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Hic gelidi fontes, hic mollia prata,
Lycori, hic nemus; hic ipso tecum
consumere aevo.

Soft meads, cool streams you would
find here, and woodlands, dear Lycoris
– A paradise where we could have
grown old together.”

Virgil, *Eclogues*, Song X.
Transl. C. Day Lewis

*Ludunt, tristantur, delectat fistula cantu,
Pectora sed lædit mollia blandus amor.*

Sac. Cas. Maj.

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The Figurine Dialogue

Throughout 2009 I have been working on a project entitled *The Figurine – Narrative, Tradition and Renewal*. This has involved research visits to La Manufacture de Sèvres in Paris, Porzellan Manufaktur Nymphenburg in Munich and the Royal Tichelaar Makkum in the Netherlands.

The figurine is a flower of the Rococo that rapidly became stereotyped. With the exhibition *The body of figurine. De-figuration* at the Crystal Contemporary Art gallery in Stockholm I seek to illustrate the renewed topicality of the figurine today as seen in the work of Ruth Claxton and Håkan Lindgren.

Päivi Ernkvist, Stockholm 2010

Porcelain is Fragile

The figurine and history. In this essay I shall seek to sketch a mental map of the figurine, its diversity and limits as it appears to my limited vision. Alighting at specific (highly subjective) points and outlining a succession of brief propositions I shall attempt to delineate a phenomenon that, with its vast range of contexts, defies more precise definition.

The present. Seen as a symbol of luxury, the figurine today has lost some of its former prestige. This may result from the fact that the figurine is conscious of its own tradition where, in its more exclusive contexts, it appeals to wealthy connoisseurs with a sense of history. With the passing of the years, the cultivated connoisseur has tended to depart from the stage.

At the major international art auctions, porcelain no longer fills the role that it had during the 1970s and long into the 1990s when famous collections belonging to Rothschild, Lehman, Meinertzhagen, Nyffeler, Kramarsky and Netle went under the hammer. The once unique position of porcelain among collectors has been replaced by a more sober attitude and fine porcelain now has to share auctions with furniture and other applied arts.

But the historically prestigious objects, like Meissen china, are still sought after. In 2005 Christie's auctioned a full-size pair of herons modelled by J.J. Kaendler in 1730 for Augustus the Strong. The price was 5.6 million euros. Another figurine by Kaendler, *The Indiscreet Harlequin*, from the Commedia dell'Arte collection was sold for 650,000 euros in 2007. But figurines from other manufacturers like Fürstenberg, Höchst, Nymphenburg and Frankenthal generally fetch less

than 10,000 euros. Exceptions are the rare Bustelli figurines from Nymphenburg.

The Frankenthal group of figures known as *The Flute Lesson* by François Boucher was sold recently for 74,000 GBP but this is also one of the finest such groups in the history of porcelain.

A brief look at the past. The term ›figurine‹ comes originally from Italian. ›Figura‹ means a picture, form or figure. ›Figurino‹ is a diminutive term meaning a small form or figure. Little images of people and animals have, of course, been made of different materials by people all over the world and at all times. In Europe we associated the figurine with the development of porcelain which took place at the Meissen works just outside Dresden. During the 1730s the craftsmen at Meissen discovered the secrets of imported Chinese porcelain and started to manufacture their own porcelain wares. This was at the height of the Rococo era and European porcelain rapidly assimilated and incorporated refinements and models from trading contacts with China and Japan. But instead of dragons and Oriental patterns the modellers looked to their own European heritage for inspiration and produced figurines featuring scenes from Greek and Roman mythology, for example. The porcelain groups were decorated with musicians, amorous couples, shepherds, fauns and animals from a golden age in which time could not destroy the idyll. Everyday scenes were also popular, gardeners at work, the grape harvest, domestic or exotic animals. The delicacy and elegance of the figurines became the very definition of what we understand by Rococo and the intimate porcelain figures that were manufactured in the Meissen workshops rapidly became models for porcelain factories throughout Europe. The timeless world of mythology, where humans and gods live harmoniously side

