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Playing with Fire

Edmund de Waal
and Axel Salto

CLAY

KERAMIKMUSEUM
DANMARK
Kongebrovej 42
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AKO Foundation

Playing with Fire: Edmund de Waal and Axel Salto

- an artistic encounter in words and clay at CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark

It's been 30 years since English artist and renowned potter Edmund de Waal first encountered Axel Salto's work at the Design Museum in Copenhagen. Today, he has no hesitation in calling Axel Salto one of the most influential ceramicists of the 20th century. But was it love at first sight? Not exactly. Rather a sense of confusion.

- *I was completely bewildered by these budding, sprouting vessels. I couldn't understand them. So my first encounter was actually feeling confused because I didn't think his vessels were beautiful. I thought they were strange,* he explains in the book *Playing with Fire*, which is published by Press in connection with the opening of the new exhibition he has curated at CLAY.

Edmund de Waal's confusion is perhaps understandable, as there is obviously a big difference between his own subtle installations in porcelain and Salto's powerful and expressive stoneware works. But behind the differences, we encounter two artists who are both fascinated by words, myths and metamorphosis, by the existential depth of ceramics and, not least, by the drama associated with the ceramic firing.

When the exhibition *Playing with Fire: Edmund de Waal and Axel Salto* opens at CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art, it is a dream come true for Museum Director Pia Wirnfeldt. For many years, she has had a strong desire to present the English potter to a Danish audience.

- *I was lucky enough to meet Edmund de Waal at a party in 2018. Him being a great admirer of Axel Salto, and CLAY having the world's largest museum collection of Salto's works turned out to be a perfect match and so, the seeds were sown of an exciting artistic dialogue,* says Pia Wirnfeldt.

The result of that meeting was, after much exchanging of ideas, that Edmund de Waal would curate an exhibition where he would also enter into a dialogue with Salto. He does so - quite literally - both in his writings for the show and in his new installation work which is part of the exhibition and reflects on his encounter with Salto's ideas and artistic universe.

During the time de Waal has been working on the exhibition, he has come to realise just how extensive and significant Salto's work has been.

- *I had no idea that he was this extraordinary multifaceted person, such an extraordinary writer, such an extraordinary designer and graphic artist. I had no idea at all. They were just vessels stuffed into in an old-fashioned display case in a museum in Copenhagen,* de Waal explains in the book *Playing with Fire* when remembering his first encounter with Salto's ceramics.

The exhibition is the museum's largest venture to date and is the result of a collaboration with the Norwegian museum Kunstsilo, which manages the Tangen Collection - the world's largest collection of Nordic modernism. The exhibition will show exquisite works from the Tangen Collection alongside substantial works from CLAY's own extensive collections. And this is precisely Edmund de Waal's hallmark, both as a writer and as an artist, to create works based on a specific place or collection. He did this in his debut novel, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and he did it in his latest novel, *Letters to Camondo*, which will be published in Danish on 6 October. And now he does it with this exhibition, *Playing With Fire: Edmund de Waal and Axel Salto*.

The fact that Axel Salto died 3 years before de Waal was born doesn't make the dialogue between the two artists any less interesting. De Waal sees the project as taking a stroll with the old stoneware master by his side - and this is evident in the exhibition. The audience is invited on a journey through different spaces where the conversation between the two artists unfolds - and where anxiety and severity go hand in hand with immense creative joy and playfulness.

After the show at CLAY, the exhibition will move on to the newly built Kunstsilo in Kristiansand in 2024 and then to The Hepworth Wakefield in England in 2025.

The exhibition officially opens on 7 October at a closed event in the presence of H. M. The Queen of Denmark.

The extensive exhibition project has been realised through a generous grant from:



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