

# CERAMIC REVIEW

Issue 298  
July/August 2019  
£9.90  
[ceramicreview.com](http://ceramicreview.com)



## INSIDE STORY

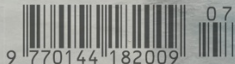
Bidding high at  
Maak auctions

## DE WAAL IN VENICE

Displaying passion in  
the Jewish Ghetto

IN THE SHADE WITH

**NICHOLAS  
RENA**





# Thinking



Finnish artist Kristina Riska aims to find the balance between painstaking detail, monumental scale and organic form in her ceramic sculptures. *Anna Varakas* visited her Helsinki studio to find out more



**K**ristina Riska is an award-winning Finnish contemporary artist and sculptor. Since the 1980s she has been concentrating on creating unique, one-off ceramic sculptures, however, in Finland, she is more widely known for her commission work for the Arabia factory. Arabia is the largest and most well-known producer of ceramics and porcelain in Finland. Founded in 1873, its tableware set *Kilta* designed by Kaj Frank in the 1940s is an icon of Finnish design. Together with her colleague and friend Kati Tuominen-Niittylä, Riska designed a popular tableware set for Arabia in 2005 called *KoKo*. It was put into serial production and today it can be found in many Finnish households and several new colourways have also been launched since.

#### HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

I met Riska in her little one room studio in Helsinki on the top floor of the Arabia factory. Her studio is found along the same hallway as nine others, which all belong to leading Finnish artists and are managed by the Arabia Art Department Society. The society was established in 1932 by ceramic artist Kurt Ekholm and today it aims to uphold the cultural heritage of the former art department. ‘In the beginning, the art department was part of the factory,’ explains Riska. ‘But it became independent in 2004.

Production at the factory finally closed down three years ago, but we were lucky as Arabia/Fiskars bought us a big new kiln. The old ones were unfortunately too heavy to be moved and they were sold elsewhere.’

The white walls of Riska’s studio are lined with shelves. Everywhere you look, you see work in progress: sculptures, pots, cups, mugs, little boxes, sketchbooks, pens, tools, brushes and big lumps of clay stacked on top of each other. In the shady corner there is a steel wash basin and in the middle of the room a massive table – the artist’s working desk. ‘It used to belong to Arabia factory and it is made of plaster. It keeps the surface moist and the clay won’t stick to it. It is extremely heavy and perfectly in balance,’ says Riska while touching the surface of the table gently.

‘There are two types of people who work here,’ she adds, ‘designers and artists. I consider myself to be part of the latter tradition. I admire the work of Russian-born ceramist Michael Schilkin, for his courage and love of art, as well as the famous Finnish artist couple Birger Kaipiainen and Rut Bryk, who I had the opportunity to know personally. Strong female artists such as Virginia Woolf, Louise Bourgeois and Georgia O’Keeffe have also influenced me and my work.’

The origins of Riska’s work can be traced back to her childhood. At the age of ten, she was in a serious accident

Images: Unto Rautio; courtesy of the artist; Hostler Burrows photos by Chikako Harada

*'I like to push myself  
towards the boundaries  
of making – I enjoy  
my battles with clay'*





and had to stay at home for a long time. 'From very early on I loved making things with my hands,' she explains. 'I spent a lot of time at home or in the hospital, so I used to draw maps and travel in my mind instead. Perhaps that is why making became so important to me. I never considered doing anything else with my life.'

Riska started her studies at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki in 1979. Her first teacher was the Finnish artist Kyllikki Salmenhaara, who gave the young art student the important advice that she was to never fall in love with her own creations. 'I like to push myself towards the boundaries of making – I enjoy my battles with clay,' Riska explains. 'But finally, if I am not satisfied, I don't hesitate to break the piece with a hammer. It helps me to get it out of my system. However, with age, I have also become more permissive. I have started to think that each piece should be given a chance. Sometimes when I take my work out of the studio, I suddenly see them in a new light.'