by side, reappeared; a cosmos in which everything has its given place, from the hidden music of the starry sky to the simple tasks of the shepherd as dictated by the changing seasons. In their desire for the impossible the figurines are also inspired by the multifarious motifs that one finds in paintings at this time. Poetry and other literary forms also contribute to the cultural climate of the day. The hand-painted sculptures speak to us like an intimate theatre that is only realized as a work of art, as fine music suited to the demands of the moment. For the educated elite of the day, the figurines are seen as tactile and delightful falsity that arouses a sense of wonder and that fulfils its given role in cultured discussion. The figurine corresponds physically to the politeness phrases of social intercourse, the bows and the flattering comments while, at the same time, filling the demand for culture and finesse that the world of elegance requires. The figurine is the creative and innovative expression of an epoch's art that was already refined and that was facing an abrupt conclusion.

But times change and the figurine was obliged to live on as elevated, imitative art, never again to reach the level of inspiration and freedom of expression that it achieved prior to the French Revolution. The 18th century was the last epoch in which gods were depicted as sensual and tempting figures floating on clouds, as in Tiepolo's paintings. Other forces and much soberer notions now took charge.

Market forces provided figurines for everyone; hand-painted or brilliant white porcelain for the rich connoisseur and mass-produced artefacts for those of smaller means.

Who has not, as a child, fallen in love with a china dog on the mantelpiece?



Some Thoughts

The figurine is an amalgam of poetry and sculpture, of time frozen in porcelain. The figurine is also an early boundary-crossing phenomenon that can absorb contributions from craftsman, sculptor, poet and painter before ending up on the production line. It is the product of many hands and the result of numerous processes and is frequently looked down on just like other crafts. The levels of quality are stupendously varied.

White and innocent as Eros.

The figurine has many points in common with poetry:

*Porzellan, viel Porzellan hat man
zerschlagen hier,
Püppchen, Vasen und Geschirr
aus weissem Meissner Gold.*

*Sieh den Stieglitz, der an Büscheln
blauer Trauben pickt
Auf dem Früchtekörbchen,
kannst ihn beinah zwitschern hörn.*

*...eine Welt in kleinen.
Falkner sind da, Winzer,
Nymphen mit dem Muschelhorn
Oder Putten, froschgesichtig,
Schwan-und Seepferd-Reiter.
Schäfergruppen, schöne
Gärtnerinnen, Fabeltiere...
Porzellan – zerbrechlichstes.*

»Porcelain, quantities of porcelain
have been broken here,
Little porcelain figures, vases and
tableware of white Meissen gold.«

»Regard the goldfinch feeding on
blue grapes from the cluster in the
fruit basket, one can almost hear its
twittering.«

»...a whole world in miniature.
On the scene are falconers, wine
growers, nymphs blowing into
conches, chubby cherubs with faces
like frogs, riders of swans and
seahorses, groups of shepherds,
beautiful maidens working in the
garden, fabulous animals – all in
the most fragile porcelain.«

(Durs Grünbein: *Porzellan*
Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt)

The figurine steals up to us like a
cultivated and ingratiating pick-
pocket at a holiday resort. We try
to protect ourselves and reject every
attempt to gain our attention; or we
succumb to its deceitful charm, losing
our integrity to a bewitching reality.
Waking up is costly.

The figurine is the ethos of social
deceit.

A silent poem without a poet. We
are bewitched in silence, marvelling.





The figurine is a magical chamber for the adult child's gaze, a bucolic miniature world that caresses both hand and eye.

In the paradisiacal landscape the erotic experience is transient and easy; lacking complications.

The figurine freezes the idealized moment in porcelain.

The figurine represents utopia on the living-room mantelpiece.

The figurine approaches fable but is without sarcasm.

No sense of shame in an idyllic world; the fulfilment of love is self-evident. All nature is filled with the piping of the shepherd.

Birds are singing and bees buzzing.

Love's cloven hoof. In an idyllic world there are also moments of unease. The satyr, at rest, plays calmly on his flute in the midday heat. Waiting.

The figurine shares Dutch painting's passion for domesticity but in cuter colours.

The figurine is a species of candy, given as a reward or serving to impart the necessity of social roles, not to say beauty.

