



centre d'édition contemporaine

Quinn Latimer, "Sgrafa vs Fat Lava, Ceramics and Porcelains Made in West Germany, 1960-1980", in *Artforum*, "Critics' Picks", décembre 2010.



Sgrafa Modern vases from the "Korallenform" series.
Design Peter Müller. Photo: Olivier Pasqual.

"All vases aren't the same," Nicolas Trembley notes with sly understatement in his introduction to *Sgrafa vs Fat Lava*, the exhibition catalogue detailing his collection of fabled 1960s- and '70s-era West German ceramic vases currently on view at Centre d'Édition Contemporaine. If his observation campily conjures the famous opening of *Anna Karenina*, as well as the inverse of Thomas Jefferson's maxim that "all men are created equal," so it should: Trembley's collection is the apotheosis of the high-low collision. The vases, exhibited on a plywood table in discrete arrangements that evoke pale Morandi paintings refashioned by an adept, acid-freak ceramicist, employ a spectrum of styles: lithe Art Deco; Bauhaus-lite; Pop art; Cubism; bright white Minimalism married to pre-Ikea commercialism; and psychedelic, hippie-art-teacher-esque explorations of textured "lava" and "pumice" glazes. Perusing the objects, I was instantly transported to the era of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964), Pierre Cardin's space-age fashions, and macramé.

For such a petite show (one long L-shaped table, about one hundred vases, and an odd accompanying sound piece by Seth Price), the scope it imparts is large: a lesson in twentieth-century art-historical movements and the way in which they were commercially co-opted, as well as a detailed view on West Germany's postwar economy. Famed manufacturers such as ES Keramik, Karlsruhe, and Ruscha thrived after the war, but they began to close as the East started producing cheaper wares, and the ceramics boom faded. The inherent kitsch of the West German production makes it difficult for a layman to ascertain its quality, though such work has a rabid following of fans and collectors. Most interesting, perhaps, are the ways in which the myriad high-art forms of the twentieth century were digested and redeemed in the body of the vase—a form both prescribed and, as one sees here, arguably without limits.

— Quinn Latimer

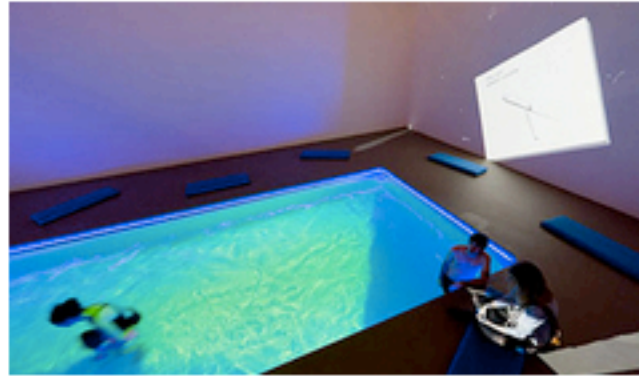
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