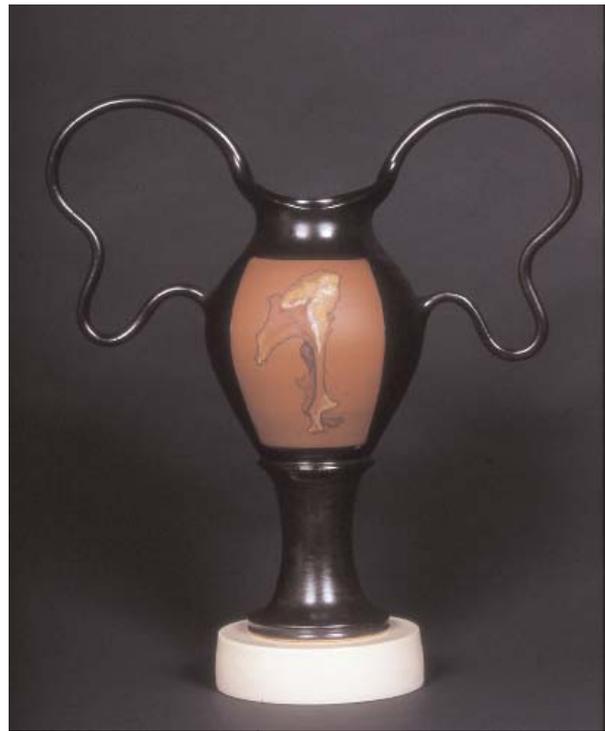




Carthaginian vase. **Spendius**. 2002. White earthenware, glaze, pigments, terra sigillata fired cone 02 in oxidation. 54 x 37.9 x 16.5 cm. Collection of the Hotel-Bertrand Museum, Châteauroux, France. Photo: Pierre Guillaume.



Carthaginian vase: **Hamilcar**. 2002. White earthenware, glaze, pigments, terra sigillata fired cone 02 in oxidation. 44 x 44.8 x 19 cm. Collection of the Hotel-Bertrand Museum, Châteauroux, France. Photo: Pierre Guillaume.

Laurent Craste Metamorphoses & Inventions

Article by *Pascale Beaudet*

AT FIRST GLANCE, LAURENT CRASTE'S WORKS TAKE you by surprise because of the antique look of the objects which makes one question the function and history of drinking vessels and the uncommon allusions to Greek traditions. This return to Greek antiquity, atypical for artists of his generation (he is in his 30s), denotes a rather uncommon inquiry, a desire to get to the bottom of things, to go down the slippery slope of causes and origins as did Gauguin in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* In other words, Craste's work is more symbolic than narrative, or even discursive. In this manner, he follows in the tradition of artists who put forth strong symbolically-charged ideas.

The irrefutable originality of his work lies in the many inextricably mixed references. The form of the vases – and at times their decoration – is especially inspired by the Greek receptacles called *cylinx* from which the word 'chalice' derives. In Ancient Greece,

the *cylinx* had more than one use: it was used both as a drinking vessel and for libation. By an understandable reversal, however, Laurent Craste at first believed these vases to be used for religious purposes.

This is how they become part of his installations which sometimes look like altars set for a Eucharistic celebration and which, in turn, make a direct reference to the Roman Catholic religion. There are many references to Catholicism: the hosts, the arrangement of the objects, the cushions used to draw attention to a relic or, at the least, a precious object – all in ceramic, of course – even some of the vases, items which can be associated with chalices or *ciboria*. And reference is not only made to objects, but to processes as well: first of all, to transubstantiation, since the transformation of material from its raw state to the final result is illustrated in recent installations.

A third reference is just as significant: an allusion to the body and to the organic shapes found in nature.



Petit Necessaire. 2003. White and red earthenware, glazes, pigment, fired cone 02 in oxidation. 47 x 95 x 47 cm. Photo Guy L'Heureux.

The cylixes' handles double as conduits, urinary or reproductive, the chalices as uteruses, the vases' extremities, ovaries or glands. Sex connects with religion in a celebration where human beings create their own transcendence. An attraction to mystery, to magical rites, is obviously a source of creativity for Laurent Craste. The omnipresence of science is superimposed over that of the body. Laboratory instruments, knives, retorts or alembics, either modified or reproduced as is, haunt several pieces. These instruments serve to transform the bodies or the substances, and are the vectors for the dynamics of the transformation inherent in several pieces.

Something else, more discreet but no less determinant, is also present in the work of the artist: tiny rolls, like miniature parchments, or replicas of open books, are found here and there. Obvious symbols of knowledge, they also evoke the Good Book, the Christian Bible. Books whose meaning has been lost, however, since the pages are dog-eared, worn, obliterated, as in a detail of the installation *Pièces d'Identité* (2002).

A white, black and red installation from 2003, *Petit Necessaire*, consists of a triad of vases: two cylix-uteruses and a sort of retort with the tip overlapping a chalice in which lie tiny sticks which will be transformed into strips of paper or leather, who knows... These same strips are stored in neatly stacked rolls on the other side of the piece, their importance made evident by their support. In the middle, a knife rests on a

cushion. The references mentioned above are repeated here: the presence of the sacred and the biological, allusions to science and, more broadly, to knowledge (the rolls, the knife). The process of transubstantiation metamorphoses matter into learning; the learning, however, comes as a result of a cruel (but redeeming?) act, accomplished with the help of a knife. In this regard, we should note that the artist was trained as a veterinarian and has therefore learnt to handle a scalpel just as well as a potter's wheel.