### PHYSICAL WORK

Riska's work philosophy is based on what she calls 'a combination of soul, skill and material'. She aspires to evoke emotions, surprise and help people to look at things from a different perspective. She does not want to please, nor take a stand if her fragile works are not considered as such. New ideas are born from various feelings and experiences as she tries to capture their physical form. 'People often see more than they are aware of,' says Riska. 'We remember all kinds of tiny details that stick in our mind. My old work stays in my head too. They remain there and keep boiling. Old works create new ones, eventually.'

Her ceramic sculptures are massive in size, yet fragile and delicate in form and detail. As her gallery Hostler Burrows in New York puts it: 'There is a powerful serenity, an energy that emanates from the undulating curves and organic forms. Her craftsmanship is profound, given not only the scale of the works, but also the vibrant detailing.'

Riska begins each project by sketching with pencil and paper or doing scale models, before coiling the large-scale versions using stoneware. Normally she uses her own, often matte glazes before firing her pieces in an electric kiln at 1250°C at the Arabia Art Department. Her recent sculptures including *Secret Companion*, *Kheops*, *Ramses I and II* from 2018, were however, fired in a gas kiln at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHiO) in Norway while staying at an artist residency there.

Problems and themes repeat themselves, but when judging her own work, she relies mostly on her intuition. Often during the process she becomes blind to her work and showing it to others or taking the final pieces out of the studio helps. 'I started working at a large scale in the beginning of my career and I have often wondered why. Perhaps so much of my work is about the tiny details that I need to find a counterbalance to it. Size as such is not so important, but I like the physicality of working with bigger pieces. It feels good,' explains Riska.

According to Riska she is highly dependent on her work as it is how she connects with the world. 'My work is my foundation – I have a basic need to build and organise,' she says. 'I like the feeling of being in control, but at the same time I find total perfection dull. I tend to avoid sheer beauty. I find it is the mistakes and constant dialogue between the beautiful and the ugly that creates the necessary edge to my work. It is the mistakes that often take a piece to the next level.'

### ANCIENT INSPIRATION

The collection of ancient Egyptian art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is one of Riska's favourite places and a continuing source of inspiration for her. 'I just can't get enough of it,' she says. 'It keeps amazing me every time I visit. The standing sarcophagus in the collection are very flesh-like and physical, as though there is something or someone inside. It was only after finishing my own recent works, that I realised the scale is very similar to my sculptures, so I named the pieces after Ramesses and Kheops,' Riska explains.

Riska's works are exhibited in galleries worldwide, most recently in London at the Saatchi Gallery, where she presented her latest pieces, which are slightly different to her older ones. 'I created two white and blue pieces with glazed surfaces, which refer to the tradition of porcelain,' she explains. 'I was fascinated by the combination or contrast of the form and the decorative surface, which is more often found in tableware. It is something completely new for me that I would like to experiment with in the future.' ■

.....  
 For more details about Kristina Riska and her work, visit [arabiaartdepartmentsociety.com](http://arabiaartdepartmentsociety.com)



#### RISKA'S TIMELINE

- **1984:** MA Degree in Arts at the Helsinki University of Art and Design, Finland
- **1985:** trainee at Studio Bente Hansen, Copenhagen, Denmark
- **1995:** awarded the *Medaglia D'Oro* in Faenza, Italy
- **2000:** *Blue*, Scandinavian exhibition, Ceramic Museum Grimeshus, Denmark
- **2002:** received the silver medal at the *International Ceramic Contest* in Mino, Japan
- **2003:** *Nordic Cool*, Washington
- **2006:** private exhibition, Design Museum, Helsinki, Finland
- **2007:** received the *Finnish Cultural Foundation Award*
- **2008:** received the *Honorary Award* at the *International Ceramic Contest* in Mino, Japan
- **2010:** solo show at Gallery Inger Molin, Stockholm, Sweden
- **2016:** exhibited at *Design Miami*; *Salon of Art + Design*, New York; *Expo Chicago*; *Design Miami/Basel*, Switzerland, all with Hostler Burrows
- **2019:** exhibited at *Collect with Hostler Burrows*; *Saatchi Gallery*, London; *FOG Design + Art* with Hostler Burrows, San Francisco