

## Light and Shadow A Duality Revisited

*Article by Suzanne Rivier*

**M**AKING GREAT PLAY WITH OPPOSITES, CONTRASTS, combining diametrically different materials, clashing brilliant colours against flat white tint – all of that is part of François Ruegg's work. But through these sometimes sharp contrasts, this pressing need to mix opposites, there is an increasingly asserted harmony born of the union of empty and full spaces, of ridges and flat areas, of shadow and light. The equilibrium radiated by his latest works, their clear coherence, are the formulation of the results of Ruegg's research, the plenitude of a long-polished expression.

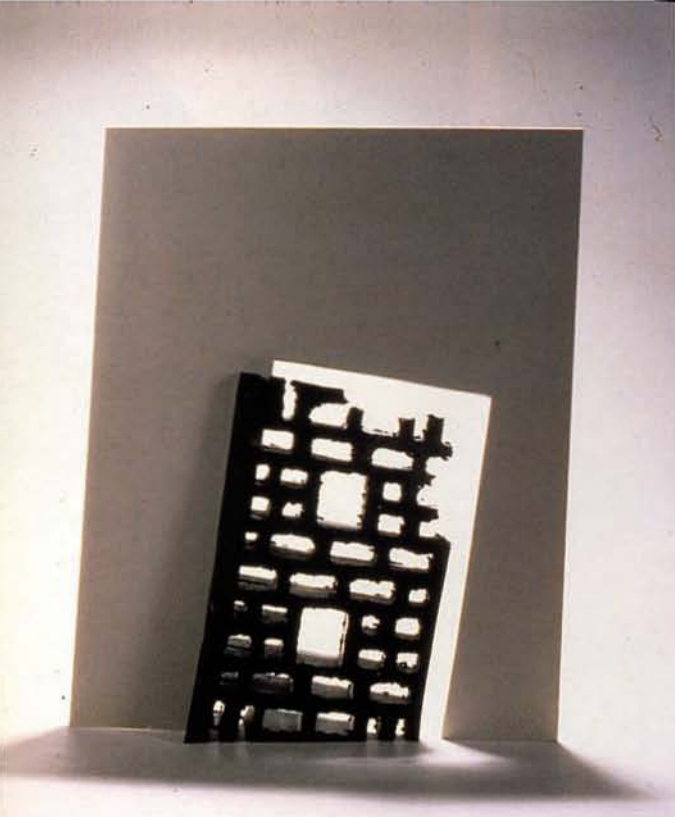
Purity of lines, accuracy of forms, complementarity of blacks and whites or of different materials, reveal a gaze also turned inward and lead us to pause and remain silent for a moment, even call to mind a possible meditation. It is true that for an artist who has brilliantly used flashes, be they of plexiglass or of laughter, the intention may be surprising. His seemingly iconoclastic use of porcelain often leaves the spectator with the impression of a slightly surprising, somewhat peculiar or provocative, universe. It is true that Ruegg's works are apparently supported by few references in the field of ceramics. We recognise the porcelain and that some of his latest mediums are in smoke-blackened clay; each has its own importance.

The aim here, however, is not to glorify the material to better justify the object. What counts over and above the technical prowess is what the piece tells us. First of all there is the pleasure of colour. Bright colours, in flat tints or in lines, luminous colours,

through the use of plexiglass, metallic colours, thanks to brushed aluminium; colours necessary to express a life made of contrasts, of vivacity, and of velocity too. Elements of urban life, yellow lines, traffic lights, various pictograms, suddenly enliven his pieces, are presented as so many luminous signals flashing across the blackness. Pure colours stretch out, intersect, respond to each other, forming geometry-predominant scenery. In a milieu where enamels and half-tones are traditionally subtle interpretations of the natural elements, the untimely irruption of pure colours, of references linked neither to water, to sky nor to earth were essential to express what the object wished to highlight: a contemporary environment, more urban than bucolic, gaiety, humour.

