

Stretching Boundaries

PROFILE – FIONA SIBLEY admires the technical virtuosity of Vivienne Foley's enchanting porcelain forms.

PHOTOGRAPHY – VIVIENNE FOLEY

Vivienne Foley is content. She is creating some of the most satisfying work of her career – a career that has stretched nearly five decades, gaining in technical virtuosity and artistic expression. Foley defines herself as both a potter and a fine artist. Her involvement with clay, by which read porcelain, is a serious business. It commands an artistic inquiry into territory at the far limits of the medium. The work deals with extremes – perfection of form on the most difficult scale. Has she ever been tempted to give up porcelain? No: porcelain has stretched her imagination limitlessly, and in turn, she has honed her skills to take her work to strong levels.

The pieces we are accustomed to seeing – the classic Foley vessels with elegant, flowing necks of infinitesimally slender proportions, sometimes only a few centimetres wide, topped with generous, complex rims offering up mysterious polygonal openings – are a technical accomplishment. The choice of a material like porcelain, with its low plasticity and high shrinkage, demands sculptural skill. Her works stretch to 55cm – larger than most porcelain forms – yet taper in to papery thinness, sometimes carved with a razor blade. Her way of overcoming the scale limits of the material is by throwing and joining sections to build height. 'To get a graceful, co-ordinated form when you are joining three or four sections together is the ultimate chal-

lenge,' she says. 'Making becomes a matter of application, and I am interested in form above anything else.'

Immaculate surfaces barely hint at the complex process of constructing parts that lies behind them. All the sections are made together so that they will be subject to the same conditions and behave the same way in the kiln. Subject to heat, the porcelain will shrink, sag and warp, but a high firing is nevertheless needed to achieve the optimum qualities of translucency and whiteness that Foley seeks. 'It is driven by an obsession with quality,' she says. Less confident potters would pale at the thought of such rigorous challenges.

Throughout her career, Foley has developed two bodies of work: one vessel-based, the other sculptural, but a strong common language elucidates the relation between the modes. For example, some of her sculptural horizontal forms, which creep along a surface like cellular creatures, can be traced visually to her upright vessel forms. They are both offspring of the same throwing technique: it is the act of lying a piece down that opens up an entirely new dialogue. 'We get used to looking at things in one way, but there are other ways of seeing,' says Foley, echoing John Berger. The transmutability of form is thus made evident in her work, and she has pursued the idea through different series. The vessel forms are acquired by collectors and galleries, while the sculptural work currently stretches her



conceptual mind the most: a logical development for a searching artistic spirit, beyond mastering classical form.

