

En Route
Babs Haenen

En Route

This catalogue was published by Monique Deul Consultancy on the occasion of *En Route*, a solo exhibition of work by Babs Haenen, at Taste Contemporary, Rue Abraham Constantin 6, 1206 Geneva, Switzerland

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In celebration of Babs Haenen

I'm very proud to present this solo exhibition to celebrate Babs Haenen's 70th birthday year. Babs has been a major force in the world of ceramics for over 40 years both in the Netherlands and abroad. Her importance as an artist is confirmed by the inclusion of her work in numerous major international museums as well as a number of solo exhibitions, most notably an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 1998.

As a woman, Babs has a confident, open personality. She wholeheartedly embraces life and is guided by an essential curiosity. She is open to exploring the new and discovering and pushing boundaries; characteristics that are also evident in her evocative works.

Their colour, line and form are natural extensions of her engaging personality. They offer us a sense of her personal opinions, shared experiences and innermost thoughts.

Throughout her career, Babs has always been a driven artist; she is wonderfully opinionated, socially involved, politically engaged, confident, warm and colourful. In summary, she is an inspiration.

As a fellow Dutch woman I salute you Babs Haenen.

Monique Deul, Founder & Director,
Taste Contemporary



In discussing the artist Babs Haenen's work, the terms expressive and impressionistic frequently appear. They are used to describe the painterly way in which she adorns her vessels and sculptural forms, the equal attention paid to colour, line and form, her recurring sense of movement. She has said that she finds inspiration in paintings. Take for example her 2017 work, *La Femme au Chapeau* (page 11), inspired by a 1905 painting of the same name by Henri Matisse (pictured below). In it, his wife Amélie wears an elaborate costume, hat and gloves and carries a fan. The vibrant hues of the clothing are vivid and intense while its unfinished quality was considered shocking to the viewers of the day. To create her equally brightly coloured works in clay, Babs Haenen works with porcelain slabs, coloured with pigment and rolled into thin ribbons, which are then folded, cut and sculpted by hand to form expressive, tactile works. Actually paintings from many different periods, including 20th century abstract impressionism and 16th and 17th century Italian works, have provided inspiration for her. However, when reviewing the canon of work created by this extraordinary artist, there is so much more.



Babs Haenen was born in Amsterdam in 1948. She initially studied dance before completing two years at the Fashion Academy Charles Montaigne (now the Amsterdam Fashion Institute) where she first learned about textiles. She then went on to study visual art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam from 1974 to 1979, where her contemporaries included Geert Lap, Barbara Nanning and Paulus van Leeuwen. At that time, the Gerrit Rietveld Academy encouraged all of their students, regardless of medium, to express themselves freely as artists. Initially turning vessels on the wheel, Babs soon let go of the wheel as her practice began to develop. A fortuitous visit by Garth Clark to the college would also result in her first solo exhibition in his New York Gallery in 1987.

In a publication that appeared at the time, Clark made a comparison between the work of Babs Haenen and the choreography of *Lamentation* by Martha Graham in 1930. In this 'elegy' the dancer breaks free from the enclosure of the body by pushing and stretching a tube-like garment in all directions. The inner movement results in a changeable external form providing a powerful performance of the content of the work without any further explanation to the viewer. The merging of content, form and subject with references and inspirations is characteristic of the work of Babs Haenen. It is never just a literal rendering of a story or event, but an expressive elaboration of a personal opinion and viewpoint, of experiences, feelings and ideas.

Over the years these experiences would come about in many different ways. She has a fascination with pattern. Just as a fashion designer combines colour and pattern, Babs Haenen folds, layers and pleats her coloured slabs of clay, creating a wavy motif throughout. She continues to be inspired by fashion, referring in an interview for the Crafts Council

Netherlands to a visit to Bijenkorf where she 'stumbled upon the newest collection of Dries van Noten', observing that this collection was 'an explosion of colours and patterns, not only in the actual fabrics, but even in the way these were mixed and matched.' Larger table pieces, some of which made a great impact at her solo exhibition in 1998 at the Stedelijk Museum, combined landscape and urban design while the layers of sea green porcelain in *High Rise Wave* (page 19), a piece from 2017, which can be seen in this exhibition, are a reminder that motifs, such as rippling water, remain a recurring theme. The painterly way in which she adorns her vessels also reminds us how the old masters continue to inspire. For example the collar on the Frans Hals painting below, entitled *Portrait of an Old Woman*, was the starting point for the 'collar' on *Persian Passion* (page 29).



Because of her preference for porcelain, Babs Haenen has always had a great interest in Asian ceramics. She has worked, travelled and lectured extensively in Japan and received the prestigious Inax Design Prize for Europeans in 1991. In 2010 she visited China for the first time, as part of a study trip with the Gerrit Rietveld Academy [where she taught from 1992 to 2013] while in 2012 she set up *Flow* studio in Jingdezhen, China, designing pieces in collaboration with Guan Lin Wang, Li Fei Wang and Grace Guo. The *Flow* series combines the flow of Chinese waterfalls with the waves of the North Sea and the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Scholars' Rocks is the name generally used to describe small, individual stones that have been appreciated by educated and artistic Chinese since the Song dynasty and have remained popular for over 1,000 years. These *Gongshi*, as they are known in China, evolved from an appreciation of larger garden rocks however their smaller size enabled the Chinese literati and Imperial Court to carry them indoors where they could be admired and meditated over in their small studios.

