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A blank sheet of paper, a bare canvas, an empty room ... for some the void can be overwhelming. For others, it is empowering. Like a tidal wave, the constant push-pull of starting over, making a mark or generating form anew is willed on by forces beyond the practical. Start. Stop. On. Off. Back. Forth. On and on until the repetition takes over, erasing the boundaries between action and inaction, creating an agenda or lifeforce of its own.

This interplay between states – between something and nothing, dynamic and static, darkness and light – has long been celebrated in Japanese culture. Represented by the philosophical concept of *Ma* its application serves across time, space and objects. As an interval between things, thoughts, environments and periods *Ma* offers a moment of repose and reflection. It encourages us to search for the hidden meaning or value within the gap and, by way of reward, provides a *tabula rasa*, a space for imagination and intuition to exist.

Western culture has neither word nor designation for this in-between state. The closest we get is the notion of tension. The energy created by and between opposing forces. Start Stop On Off Back Forth Push Pull. Eventually, the full stops disappear. The wave becomes a cadence and all tension becomes vibrato – palpable, intuitive and energising. It is exactly this kind of tension London-based artist Paola Petrobelli seeks through her practice.

For over two decades, first through glass and now with clay, Petrobelli has pursued the elusive tipping point between her finely crafted intention and the potential for random outcomes. Far from any passive material exercise, she takes the process to its absolute limit then – somewhere between cause and effect – the dynamic changes and the beauty is revealed. As she says, “making an effort means meeting resistance. If there is no resistance, the effort has no point. It is this tension that creates the magic.”

In a sense, this is largely why so many of her works are made of multiple sections. The order of the arrangement, how they meet, what pressure holds them either together or apart – the synergies created between the various modular forms is a carefully calibrated, constant flux. Ideally, modular works – like the 24 series of lamps, each composing four separate layers of differently coloured glass – would continue to change long after they left her studio or the gallery space. Like Meccano bricks, they were designed to be taken apart and put back together in thousands of different configurations, each its own *tabula rasa*.

Given Petrobelli’s first career in molecular biology, her enduring preoccupation with stacks, orders and patterned sequences is not surprising. What is noteworthy though is her appreciation for the potential of formulas to unlock creativity. As she says, “if you have a simple module, it allows endless possibilities. The structure is a launchpad and limitations push you to create.” For the most part, these limitations have been externally imposed – be they the practical restraints of working with glass and glassblowers, the demands of a brief, or the technical requirements of lighting design.

Alongside embracing a novel material language, what shifts this new series of works in clay is Petrobelli's intentional divestment of "the mathematical rule" – or the precise instructions required by the assisted production of her glass work. Instead, all production was confined to her studio, and through her own hands. But by liberating her practice and bringing a sense of immediacy to the process, she increased the jeopardy two-fold: introducing the uncertainty of hand-worked techniques and the variability of natural materials. With clay, there is a constant potential for movement – even after the firing process. Reciprocity also appears through sculpting, rolling and glazing, potentially shifting and cracking the works. Characteristically, Petrobelli embraced these challenges – between the predetermined and the accidental, the perfect and imperfect, and between permanence and impermanence. As a result, these humble, slab-rolled pots act as extensions of her own self, her gestures and thoughts – representative of the complex balance between her effort and intuition.

Each set of pots adheres to a strict selection of repeated profiles, scales and tones which are gathered in specifically defined groupings. Their proximity (or distance) encourages a dialogue between the individual pieces, their arrangements and the series as a whole. After a pause, a percussive resonance begins to emerge through the repetitions and the gaps in between – making this pairing with Martin Creed, an artist renowned for seeking solace in compositional order, even more significant. The potential for dialogue carries on through her refined sense of colour. As Petrobelli says, "I am wary of being seduced by colour for colour's sake. Instead, my colours serve a function, to highlight the shape or a section, enabling the different parts of the pot (the interior, the exterior, the attached geometries...) to speak with each other. Hopefully this dialogue will continue to develop as they venture out into new surroundings."

Unlike many ceramics, in which the marks of making are concealed under thick glaze, or erased through industrial procedure, there is no artifice to these pots; everything is on the surface, and, in some pieces, sections of the clay are left completely unadorned. Even Petrobelli's reference to them as 'pots' (rather than ceramics or vessels) underscores her intended simplicity. But simplicity should not be confused with simplistic. These pots might wear their prowess lightly, though it is undeniably there. Her conversations are peppered with references to Ettore Sottsass and Carlo Scarpa, and there are definite parallels to be drawn – particularly with Scarpa, who, like Petrobelli, was also born and raised in the Veneto. Consequently, their collective visual stimuli – the marbles, mosaics, stones, glass, water and of course the light of Venice – have culminated in a shared or *sympatico* language of bold forms, sensitive handling of substantial materials and exactitude of line.

The intrinsic value is, for Petrobelli, in the creative act, in the making. She describes the experience as 'kamikaze-ing' – just throwing herself into her work at full throttle. It's a disconcerting analogy for someone who's youth was spent motor cross racing, but an appreciation of momentum and movement has proven a positive force for her work. It has encouraged a heightened sense of confidence to engage with the void, make the leap and just get on with it. As Martin Creed has said, "the things you're scared of are exactly the things you need to do."

Libby Sellers, November 2021.