The vulnerability of the idyllicized world; the fragility of porcelain is that of poetry.

It is seldom far from the dinner table and its conversation.

Mankind is at the centre – not the world's meaning.

Social role-playing continues even when the figurine portrays creatures such as cockerels, deer, monkeys, birds, tortoises and others.

All art with claims to significance forces us to reflect. In this context the figurine is extremely modest, groping its way.

The figurine instructs us in the history of how an exclusive artefact of Oriental origin, mythology, design and technique is imported and, in time, transformed into a genuinely European product. The European heritage together with market forces brutally eradicates the distant origins of the figurine.

The figurine is a spiral shell raised from the seabed in which one can hear ancient voices: Virgil, Ovid, Callimachus, Theocritus.

The current interest in figurines is certainly based on an awareness of a state of crisis. We need a firm place to stand while all else is transient. With the figurine we are contemporary with the 18th century, with Rome in Antiquity, with Virgil and Arcadia.

The origins of European porcelain in Meissen outside Dresden, brilliantly white and delicate.



Pompeii is glass, Dresden is porcelain.

Time caught on the instant. Here the figurine surpasses sculpture. The agility of clay contrasted with the majesty of stone.

The figurine relies on its ability to quote, having little autonomy itself. It is sculpture, painting, theatre, literature but always a little brother. But it expresses itself in a luxury material. In lustrous porcelain.

Quotations are not theft in Mandelstam's view, but are cicadas that sing; endless presence that brings the song forwards in time.

The slow and meticulous manufacturing processes at Nymphenburg. The craft skills and the personal touch at every stage from clay to finished product. Time is not money here except in terms of the individual concentration and the absolute precision of a brushstroke.

The figurine is almost always a narrative but, today, it has not the courage to reflect our own times and utopias.

The possibilities inherent in this flexible, white material ought really to be infinite.

The muffled, unconscious background note is the fact that it is perishable.

The figurine's *mis-en-scène* is as light as time, as the moment.

Love's brief moments conquer time. The unavailability of melancholy.

What does the figurine know of Virgil? Probably not a lot; yet he is there.

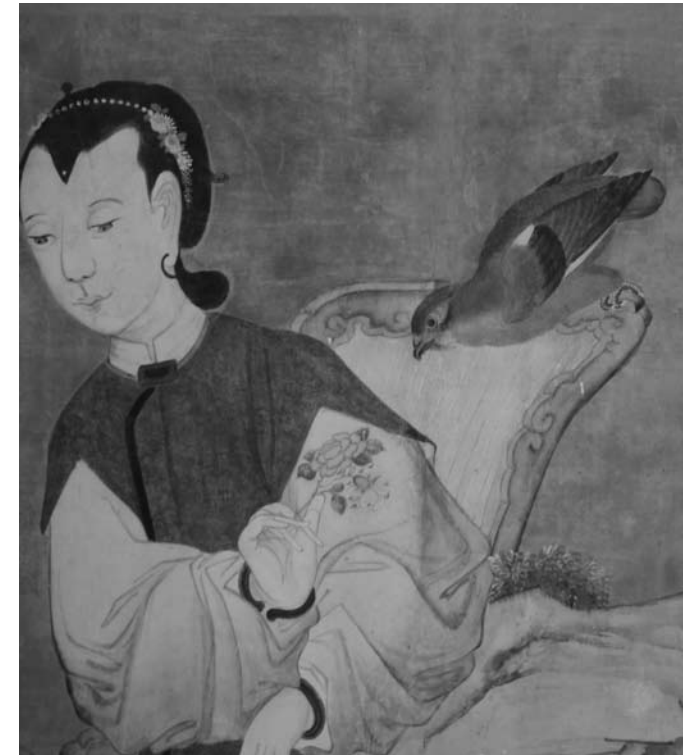
The figurine has nothing of the distance of pathos, of sculpture's rigour. On the contrary, it is intimate, often frivolous and it seduces us by its proximity.

The figurine is hedonistic, honouring nature. False nature and true theatre.

Falsehoods and flattery have their given roles in the theatre of life.

For both fable and figurine, time is a minuet.

