

## **Ester Beck – Movement in Matter**

**By Hagai Segev**

It is the nature of art to show us familiar reality in a new way. Traditional art, with its conventional patterns and paradigms, is a particularly good place to begin reappraising and changing what we perceive as reality. The artist is challenged to create a new, innovative esthetic that stimulates further elaboration and thus becomes itself part of the tradition.

It is not easy to innovate in an era that seems to have seen, done and heard all. This is particularly true in the field of ceramics, where vessels and statuary have been created throughout the ages, and even the ceramic “object” has become a familiar genre since the 1950’s. And yet, ceramic art – sometimes in conjunction with new technologies – does not cease to surprise, delight and stimulate us with its new forms and expressions.

### **Movement and Gesture**

This is the path that Ester Beck has chosen -- innovative creation within a familiar framework. In this way, her art addresses the human needs for both conservation and renewal. Her sweeping works of recent years are inspired by the physical gestures associated with the work of the potter. But while its starting-point is traditional craft, Beck’s work crosses into the realm of sculpture. Neither an act of subversion nor an attempt to undermine foundations, Beck’s art pushes out against old, familiar boundaries in its search for new possibilities that have not been tried before.

Beck is herself a collector of ceramics, and it is inspiring to see how she turns to the work of her colleagues for esthetic enrichment. Beck lovingly investigates her colleagues’ creations, examines them closely to try and discover the logic and emotion they contain. Through meticulous study she internalizes, body and soul, the creative impulses of those who have worked in the field before her, and these intuitions are the springboard from which she leaps for ever more daring forms.

Ester Beck's new objects are devoid of any superfluous narrative. They stand firm on the ground and at the same time overflow it. Their form changes according to their location, placement, and the active imagination of the beholder. They can resemble discarded snake skins, that have peeled off the animal and remain lying on the ground; or they resemble an ancient lava flow that burst deep from underground and hardened on the surface, a testimony to the explosive power of nature,.

The flowing movement captured by hardened matter is astonishing. In these works Beck has abandoned the potter’s wheel, and instead beats and stretches the clay and creates the object from inside, sometimes with the help of hammer blows and sponges and various tools, as recorded in the short documentary film recently shown during the Ceramic Biennale at the Museum Eretz Israel. The result is an abundance of expressive layers and shadows. Beck’s freedom of choice and her liberty in the use of various means to achieve the object's form are fascinating and make the viewer of the film realize how far the inherent possibilities of matter go beyond what is achieved by conventional methods of working.

## **The Hand of the Artist**

The ceramic artist faces many challenges, first and foremost the limitation of the physical properties of clay. Molding the wet clay, finding a technical way to express human imagination through it, and firing the made object in the kiln, are only some of the challenges. The challenge least discussed is the challenge of emotional intimacy. The clay artist creates physical objects using the simplest and humblest of means. She kneads the clay with her hands obsessively, as if unwilling to let go of her closeness to mud, as if magically she could transfer her feelings to the object being formed under her fingers. Through the object's form, sensation, texture and touch, to hand and body, the artist shares a physical and emotional communion with the user or viewer. Thus, the ceramic object created bears a profound affinity with its creator, it bears her presence, her passion and vulnerability. Perhaps this isn't true of all ceramic artists; however, this is no doubt true for Beck.

Beck's work captures elemental, almost primeval turmoil: the tension between wild, primary force, fiercely out of control and whirling into chaos, and an impulse for control and direction.

The form of containment is a basic value in the world of ceramics – it is as much the raw material as the clay itself. The ceramic maker has relatively little leeway, since he follows a timeless set of given technical rules to achieve a predictable container shape. This is the point from which Beck, over the course of her career, has conducted a creative inquiry into the limits of the malleability of clay, in the process progressively abstracting and deconstructing the vessel. Beck's initial urge was to break through the boundaries of the vessel as well as of clay, and this breakthrough, unexpectedly and paradoxically, is such that the creator has minimal control over the shape of the finished object. A life-force quickens the object, which articulates itself in completely abstract shapes and movements. This abstract form is like a frozen, unknown emotional expression.

"I create artistic objects that are both form and spirit. A seemingly structured and planned tempest that has chaotic foundations", explains Ester Beck. The chaos she creates is controlled chaos, a continuous abstracting process that begins in the same way as work on the potter's wheel: opening up clay from the center and delving deep into its depths. This delving, scratching, pushing and churning open up new spaces for even more action and expression. Thus, while seemingly chaotic, this is controlled, contained creation. The object holds, it does not break apart, and this place at the border between integration and destruction is especially interesting to Beck. She is playing at the edge.

When Beck confronts a block of clay, she examines it and thinks about how she would like to interact with it, how she will handle and shape it. She does not caress the clay but attacks it, shocking it. She forms the vessel first, by intensively and aggressively incising the outer surface of a block, creating cracks and fissures which will open up as the object evolves. Next, she opens up the block by beating it with hammers and fists, and then stretches and carves from within. And yet at the end there is resolution, the object displays a profound, flowing harmony like a stream or wave.

Beck's objects are not practical, they are an abstraction of the container form. Her objects evoke nature, not the man-made, and thus depart from ceramic tradition. Yet despite this approach that is so apparent in her work, Beck has never regarded herself to be a sculptress as opposed to a ceramist. The result, however, is sculpture, as it does not have any place among practical utensils, and it cannot be defined or held as a vessel and only that. Instead, the flowing movement of the vessels points to clues and suggests contexts that help us grasp their inner essence and to feel the emotions they encapsulate.

The degree of abstraction attracts and challenges Beck – how far can abstraction be taken, without losing the container context, and to what degree do form and matter remain connected? Her quest to break through boundaries led Beck to leave her studio walls for Gilles and Michal Jaure's wood-burning Anagama kiln at the Te'ashur village in the Negev. Firing in a wood-burning kiln is unique and requires the potter to participate in a delicate balance of having and losing or forgoing control, of being able or not able to affect the final result, when the object is placed into the fire. This is a gamble between the known and unknown, which can result in disappointment, but can just as well open up rich vistas of surprising forms and textures, as it has done in the work that is on display in Beck's show.

Hagai Segev 2009