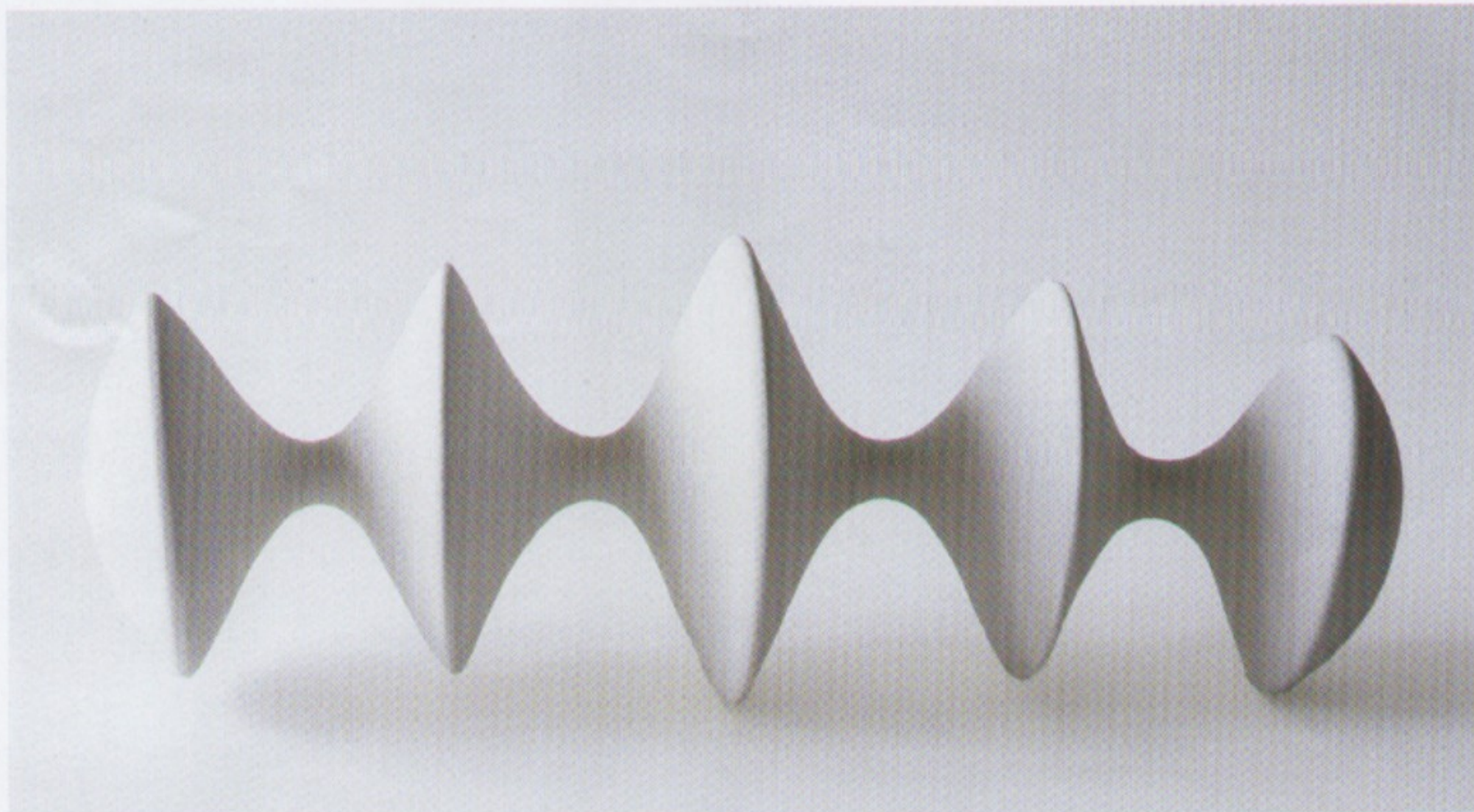
SCULPTURE

Foley's concern with sculptural form has moved her work forward substantially. The most recent series, *Strange Attractor*, takes the extended conical structures of previous works and connects them from a central volume, or boss. The resulting composition is of startling complexity for porcelain and so powerful is their suggestion of movement and energy, they evoke dancing starfish. Their limbs or tentacles bear relationship to the elongated necks of her vase forms, which she too has often stretched beyond usual dimensions. 'They have a life in them, as some pieces just do,' says Foley. Experimenting with the idea of multiples, she has been piling them up – 'playing' with them. It is amazing to see how they behave.'

After her mainly horizontal sculptures of the past three years, *Strange Attractor* has triggered a move



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Strange Attractor* series, porcelain with white slip, 2005, H max. 41cm ■ *Long Ribbed Forms*, porcelain with matt black slip, 2002, L max. 46cm ■ *Weight*, porcelain with matt black slip, 2003, L max. 28cm.