Gongshi began as stones that resembled or represented mythological and famous mountains, or even whole mountain ranges and it was said that a garden could not be beautiful without such rare rocks. In 2014, Babs Haenen presented an exhibition at Rotterdam's Galerie VIVID where she moved from her vessel forms to more complex sculptural works composed of various layers. Inspired by the ancient tradition of scholars' rocks, or *Gongshi*, Garth Clark wrote at the time that this work 'hovers above the line of art and craft, drawing its power from both.' In *En Route* we see a number of these dramatic sculptural works including *Gongshi [Easter Isle of Immortals]*, 2015 (page 17), a towering form in dramatic hues of dark blue and grey.



Babs Haenen does not exclude any form of ceramics in her practice. While she mostly creates sculptural work, she has also designed tiles and ornaments for architecture, working with architects such as Erick van Egeraat, for whom she made porcelain relief tiles for the Stadsschouwburg in Haarlem. Other projects have included cobalt blue, sand yellow and brick red tiles produced by the Royal Tichelaar in the Frisian Makkum.

Babs Haenen has been at the forefront of sculptural ceramics for many decades. Like her contemporaries and close friends Alison Britton, Carol McNicholl, Jacqueline Poncelet and the late Betty Woodman, she has elevated the vessel from the domestic to the art world. Today her work can be seen in the permanent collections of museums all over the world. She has exhibited widely and has received solo exhibitions in Europe, USA and Asia.

In 2018 she celebrates her 70th birthday. Throughout her career, her journey has seen her study dance, fashion and the visual arts, it's taken her to many countries where she has been inspired by many things including painting and landscape and eastern cultures. Throughout these years she has also inspired her many students. 'I have always tried to tell my students that they need to discover their personality and in what way they would translate this into their clay. Rather than creating something they didn't fully put their heart in. I have always said "create the unexpected without keeping others opinions in mind." As Babs Haenen continues her fascinating journey, *En Route* provides us with a glimpse of what she herself puts her heart into. Long may the journey continue.



Right:
Babs Haenen pictured with
the late Betty Woodman (centre)
and Jacqueline Poncelet.

Right:
Liquid Landscape, 2018
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
44H x 37W x 30D cm



Right:
La Femme au Chapeau, 2017
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
37H x 26W x 26D cm



Right:

Desert Blues 'The Greeting', 2014

Porcelain, pigments and glaze,

46H x 24W x 27D cm



Right:
La Naissance du Paysage, 2017
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
37H x 27W x 27D cm



Right:
Gongshi [Easter Isle of Immortals], 2015
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
50H x 19W x 32D cm



Right:
High Rise Wave, 2017
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
42H x 24W x 24D cm



Right:
Wind Water, 2016
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
49H x 35W x 32D cm



Right:
Rhapsody in Blue, 2016
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
35H x 24W x 24D cm



Right:
In Full Swing, 2016
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
28H x 28W x 28D cm



Right:
Desert Blues, 2014
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
55H x 46W x 23D cm



Right:
Persian Passion, 2009
Porcelain, pigments and glaze,
50H x 30W x 30D cm





Babs Haenen

The Netherlands

b. 1948

The ceramic work of artist Babs Haenen is typified by expressive and impressionistic qualities where colour, line and form all play an equal part. The painterly way in which she adorns her vessels demonstrates the way in which abstract painting inspires her while landscape motifs, such as rippling water, are also recurring themes. To build her vessels Haenen works with coloured porcelain slabs, which she then manipulates by hand. The slabs are coloured with pigment and rolled to form thin ribbons that are deftly folded, cut and sculpted to form expressive, tactile works with a strong sense of movement.

Babs Haenen studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam from 1974-1979. She has taught extensively and has won a number of prestigious awards; these include the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture [Fonds BKVB], which she won in both 2003 and 1990 and the Inax Design Prize for Europeans, Japan. In addition she has undertaken several high profile, public commissions in The Netherlands.

Babs Haenen's work can be found in the permanent collections of numerous international museums including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics, Leeuwarden; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Gardiner Museum, Toronto and Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu. She has exhibited widely and has received solo exhibitions in Europe, USA and Asia including a series of exhibitions at the Garth Clark Gallery, New York between 1987 and 2002 and a solo exhibition entitled *The Turbulent Vessel, Ceramics 1991-1998* at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands in 1998. Her work has also been written about in numerous publications and journals.

Babs Haenen lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Left:

Babs Haenen pictured in her studio working on *Persian Passion*, 2009

Acknowledgements

Photography

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