

Guido De Zan

Ceramic City

*David Chandler encounters an important studio in
Milan, celebrating 40 years of work 1978 -2018*



Ten minutes' walk from the Piazza del Duomo in Milan is the church of San Lorenzo Maggiore, a UNESCO listed basilica, part of which stands to its full fourth century height. For forty years, since 1978, a solo craft potter Guido De Zan, has occupied a full double fronted studio "*Il Coccio*" [translated as shard and earthenware] and a linked retail space to the side of the great centrally planned church with its surviving row of late Roman fluted columns.



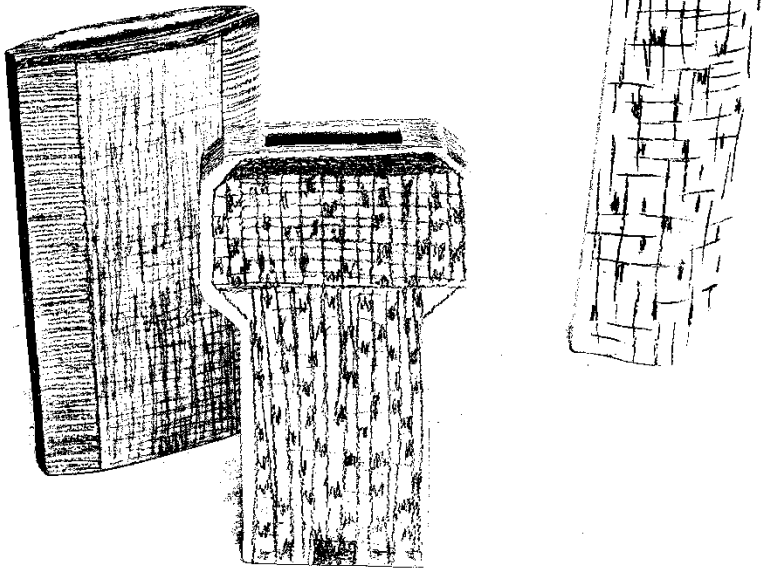
"*Il Coccio*" has a shop sign that proclaims his consistency and his brand. His studio worktable, visible from the street, has hosted many workshop tutorials with international students.

Guido's father had, as a builder, helped to repair the city of Milan in the period of post war reconstruction, working on some of the landmarks of Modernism including the Torre Velasca and Gio Ponti's 1960 Pirelli Tower. The slender building, with its illusion of a deep side structure would become the focus of a year of artistic homage in 2010 when Guido devoted his pottery activities to an extended improvisation on the theme. A form that Guido refers to as "*bidimensionale*"; flattened, but with an articulate edge view. Small Pirelli type clay pots still crop up in his workshop storage racks.



Gio Ponti, P.L.Nervi & Arturo Danusso; Pirelli Tower, Milan. 1960

Guido De Zan; Milanese Tower vases



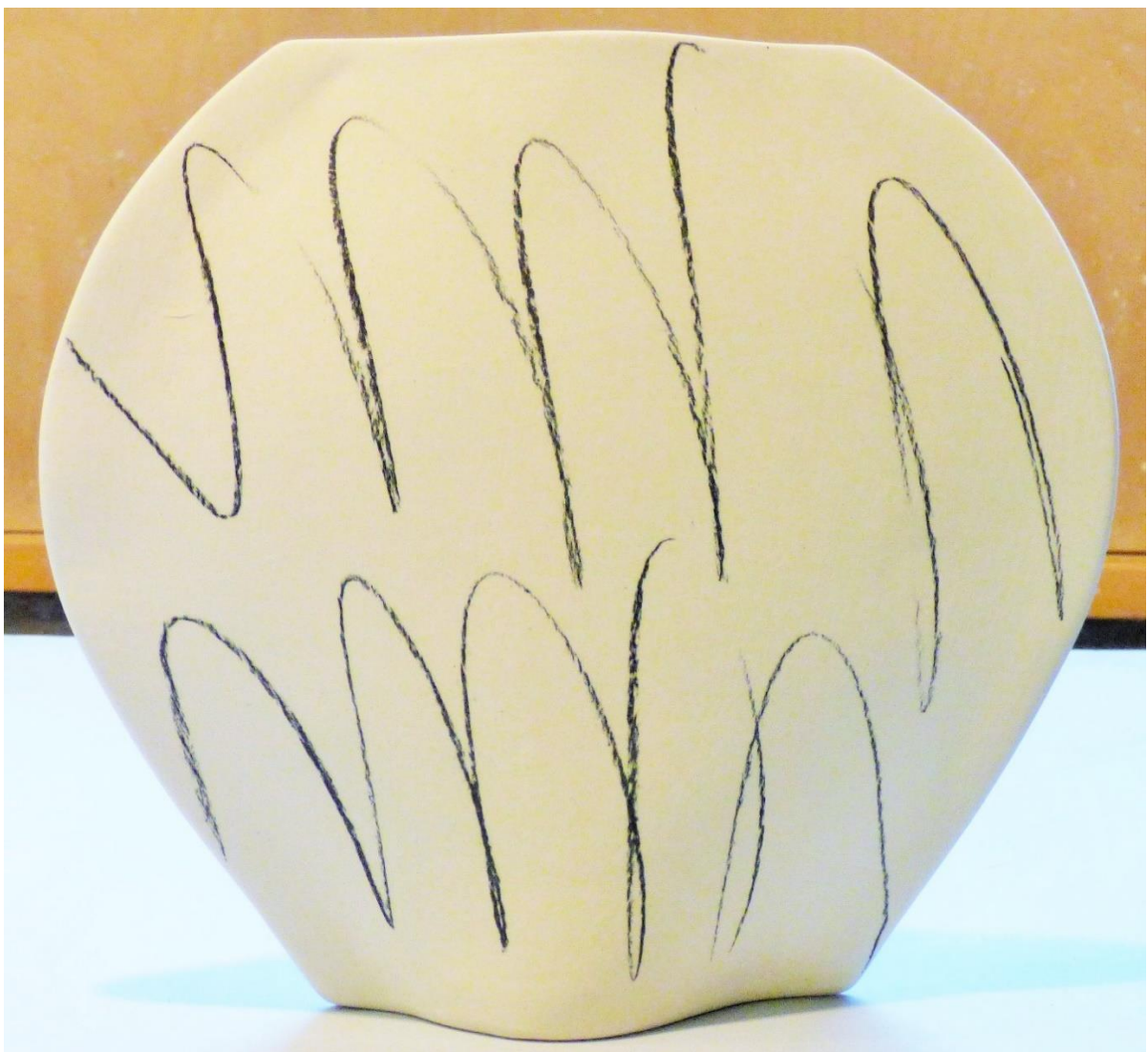
Inspired as a child by the campanile at Zanè in the Vicenza countryside of his grandparents' home he later studied for a sociology degree at the University of Trento. He has participated in a number of socio-political movements from the late 1960s and has remained mostly in the Milan area, as he does not travel extensively. He assisted in the aftermath of the floods in Florence in 1966. He has worked with young people on community rehabilitation projects. This focus on his immediate social urbanism is also central to his interpretation of his city and the humanity that motivates his activity.