People know the world of reality all too well. Hence this beauty, this exquisite wishful thinking in white porcelain.





A Visit to Ruth Claxton's *Lands End*

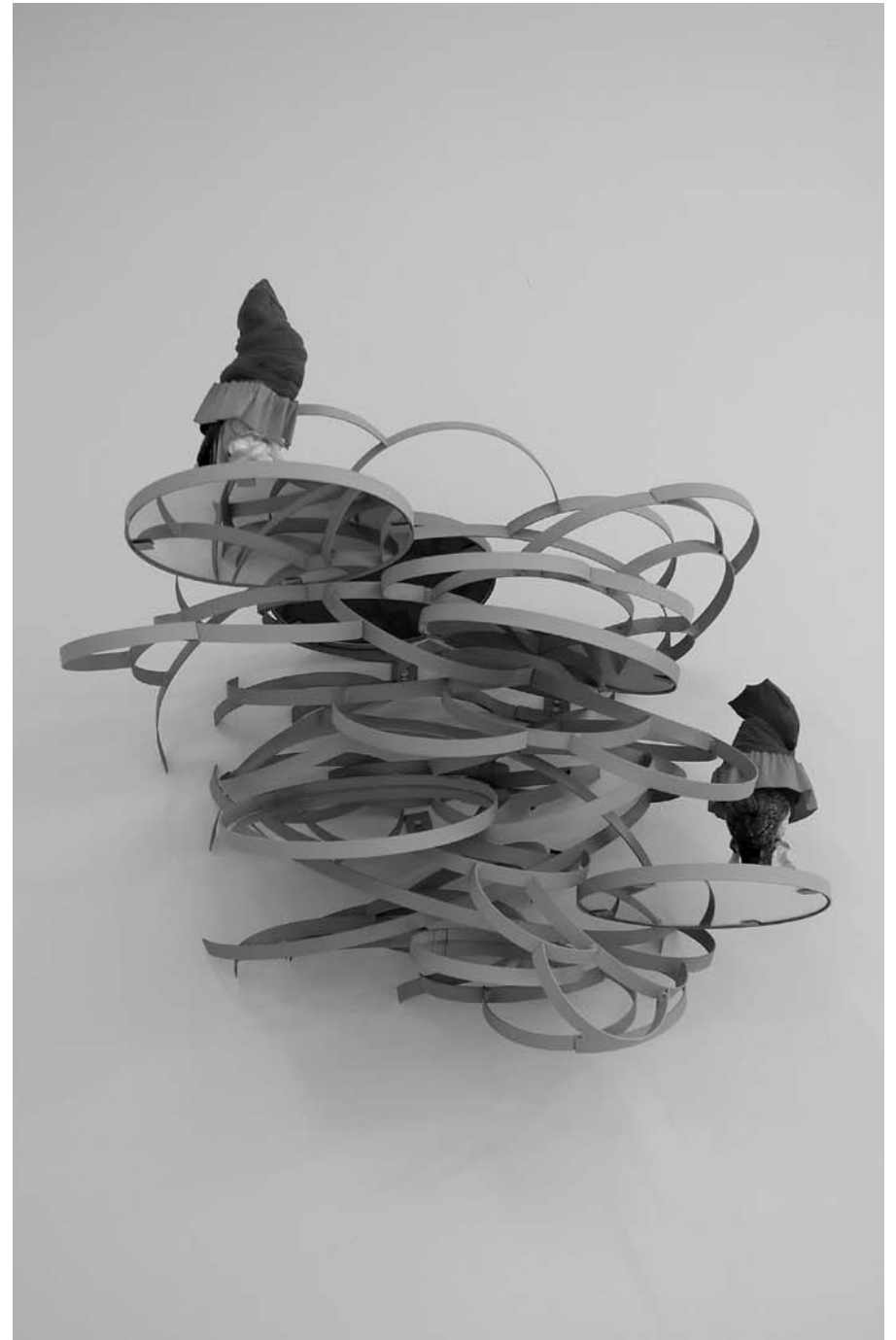
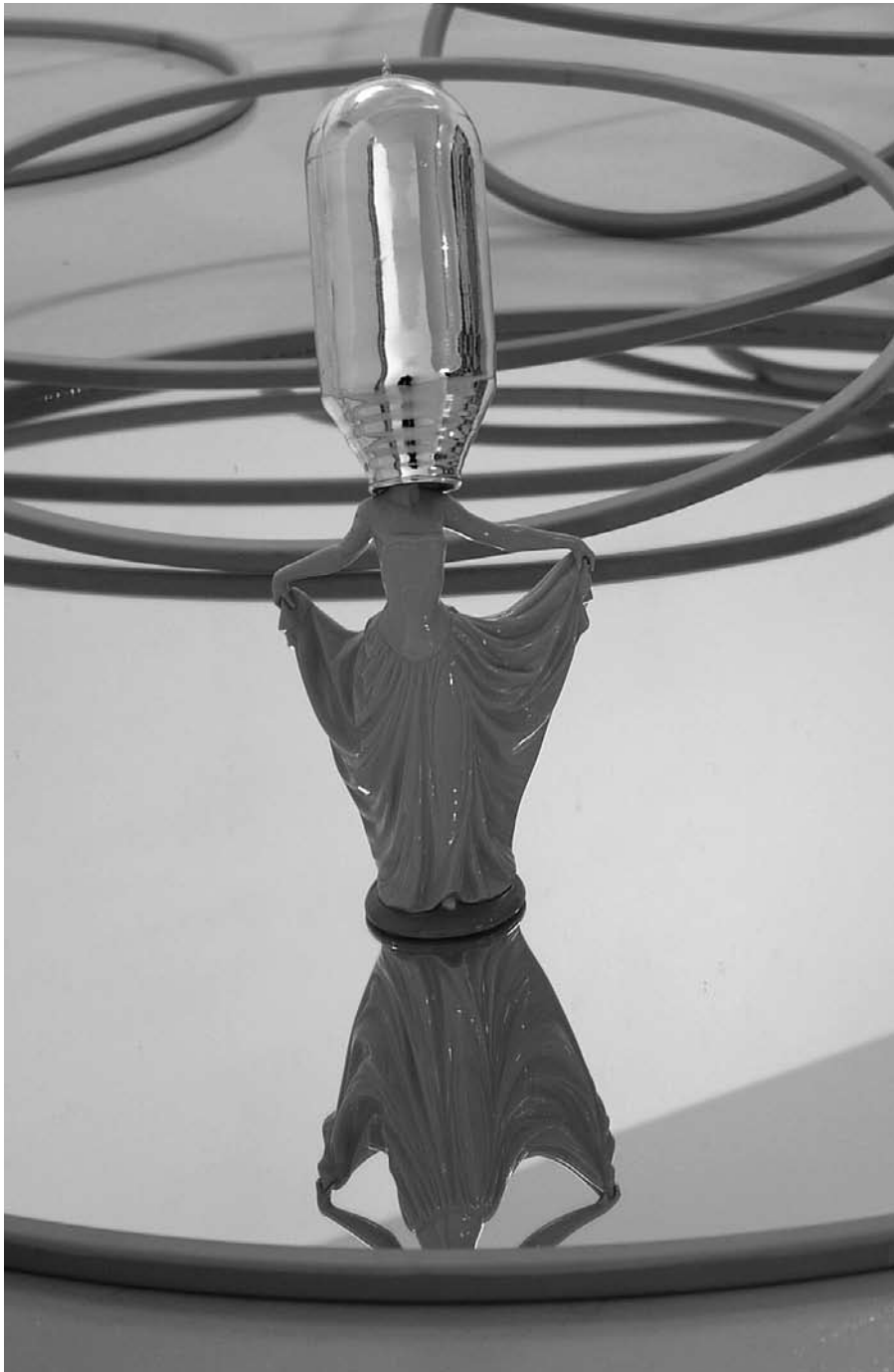
Entering the gallery and finding oneself immersed in a three-dimensional narrative made up of swirling hoops and circles of narrow metal ribbons, diverse porcelain figures from varied scenarios and mirrors that reflect the light and the dimensions of the room, all arranged at different levels, comes as something of a shock. At the centre of a construction or somewhere on the periphery there is a figurine that immediately commands one's attention. This may be a princess, an amorous couple or a pretty bird turned into a ready-made sculpture, re-used and deformed so that the new narrative can begin. Ruth Claxton provides her figurines with external attributes that give them a quality of absurdity which is often humorous. The traditional meanings, the clichés, are deconstructed. Circular mirrors and their reflections open up to an unspecified, universal significance. The last word is never uttered. The extreme physicality of the abstraction, the thought forms, chains and structures are literally cast in the room. The mirrors are the idea, the word, the echo of an image. The little figurines in the network of forms are added as instruments of human emotions, attentive little birds in the woods that embrace the weight of the entire constructed landscape and the billowing shapes in the brief cadences of their species.

