

HOSTLER  
BURROWS

# ceramics

M O N T H L Y

Topic: Ceramic Sculpture

From the February 2019 issue

## Compositions in Clay: Eva Zethraeus

[Anthony Merino](#) • January 8, 2019 • [Add Comment](#)



Platinum Cobalt Trumpet Cluster, 15¼ in. (39 cm) in width, porcelain, glaze, platinum, 2018.

*Creativity is more than just being different. Anybody can plan weird; that's easy. What's hard is to be as simple as Bach. Making the simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.*

— *Charles Mingus Jr., US jazz musician, band-leader, and composer*

Mingus' quote resonates with Swedish artist Eva Zethraeus' work for two reasons. First, her work is deceptively simple. Second, there is an innate musicality to her forms. The most essential element of music is rhythm—which in its most basic definition is repeated sound. The rhythm used by a music piece is the beat. This is the graph paper on which the sound composition is constructed. Melody and harmony can be considered the X and Y axis on this graph. Harmony is a pleasing relationship between notes played simultaneously. Harmony exist in every beat. Melody refers to the relationship between notes separated by the succession of time. These themes take physical manifestation in Zethraeus' work, recently exhibited in "Order in Chaos: The Duality of Nature," at Hostler Burrows Gallery ([www.hostlerburrows.com](http://www.hostlerburrows.com)), in New York, New York.

### **Harmony and Melody**

Zethraeus repeats a shape—spout, bottle, tapered cylinder, or plug. Each work starts off with shapes, adhered in a symmetrical pattern to a base sphere form. These shapes vary in complexity from simple, finger-like forms as seen in *Platinum Tipped Blue Bulbus* to complex almost fractal elements used to make *White Tipped Cobalt Nest*. There is an undoubtably visual intoxication to any design repeated hundreds of times; however, getting lost in the sheer repetition obscures what makes Zethraeus' forms so interesting. It is the variations, not the exactness, of the component parts that generate interest. If the exactness of rhythm was the only thing that made music appealing, top-40 radio stations would only play metronome recordings.



1 Small Green Polyphyllia, 9¾ in. (25 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, platinum, 2018.



2 Installation view of "Order in Chaos: The Duality of Nature" at Hostler Burrows in New York, New York, May 4–June 15, 2018.

The next connection between music and visual art comes from Zethraeus' obsession with proportion. In her exhibition statement, she asserts, "My sculptures are the result of an ongoing research of form. . . . Recent focus has been on the Golden Section and my fascination with the Fibonacci Series reoccurring in nature. Between what seems to be a chaotic universe, everything is created through a secret code."

The Golden Section (or the Golden Ratio) is proportion of 1 to Phi (an irrational number 1.6180339887498948482). The Fibonacci Series is a series of numbers where each number in the sequence is the sum of the prior two numbers (i.e. 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 —and so on). This proportion plays an important part in both musical and visual composition. The Golden Ratio occurs in everything from the facial proportions of attractive people to the foundational geometry of most paintings. Zethraeus uses it as the primary proportion for both her forms and the elements she adds to them.

### **Sculpting a Narrative**

In some works, Zethraeus uses these variations to suggest a narrative. In *Small Green Polyphyllia*, she uses long spout-like forms as the repeated element. These elements vary in length and straightness, making it feel as if

they are wiggling. From this the viewer reads the form as referring to an underwater plant—the leaves dancing with the currents. The same basic design is used in *Platinum Tipped Green Plantae*, with two variations. The added elements are much shorter and more uniform, and are like an abstraction of cactus thorns.



**3 Platinum Tipped Light Green Cluster, 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (45 cm) in width, porcelain, glaze, platinum, 2018.**

In both *Small Green Polyphyllia*, and *Platinum Tipped Green Plantae*, Zethraeus does not create a narrative as much as a visual melody. The human mind abhors the non-objective—objects that are built just as interesting geometric shapes. Cloud gazing clearly demonstrates this. No one looks in the sky to see asymmetrical bulbous forms—they look to see things that look like bunnies or turtles. So, to some extent it is difficult to create an abstract form that the viewer will not start trying to see as something else, something recognizable. These narratives operate as the melody of her forms—they give cohesion to how each form progresses from the last.

### **Fluid and Layered Surfaces**

Zethraeus adds a second melody through her handling of surfaces. She layers matte, mixed hues to build surfaces on her forms. While parts comprise the shapes she creates, the surfaces are far more fluid. If they change

throughout the work, they do so gradually. Additionally, there are subtle differences in how she builds surface. *White Tipped Yellow Plantae*, is finished with a mustard color that is more prominent on one side and slowly gives way to a blue-tinted matte white. In *Platinum Tipped Light Green Cluster*, the surface is less directional. Zethraeus doesn't define these surfaces. They could be read as moss growing, or layers of paint and rust being worn away. The vagueness of the surface creates touchstones for the viewer's imagination.



**4 Platinum Tipped Purple Seedling, 12¼ in. (31 cm) in diameter, porcelain, glaze, 2018.**



**5 Platinum Tipped Cobalt Cluster, 17 in. (43 cm) in width, porcelain, glaze, platinum, 2018.**

Imagine taking two musical compositions that share the same beat and lay one over the other. This is what Zethraeus does in her work. Her forms are composed in one way. Her surfaces are composed in another. Each composition evokes an association or an emotional response. Sometimes these reactions seem related. At other times, they seem unconnected. There is a musical term used for this layering of compositions called counterpoint, which is very closely associated with Johann Sebastian Bach's music. What Bach did with notes on a page, Zethraeus does with materials in space. Charles Mingus Jr. labeled the music Bach created with this form as awesomely simple. This phrase aptly describes Zethraeus' best work as well. *All photos courtesy of Hostler Burrows.*

**the author** *Anthony Merino, a frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly, is a ceramic artist and writer living in Adams, Massachusetts.*