly manage“, this mother of three children observes, who otherwise seems to be less outgoing. Despite her presence at major competitions during the 1980s (Westerwald 1985, Richard Bampi 1987, Frechen ceramics prize 1989), she nowadays has less time for gaining formal accolades, as artistic production and marketing of her work are of prime importance. Looking out on to a small, tranquil garden, her basement workshop at the rear of the house is far removed from the public domain. This is where she withdraws to, whenever time allows, and this is where she works. End of story.

Her quest for something „different“ leads Gänsslen to discover colours: „Colours are my world“, she says. And so she begins to paint a colourful world. She first used more dark tones. With her temperamental style reminding one of gestic abstraction and her occasional representational references, her initial ceramic work is more dramatic, with greater contrasts between light and dark than today. Areas of black pigment lavishly applied with a broad, splashing brush contrast with matt pastel tones, with fine, dark lines accentuating the form here and there.

Then came a period of wild, overflowing floral decoration. Gänsslen's palette became brighter and more cheerful, remaining principally in a single zone of brightness: egg- yolk yellow and tangerine orange, hibiscus red and dusky pink, a rich cream and in between mignonette green and forget-me-not-blue – these colours stand in her workshop, mixed in small ceramic containers, ready for painting, smiling cheerfully at one with their colourful eyes.

At this stage, Gänsslen perfects the method of painting or firing colours one on top of the other. First, the stoneware shards are fired with a matt silk, warm white basic glaze. The forms – a manageable number of prototypes Gänsslen has designed and created herself – are tense, with large, peaceful areas optimally displayed behind the painting. Generous areas of colour are applied on top. This can be very precise in execution, or the result of a broad, spontaneous brushstroke. The colours Gänsslen uses can be loud; but often they are cloudy, pastel substrates:

bluish, light green or yellowish, with indistinct boundaries and conclusions. On the smaller bowls she mainly uses striped ornamentation, its application not so lavish as on the larger pieces. The vessels prepared in this way are fired, and then painted once more. At this point, the ceramist's years of experience with her paint media comes into play. The pigment needs to be mixed in the right proportions. Its thickness and wateriness have to be just right if it is to stand in relief, paste-like, or run and mingle, causing streaks, creating a shiny oily surface and brilliant spots as well as a watercolour-like merging of colours. The white pigment she used has a thin quality about it, as if it has run, and hence always achieves the effect of transparent material. Gänsslen is a masterly exponent of wet-in-wet painting in many different nuances. She can just as easily make a clearly recognisable flower appear to lift off from the surface, as create a torrent of action and event in a mixture of action painting and a psychedelic blaze of colour; she can create an even 'winding effect' as found on old wallpapers, just as easily as a transparent delicacy of forms.

She also uses the sponging technique, very accurately wiping pigment from fired layers, thus creating a kind of peephole into the coloured areas beneath. For example, a cut-out of this type on a blue, marbled balloon vase reveals something reminiscent of a brilliantly coloured supernova against a pitch-black night sky: a porthole on to the universe. – Or: suddenly, abruptly, she ends an orgiastic wallowing in colour with a series of concentric circles radiating toward the centre of the bowl. In contrast to glaze firing (1250°C), the subsequent decoration, including the onglaze gold, is fired at 750°C. Often the vessels are fired more than three or four times.

As long as it takes to get the 'picture' right. It is an extremely time-consuming process, there is no doubt about it. And where objects such as her teapots are concerned, a great deal of effort is invested in formal aspects too. Unlike the other generous, quietly elegant forms whose small feet and

expansive features require a clean throwing technique, her teapots possess a large number of three-dimensional details. They are elaborate eccentricities covered in a multitude of extravagance. They possess delicate, jutting spouts and claw-like, gilded feet; pagoda lids rest on biscuit-like cushions with ornate knobs (pistachios? peppers?); the fire-red handles, curled monogram-like, are mounted on to the body of the pot as though attached by a cord.

Are these whimsical creations ever actually used? Carola Gänsslen laughs – probably not, she assumes. And even so she refuses to see her work as an end in itself, as art. Take for instance her dishes, her main theme. There is absolutely no way they should end up as wall-plates, "on that I'm very strict", she says. "That is a vessel".

She does not make sketches: "movement comes from the hand", she maintains. "What happens with the colour is determined by reference to the form". Recently she carried out a number of experiments with geometric patterns, stripes, circles, diamonds. The outside of her work is usually painted in an orange minium monochrome. To achieve this effect, the large dishes measuring almost 50 cm in diameter are often worked with a tool while still leathery, thus creating metal-like, sharp-edges grooves. The rims of the vessels frequently bear an unobtrusive golden knob, scarcely more than a fine trace of light. But Gänsslen's ceramics are their most beautiful when our glance is drawn inside them as though into a jungle. Where new, wild elements mix with action painting and 1970s flower power, where we lose ourselves in the depth of overwhelming, sensual painting fests, where various levels mingle and everything seems irretrievably entangled, as if in a rush of intoxication. "My photographer asks me what drugs I'm on", she laughs. The coloured eyes wink at me: ceramics, of course. In large doses!

After the deadline for this article, Carola Gänsslen was awarded 2nd Prize by the State of Hessen at 'Tendence', the autumn fair in Frankfurt.

We offer her our sincere congratulations!