Reverse Transubstantiation Machine is also from 2003 and focuses on science and religion. Little twigs drop from the wall through tubes into a funnel and are transmuted into hosts which collect in a little open drawer below. Craste diverts the solemn aspect of the mass by instrumentalising it, by making it mechanical, while preserving the significance of the rite: the middle section of the machine resembles a person with raised arms which could either refer to an officiating clergyman or illustrate the symbolic representation of the body of Christ in the host. At the same time, the twigs ejecting from the wall have a sexual connotation that adds complexity to the reading of the work. The primitive aspect of the rite, which harks back to ancient beliefs relating to fertility, is articulated. Moreover, the 23 tubes correspond to the 23 pairs of chromosomes that make up the human being: the twigs are therefore a substitute for the flesh that is transformed into the host, hence the inverted process in the title.

The unique approach of this young artist reflects roots in a Western civilisation as understood and taught in the 19th and 20th century. Greek art and its fascination with masculine form, the beginnings of science and philosophy, and mythology, setting the stage for gods, fauns and satyrs, form a pool of knowledge that was familiar to college students, but is unknown to the younger generation even though there are many shows based on the magical exploits of Greek gods and heroes, staged in bucolic settings.

Greek mythology is full of invention and metamorphoses which Craste explores and turns into reality in his artistic practice. *Pan* (2003) combines two types of mythology, Greek and Minoan: the two handles of the vase are, in fact, reminiscent of serpents or even of bull's horns, both extremely phallic symbols, driven home even more by the image of a horned faun's head. In Cretan sculpture, the mother-goddess brandishes a snake in each hand and the *rhytons*, drinking horns having an animal head as their base, are often decorated with a bull's head. The snakes also recur under another form: a tangled enmeshment, reminiscent of the snakes covering Medusa's head in Greek mythology.

Freud saw the snakes as a defence against a lack because, according to him, Medusa symbolises castration or impotence, the snake-hair proliferating the shortfall. In *Autel Particulier* (2002), a vase is deliberately broken, and a reliquary appears to be made of ivory, despite it being ceramic. The same extends to the cushions, and to the tassels that adorn them. A necessary demonstration of virtuosity to illustrate that the ceramist has more than one trick up his sleeve, a little ruse proffered to the spectator, a nod to the current tendency toward transdisciplinarity, an allusion to *trompe-l'œil*, stratagem used since antiquity.

If the artist uses ancient forms, he transforms them; repeating past forms does not gain added value unless they are reinterpreted, unless another stratum of meaning is added. Laurent Craste has worked the cylix or the amphora by taking several approaches, both figurative and abstract. For example, another trinity from 2002, *Vases Carthaginois*, groups three red-on-black amphorae on which abstract body-like images are drawn: pointed, elongated and rounded bones. He also uses a special technique: he paints these shapes using a watercolour method on an agate-like polished sigillate pottery base, but uses only pure oxides. On another vase, the artist seems to illustrate the respiratory system, only a dried-up, time-eroded one. Elsewhere, a bone takes on a threatening look with its sharp edges. The threatening element, a knife in *Petit Nécessaire*, recurs several times in Laurent Craste's work.



Le Mythe de la Méiose. 1999. Red earthenware, terra sigillata, pigment, underglaze, fired cone 02 in oxidation. 26 x 38 x 17 cm. Private collection, Canada. Photo Guy L'Heureux.

Were we to rely on the psychoanalysts, the presence of a knife and the symbolic snake-horn elements would be used as a way to confront impotence, a fertility ritual. A vase being, according to Freud, a feminine symbol, the correlation of the round form and the linear elements is a way of uniting the feminine and the masculine.

Greek vases were adorned with mythological and erotic scenes. Some of Craste's vases are adorned with drawings of the body or of faces, always male. The scenes are not erotic (they are simply nudes), but in the case of *Adam*, the shape of the vase itself is sexualised; the tip of the handle is a penis. Internal anatomy, organs, systems and glands, is therefore not only depicted on the vases, but also by the vases, which, in a sense, is a return to raw materials, the wineskin made of stitched-up goat skin. Craste's thought process is therefore not a nostalgic call to the past, but a meditation that uses the past to get better momentum in the present.

In 2002, the artist was awarded the Winifred Shantz Award, given by the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario (Canada); in fact, he had an exhibition there in 2004. Since 1999, he has been a finalist four times for the François-Houdé prize, awarded to artisans by the City of Montréal in recognition of exceptional work. A young career, then, begun in 1997 after completing training in ceramics, but one that has received prestigious reward and which no doubt will receive much more.

Pascale Beudet has a PhD in Art History from the Université de Rennes 2, France. As an independent curator, she has organised several exhibitions, mainly with Quebecois artists. Also, she has written extensively on contemporary art in exhibition catalogues and Canadian and French magazines.