It is also a question of freeing the object from the embrace of the earth or the plinth, of making it soar into space, and this preoccupation is ever-present. From the earliest teapots, a bar of plexiglass or aluminium breaks away from the roundness of the paunch; from the earliest boxes, coloured crests burst forth from the lid. Later, the sharp-pointed geometrical cut-outs of the open containers still give the feeling that the object refuses to close on itself.

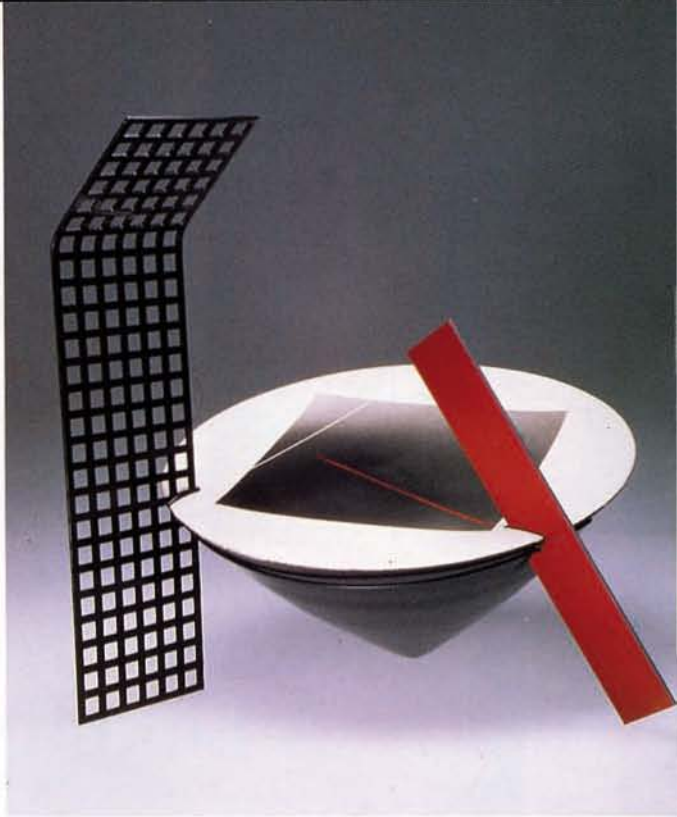
Everything seems to deny the earth-material, its heaviness and gravitation; even the lines of colours slashing across the piece are so many escape-lines drawing the gaze beyond the object. The aim here was to create volumes, open in such a way that they suggested usable containers, while playing on the feeling of broadness and spaciousness induced by the



*Construction II.* 1992. Porcelain, brick, 47 x 42 x 10 cm.

partitions of slightly inclined plates assembled on the verge of disequilibrium, aluminium rods indicating the void rather than closing it off. The prevailing idea was that only the revealing of a specific and fragile point of equilibrium could release the matter from its real weightiness, to suggest lightness, the air around the object. There again, the dissymmetrically coloured flat tints, the arcs of the circles or ellipses of the coloured rods play an essential role in giving the object its coherence and its boldness. A boldness reinforced by the fact that the aim of these objects was to suggest rather than lead to a particular use. The notion of ceremonial surrounding their employment, with their unusual forms and their delicacy, made them works demanding our attention to the same degree that they could be of use to us.