Following the direction set by his father, Guido was also to become another type of builder from his late 20s. At first as a potter using a wheel, and then through the radical transformation of a two dimensional slab built typology. Not a "traditional ceramicist", in his own words, he developed a form of building that is mostly from a raw unglazed grogged white earthenware, although he uses porcelains and a range of stains and pigments. Glazed on the interior and tested for watertight properties, his vases are functional but animated by a jazz graffiti inscribed on the exterior. Often applied with a black pastel. Guido mentions Cy Twombly and Japanese calligraphy amongst his valued influences.

He is also strongly motivated by pairs and binary relationships, often applying very different approaches to drawing on each face of his flat envelope vases as if they had a verso and recto. Many of his shapes have a very compelling instability, emerging from an archaic source, a personal dialect, leaning over with their necks at an angle to the body. At times it requires two half vases to complete a full vase as if the pieces have split personalities. In conversation, he has discussed his own body shape. Guido De Zan is quite tall, with a tendency to live life at a gentle angle and, more movingly, some of his encounters with a personal psychological landscape encouraged him to describe the tendency of the material to be deformed by the kiln as if the vases birth their own autonomous life forces. There is unavoidably a self-portrait in all of his work. His signature is as recognisable as that of any mature sculptor.

Guido De Zan's art has a playfully subversive presence, generating parodies of academic classical ceramic traditions that offer an insight into a compelling strand of Italian wit. A phenomenon that is recognisable from the late watercolours of Giorgio Morandi, who could make a void into a solid inside a still life profile. At times Guido's shelves offer glimpses of the dusty Morandi studio in Bologna. These ceramics have a self-deprecating warmth that we know better

from the work of Roberto Benigni (*La Vita è Bella*) as the actor apologises ingenuously for his own presence on stage. This pottery consciously struggles to qualify itself as serious, when often the graffito sign of a vase is sometimes the only symbol of its identity; made by the artist as “an anthropomorphic imprint”.¹ Some of the vases have an affinity with body shapes (happily avoiding gender tropes that emerged in the iconography of many post war, post Picasso ceramicists). These objects ask us to believe in what they could be, despite their unpredictable shapes. As if they were nervous of their own fragility, clad in eggshell brittle volumes. Guido animates clay in the tradition of a ‘Geppetto’, conjuring forms to life with the energy of hands, but also with a sense of play. Each of his forms has a strong sense of individual character, “*personaggi*” - personalities. Ceramic pots are taken from his kiln into a studio where the pieces might come alive once the customers have left the shop. The shelves of Guido De Zan resemble scaled down pedestrian pavements where a drama is enacted simply through the chance arrangement of the stock.



Guido De Zan; envelope vase



Guido De Zan retains a large personal collection from his own output, reserved for international display. He maintains and is proud of an extensive exhibition history. In his studio in Via Pio IV there is an attic balcony that resembles a museum archive. The spines of the stored vases resemble books or architectural models. Recent catalogues have produced an important photographic record of his building processes. The Guido De Zan repertoire has seen the addition of ceramic figures that seem to place the pieces into a new comparative scale with shadows drawn in on their pedestals, defining them as sculpture, with echoes of Giorgio de Chirico. Guido works relentlessly across all media, with some recent paper sculpture pointing the way to new extremes of fragility. His studio is a quiet operatic space, where all pieces play a part. Guido De Zan continues to enliven a Modernist aesthetic and celebrates the legacy of the *novecento Italiano*, confident in his contribution to the culture of the metaphysical city that he has created in the street next to San Lorenzo Maggiore.

“my towers have a light and fragile structure. They convey instability and precariousness, a sensation reinforced by the tendency of the material to become deformed by the firing, when it gets driven to the limit of its physical resistance”ⁱⁱ



Guido De Zan; archive and storage of studio products

References

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<http://www.guidodezan.it/>

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Guido De Zan. Via Pio IV, 3, 20123 Milano



ⁱ Gualdoni, F. 2008. p.61

ⁱⁱ Molinari, L. Schatz, E.A. (ed.) 2012; p.4