

Françoise Dufayard

A Journey in Clay

Article by Victoria Eden



Arch. 1998. 65 cm x 37 cm.

FRANÇOISE DUFAYARD IS A DEDICATED CERAMIST AND A passionate traveller. Her life as a potter is a journey that is nourished by extensive journeys where the purpose of the travelling is not necessarily to arrive. Her pots are a synthesis of all she experiences. They are both an expression of herself and, as ceramics is the only livelihood for herself and her daughters, they are her work in the most profound sense of the word. Her occupation as a designer-maker would have won the approval of William Morris and the 19th century Arts & Crafts movement, for now, as in Morris's time, it is a life that demands creativity and skill but would soon stall without discipline and labour. The concept may be romantic but the practicalities are exacting.

Dufayard first modelled clay as a child and later, as a teenager, she took some pottery classes. These experiences were sufficiently meaningful for her to look for work in a pottery when, aged 22, she returned from travelling in Japan. At this time she had the good fortune to find employment with Gustave and Sylvette Tiffoche, fountain makers in Guérande, Brittany, where in addition to large, architectural stoneware pieces indented with pattern and texture, they also produced a range of tableware. It was here, over a period of four years, that Dufayard learnt to put energy and strength into a thrown pot. Hers was a rigorous training where she was urged on with cries of 'allez, allez pas de mollesse!' (go, go no flabbiness!) A few months employment with Suzie Atkins in Cantal



Landscape Dish. 2000. Slipware. 65 x 65cm.

followed: here she discovered slip, visited the Marche de Potiers de Clouslat and was impressed by the slipware of Jerome Plat, Patrick Galtier and Gilles Duru. In 1988 she returned to Rennes in Brittany, rented a studio and equipped it in order to produce traditional honey-glazed slipware. Almost immediately Dufayard discovered the strong black slip that is typical of her contemporary work. This, in turn, led to a range of greys and an appreciation of how to use these colours effectively under a ready-prepared Spanish transparent glaze that gave few crazing or firing problems. This glaze, which she still uses today, was a fortunate discovery, for it is one that has proved itself endlessly responsive and reliable. Suitable for functional and non-functional work alike, it amplifies the subtleties of her slip decoration.

Initially, Dufayard produced a simple range of domestic ware that could be used for the oven or table. The square dishes, which have established her reputation, just grew and grew until her largest pieces developed to a length of 88 cm. These became possible with the purchase of a sizeable gas kiln (1.5 cubic metres) in

1994. The dishes are prepared on a slab roller and then shaped in moulds, but the painting on the surfaces is never 'designed' in the formal sense of the word and is worked directly on to the clay. Although Dufayard does not see herself as a painter, the application of the colour on to the slabs is undoubtedly painterly and is born of her interaction with the slip. She believes that marks must be made with 'energy and soul' and aims for a free brushstroke that can never be reworked. It comes as no surprise to learn that Dufayard values the dynamism of modern calligraphy, particularly that of Catherine Denis. Clearly, her mind is a vast archive of information, both aesthetic and empiric, concerning the materials she uses. She appreciates exactly the colours and textures they can create and the power of the marks that can be achieved. This vital knowledge, analysed and synthesised by her imagination, is expressed directly on the clay surfaces. The immediacy of her approach floods each piece with energy and vital expression and so communicates the nature of her journey.

Travelling is in Dufayard's blood. All her family

seem to travel and her recent journeys to Uzbekistan and Tibet were made with relatives, of whom several were in their 70's and 80's. Her early travelling was in Greece and Europe, but it was a friend living in Japan, (plus the influence of Leach and Hamada) that provided the impetus to take her to Kyoto, Hamazaka and the potters' villages of Bizen. This journey ultimately led her to India, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, China and Hong Kong and left her with a lifelong love of Far Eastern art. The work of Pierre Soulages is also important to her, as she sees in it a link between Eastern art and modern painting, with echoes of the qualities she values in calligraphy. It had no influence on her own use of black, in fact, she only looked at Soulages' paintings when a friend perceived a link and drew her attention to it. For her, Soulages' work is to some extent a reinterpretation of calligraphy and is interesting for the way it 'brings light from black'.

As a young potter she experienced two difficult years before she found outlets willing to sell her pots in Brittany. The situation gradually improved to the point where Dufayard had established enduring contact with shops and galleries and had begun to sell at potters' markets. By the late 1990s the climate once again became uncertain due to the economic situation in France and the general decline in the market for handmade ceramics. At Milsbeek, in the Netherlands, she met the English potter Richard Godfrey who introduced her to markets in England. Dufayard exhibited in Plymouth in 1997 and this established an English connection that continues to be an unabated success. Since then her work has been shown regularly at Art in Action, Rufford, Hatfield, Clayart, Ceramic Art London and Potfest in The Park where she won the coveted Sotheby Prize in 2006.

English buyers respond enthusiastically to the scale of her work, its simple lines and layered autumnal colour. The black slip, poured or sprayed, remains a strong feature of the forms; sometimes it is a background colour, hovering



Right: Vase. 2005. Slipware. 66 x 27cm.



Landscape Dish. 2005. Slipware. 65 x 65 cm.

shadow-like behind warm ochres or grey-blues and at other times it becomes more prominent and bold. Paper or wax resist methods are frequently used and areas of softer colour are textured with newspaper. The design is typically brought into focus with energetically scored lines that are sometimes filled with white or blue. The large dishes are dramatic; objects that create a focal point in space.

Even though Dufayard may choose to deny it, the evident exploration of colour and balance, the tension of the line and the communicative marks imply a move towards painting. They cannot be seen as mere surface decoration, for these pieces have an undeniable expressive power and a fulfilling unity of form, colour and line. The final words must come from Dufayard herself, "When travelling alone, everyday is new and alongside the stimulation there is a necessary sense of risk, plus a need for the senses to be alert and responsive. For me there is a connection between

travelling and my creative work. When I paint a large scale dish I become totally connected with the piece and work in an instinctive creative way with the work coming through me, but not from me. There is no possibility of changing or re-working a surface once it has been created. As with calligraphy, the brushstroke and the cut of the line in the fresh slip will not accept any return. I must breathe life into each stroke and then move on." And so Dufayard travels in to the future, to the next destination of a journey without end.

Victoria Eden teaches and writes about contemporary ceramics. She is currently completing a large ceramic installation piece based on the cockle picking tragedy in Morecambe Bay (in north west England) close to where she was brought up and now lives. Francoise Dufayard lives and works in Rennes, Brittany, France. She was a demonstrator at the Aberystwyth International Ceramics Festival, 2007, Wales, UK, and will exhibit at Ceramic Art London February 29-March 2, 2008 at the Royal College of Art, London, UK.