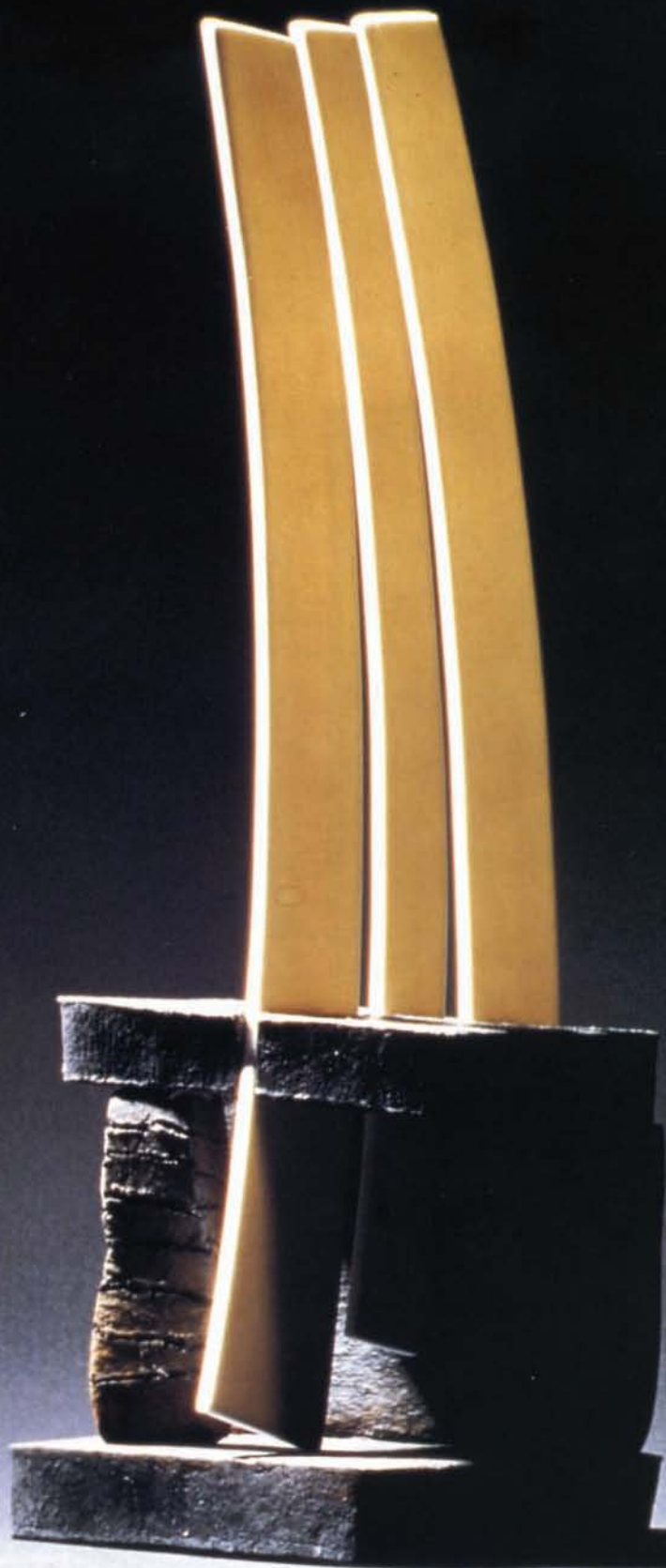
At this point, it may be useful to recall that these pieces were never designed to arouse an irrepresible urge to seize hold of them, to feel them, to handle them. These works are to be touched little or not at all. They are skimmed over and approached by other less direct ways, where the pleasure of the eye does not necessarily lead to the possessive gesture of the hand. We must, moreover, keep in mind that coherence and fantasy respond to each other, feed on each other. By combining gaiety and humour with the rigour of the forms, Ruegg nourishes its development. His research, often advancing behind the mask of fantasy or of paradox, may now lead to calmly serene works. The open containers approach sooner or later had to cut itself off from the whole idea of container and develop a relationship with the space around the



*Captor I.* 1987. Porcelain, aluminium, steel. 32 x 25 x 22 cm.

object. The notion of construction then becomes essential, illustrated in particular by the series of *Sensors*, those reversed cones, balanced on their apex, maintained only by plexiglass and metal bars or antennae, which catch the light with their inclined planes, incite us to look at them side-long, towards an elsewhere somewhere in space. Later, the united plates, also making use of assemblages and juxtapositions, further highlight the relationships between each of the parts, their tonality, their resonance, what they can call to mind when taken together. This sort of return to the object itself as the focus of our sight introduces what is going to become a dominant theme of his work: expressing through shadows and lights, rough or smooth elements, lines or flat tones, the possible combination of these opposites in a unity nourished by them.