Ruth Claxton's figurines are masked as though for a Venetian carnival but in their disguise they are, precisely, figurines that radically emphasize the limits of the genre. Beneath their lovely veils they reveal themselves in all their banality and exquisitely bad taste; explosions that help to realize the total sovereignty of the work of art. These are the alleys that meet the ocean's horizon.

Asked about the title of the exhibition, *Lands End*, Ruth Claxton comments:

»I like the idea that it can be a statement of fact: if you take the apostrophe away, it becomes ›Lands End‹, a kind of border, where one thing finishes and something else starts – like an abstract extremity, rather than a geographical place.«

Ruth Claxton was born in 1971 and is based in Birmingham in the UK. The touring solo exhibition *Lands End* (2008–2009) opened at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, before travelling to the Oriel Gallery in Wales, Spike Island in Bristol, The Grundy Gallery, Blackpool and Faye Fleming & Partner in Geneva. www.ruthclaxton.com



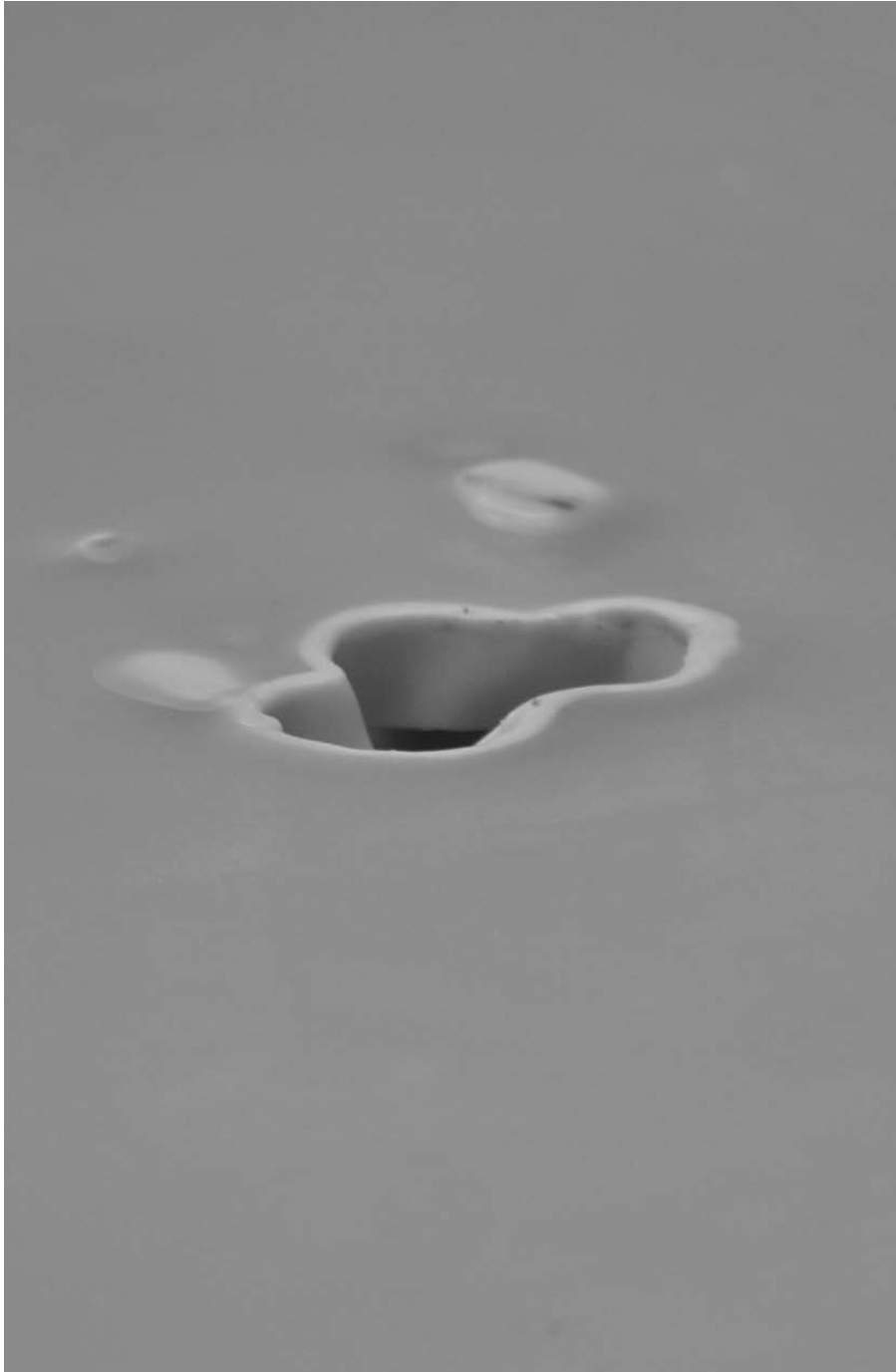
Conversation with Håkan Lindgren

- PE The figurine has a long history, stretching back over many centuries on several continents. And so there is both diversity and perfection in its formal expression. In your work your point of departure is not the exterior, the visually refined elegance but, rather, the interior of the figurine, the void, the cavities in between. In what way and to what extent does this inspire you in your work?
- HL How things are created is interesting; the actual working process. I have worked with hollow objects in general, like bronze and aluminium sculptures. I was struck by the insight that, at the same moment that the surface is created, the cavity is also created as a side effect of the process. The graspable aspect and the hollow cavity appear at the same time.
- PE The void is a weighty concept in both Chinese and Indian philosophy. How do you see the time axis, that is the development of forms and their metamorphoses?
