



1 Dylan Bowen – *Thrown Bowl*, slip-decorated earthenware, 2012, Ø54cm (Photo: Ben Ramos) 2 Dylan Bowen – *Thrown Shape*, slip-decorated earthenware, 2012, H38cm (Photo: Ben Ramos) 3 Anne Mette Hjortshøj – *Teapot with Two Cups*, salt-fired, 2010, H26cm 4 Exhibition view of Tamsin van Essen (Photo: Kleinfenn)



**PEAUX D'ÂMES**  
NEXTLEVEL GALERIE, PARIS  
15 MARCH-5 MAY 2012

NextLevel Galerie positions itself as a defender of contemporary art, design, and photography. Why, then, an exhibition featuring clay? Gallery owner Isabelle Mesnil admits to a predilection for ceramics, while curator Sandra de Vivies talks about returning to 'original sources'.

*Peaux d'Âmes* (*Soul Skins*), a slightly convoluted play on words, recalls the seventeenth-century folktale by Charles Perrault 'Peau d'Âne', in which a princess hides her beauty beneath a donkey skin to escape an incestuous marriage with her widower father. Like the tale, the exhibition operates on several levels, deliberately juxtaposing exterior beauty and interior degeneration, family as refuge and as threat, aging as repugnant yet beautiful.

Entering the airy space of the gallery one is immediately drawn to Farida Le Suavé's flesh-coloured ceramic sculpture resting on a soft blue cushion. Suspended above is a curved wooden rod with a ceramic arrowhead aimed at the torso. The piece is both beautiful and off-putting, as much else in this exhibit turns out to be.

To the left are Tamsin Van Essen's ceramic jars arranged on staggered shelves as in an ancient apothecary, ostensibly holding remedies to all that ails us. The technically impeccable vessels in various shades of pink and salmon are feats of glazing mastery. A closer look reveals crevices and protrusions. Reading the titles (*Acne*, *Psoriasis*, *Syphilis*), one is shocked to realise that these beautiful objects hide the deterioration within us all.

Two large photographs of superimposed headless male figures, dressed in slightly dated suits, demands a second glance that reveals several protruding plaster-cast hands and penises. To the right of the photos are two porcelain biscuit phalluses, created in collaboration with ceramist Guy Eliche. This installation by photographer Natacha Lesueur talks about sex and power, evoking a nightmare scenario of sexual aggression.

*Pots Sensibles* is a trio of three ceramic skin-toned pots inspired by Picasso's portraits of his lovers. Conceived by the design team Les Sismo, and executed by ceramist Annie LaPorte, the pots, completed with human hair, bird feathers, and python skin, are humorous, cubist portraits that cease to exist as such if deconstructed.

On the last wall hang five earthenware plates with metallic mirror glaze fashioned by designer Elise Fouin, representing the aging process from twenty to one hundred. The lithe representation of twenty is less beautiful and interesting than the wrinkled, ravaged one hundred.

Clay is necessary to each of these five vignettes. The texture, plasticity, colour tones, and warmth of clay make this eclectic exhibition work. This self-conscious use of clay as a medium in contemporary art helps break down walls that have been built between art, craft, and design. *Peaux d'Âmes* is an effective and fascinating use of ceramic as a language in contemporary art.

**Esther Viros**

Esther Viros formerly owned a gallery in Paris and now lives between Paris and New York

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