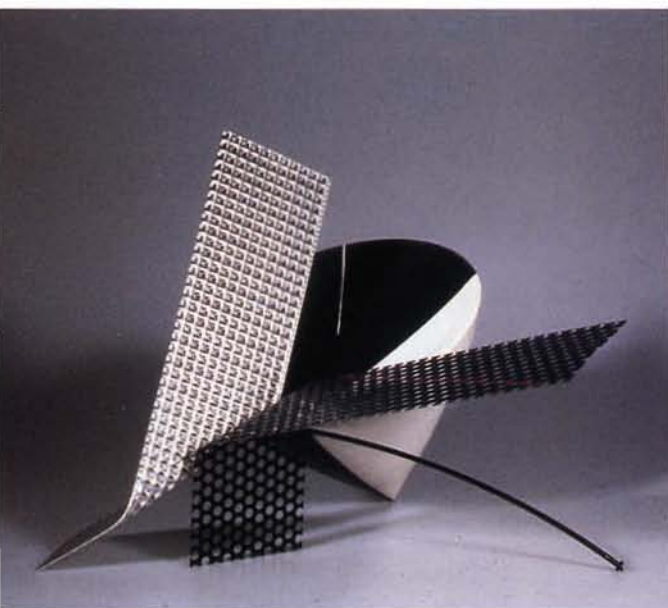
Thenceforth, the way is open and has materialised already in the pieces exposed at the last porcelain Triennial in Nyon. What appears there as fundamental is indeed that harmony born of contrasts. The lines incised in the plates are so many luminous signals holding full surfaces, the hollows of blackened brick are so many cavities lightening the volumes and emphasising their mass, each element highlighting the characteristics of the other. Complementarity is the key. The black and white then assert themselves unalloyed. Recourse to colours as dazzling elements is transformed into the use of light as an integral part of the object. Crossing the empty areas of the piece, the light takes the form of streaks, of clerestories, or else, materialised, it crosses the space in the form of



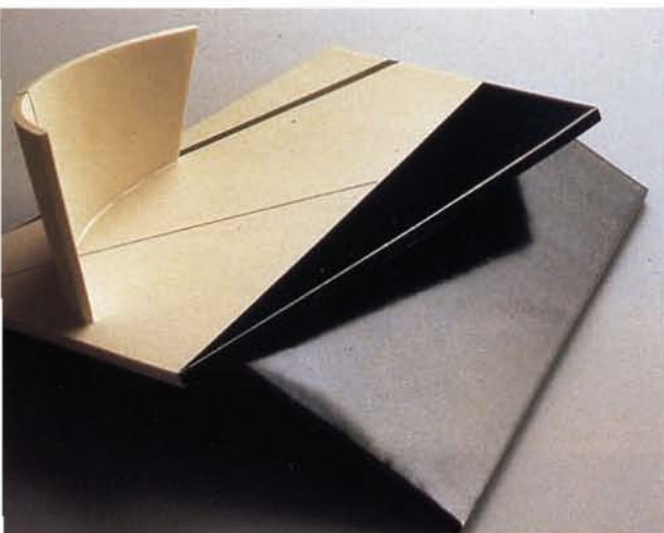
*Porte.III. 1993. Bone  
china and red clay,  
smoked. 50 x 18 x 18 cm.*



*Container. 1985. Porcelain, plexiglass, steel. 45 x 40 x 20 cm.*



*Captor II. 1987. Porcelain, steel, aluminium. 30 x 20 x 30 cm. Collection Ariana Museum, Geneva*



*Container. 1987. Porcelain, glaze. 40 x 35 x 25 cm.*



rays of brilliant white porcelain set in the dark masses serving as a medium.