- HL My point of departure is in Western philosophy. My role in the context is that of the artist and I have used and interpreted the various philosophical concepts very freely. My approach as an artist is that I allow myself a certain freedom, making a sort of collage out of the theoretical points of departure. The argument can sometimes be regarded as not thought through or illogical. I don't see a problem here because my task is primarily to make interesting objects and I am not afraid to provoke people. For a long time I have been

influenced by alchemy and the processes that it employed. The illogical manner in which the alchemist reported his work plays a central role as metamorphosis.

- PE European manufacture of figurines found its inspiration in China and the Orient. Does your approach involve returning to the origin, a sort of new beginning brought about by having, so to speak, thought things through from the beginning?
- HL In a sense the situation today is reversed. Many of the European manufactures are copied and produced in China. The figures and sculptures that I have worked with are copies of »genuine« originals and in this sense there is a return to the origins.
- PE You have recently graduated from the Department of Ceramics and Glass at Konstfack in Stockholm. What importance do you attach to material qualities and the meeting of hand and material?
- HL My starting point is the making process itself, how one works with a material. In his book *Den hemliga källan* [The Secret Source] Peter Cornell gives an account of how alchemy was an important point of departure for some of the surrealists. I can see obvious parallels in my own approach and, because of this, I place the emphasis here. I am interested in the material and the alchemy of the process.

**Håkan Lindgren was born in 1983 and is based in Stockholm. Konstfack (University College of Arts, Crafts and Design), Ceramics and Glas, M.A. Program 2004–2009
Royal College of Art, London 2010
www.hlindgren.se**



In conclusion. We started our visit with Virgil and we end with him too. That which is far distant approaches closely.

Sed nos immensum spatiis
confecimus aequor, et iam tempus
equom fumantia solvere colla.

But we have covered a deal of
ground in our course, and now
it's time to slip off harness from
the necks of our reeking horses.

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book II
Transl. C. Day Lewis