The notion of opening(s) is ubiquitous. The opening can be a passage-way between a flood of light which penetrates and a glance which can escape, a narrow entrance between one space and another, or the threshold between within and without, or even between heaven and earth, suggesting the possibility of passing through the wall by looking through the key-hole or letting one's gaze soar up to look beyond, ever higher. The structure of the object is revealed by the withdrawal of matter and not by additions, by supplementary specifications. It is the empty spaces which, when they are crossed by a luminous flood coming from the other side, alter the perception of the ridges, the flat tones, placing the emphasis on one volume or the other. It is the empty spaces which reveal that the white, fine arcs of porcelain transpierce the somewhat soft gentleness of the walls of dark earth, like an arc of light penetrating through the openings of a house.



*Planet X. 1985. Porcelain, plexiglass. 30 cm/diam.*

Ruegg's pieces are increasingly solar, tending to signify light and call for a changing lighting made up of flashes or variations with which they enter into resonance. Light becomes necessary for the apprehension of the object in all its potentialities, to such a degree that it seems natural to place it on the sill of a wide window if it is to be perceived at its best.

Parallel to these pieces appears another type of creation which combines absolute simplicity in its fabrication with a strangeness just as great in its effect. These are great almond-shaped plates (as one talks about almond-shaped eyes) with a partly indented centre curving inward until it is resting on its end, so constituting one of the two supporting points of the piece. A porcelain tongue escaping from the eye and recreating a volume, the empty area initiated in the centre sufficing to transform the flat starting surface into a three-dimensional object. These pieces with their delicate matt turquoise blue surface produce an arresting result which links perhaps in a masterly manner with the artist's manifest taste for extra-terrestrial pictograms. In fact, beyond the humour, the ground covered since the '80s is significant.

Just as the older objects bore witness to a frenzied desire for openness to the world, so they now mark an appropriation, a synthesis obviously showing more restraint and silence. The pieces no longer soar toward something seductive, exterior and inaccessible; they unite the opposites in themselves, formulate their own response. By exploring the empty and the full spaces, by manifesting their complementarity, François Ruegg manages discretely to construct a universe which goes well beyond the form. A pathway which leads us to discover the ever-fragile point of unification, where oppositions, by manifesting themselves, balance each other out and combine to the point of offering the possible image of a temporarily found harmony.

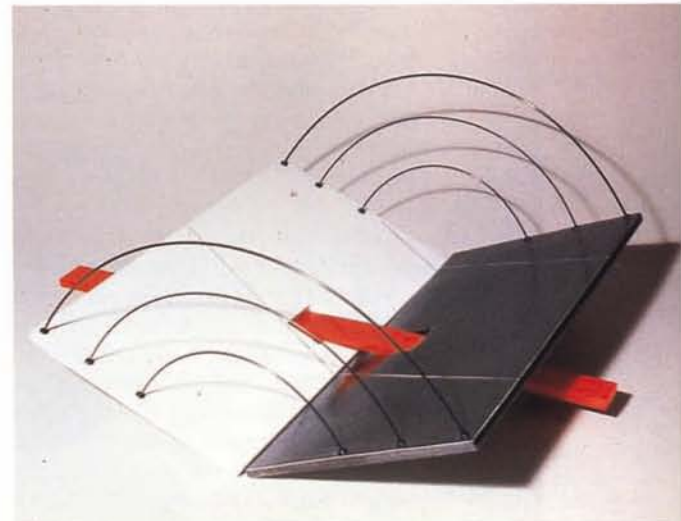
Suzanne Rivier (Dell'Ava) is a Swiss freelance writer on the arts. Translated by R E Williams. Photographs title page: *Plans*. These pieces were made in 1991, using Limoges porcelain, fired in a gas kiln, 1280°C. 48 cm/h.



*Zebra Plate. 1988. Porcelain, underglaze, yellow plexiglass. 37 x 26 x 15 cm*



*Flash Box. 1984. Porcelain, glaze. 18 x 20 x 8 cm.*



*Container. 1986. Porcelain, plexiglass, steel. 48 x 40 x 25 cm.*