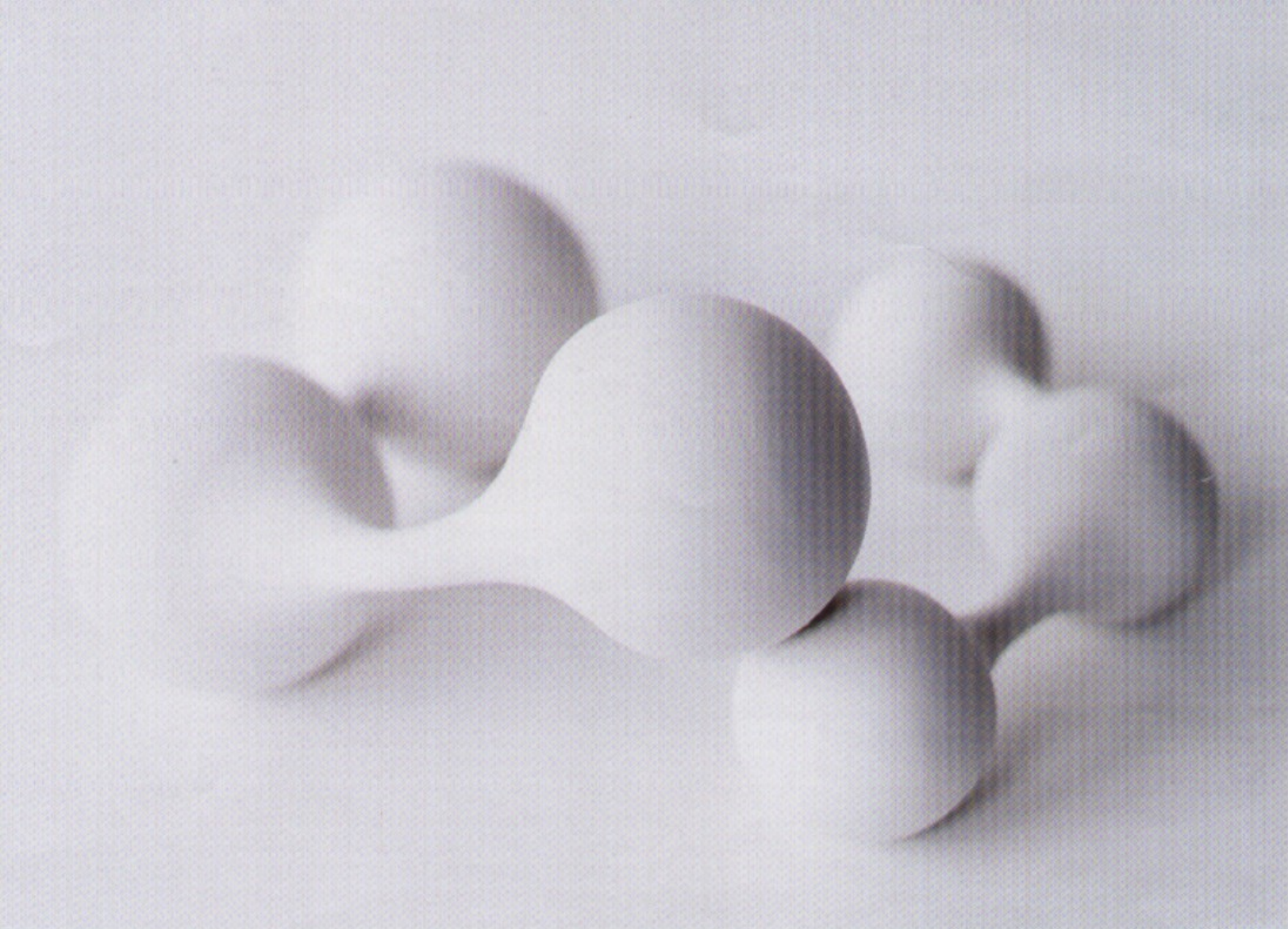
back towards vertical forms. In those earlier works, Foley subverted their visual weight with the lightness and strength of shells. *Rolling Forms*, with smooth or corrugated surfaces, lie alone or in pairs, their graceful arcs brushing against each other, commanding a sculptural dialogue with the space around them. *Connected Forms* attached numerous bodies together like molecular models to observe the relation of one to other, major to minor, or to project equal status. Balance and proportion are key drivers in her shapes. All have life but none, Foley insists, are symbolic or figurative.

Studying at the Sir John Cass School of Art in the mid-sixties instilled a scholarly approach to ceramics. 'My first teacher, Carol Stuart was a true mentor, teaching me how exciting form and structure could be,' she says. She chose porcelain 'because there was lots of heavy stuff around, and I found myself looking at Rie and Coper, and finding their work much more feminine and approachable.' Coper's sculptural ability has been an inspiration, as has studying ancient Chinese ceramics at Sotheby's and the Percival David Foundation. Here she was able to get behind the glass and handle the Guan wares of the Song dynasty and Ming palace bowls, admiring their glaze effects and the fineness of the porcelain.

VESSEL FORMS

Playful experiment has also made her classical forms distinctive. When in the mid-nineties Foley began to move the necks and openings of her vases off-centre, their elegant forms suddenly began to look like creatures. As Ahmed Sidki, an architect and gallery owner has commented: 'Some of her pieces she might just call a classical vase. But they always remind me of living things, often birds. One reminds me of a pterodactyl. There's something about them that lets you impart your own imagery.' However, Foley is quick to stress that her classical forms remain abstract. 'For me, if I say they are bird-like, there is a danger of getting into whimsy. They have got to be far enough removed from too literal an interpretation.'

The kiln plays a major role in determining shape. The porcelain is encouraged to sag and curl, but the higher



temperature firings for glazed pieces are too severe for the very fine necks. Those slender pieces are fired with slip then polished by hand to minimise distortion by heat. No two pieces are identical when they emerge. The works whose movement in the kiln has most pleased her is a series of long, funnel-necked bottles. The same charm is visible in a vessel called *Comma* (2001), whose swollen belly supports a neck that droops elegantly into a waning curve. The modernist influence of Brancusi's flowing, graceful forms is evident.

While running a studio in County Clare, Ireland for seventeen years, where she learned her commercial discipline, Foley used colour, lustres and textures. A move back to London

provided the welcome chance to rethink her work, including ridding herself of a challenging shelf of glaze jars. The serenity of black and white, ambiguously stately and playful, is now used exclusively by Foley to conduct her formal experiments. 'I find black and white more calm – I can't really deal with all the colour. It freed me to concentrate on developing ideas.' She has recently begun to experiment with photography – 'to redefine my work and extend the parameters. It gives the ability to focus and unfocus, and allows shadows to form part of the structure of a piece.'

Last year Foley received major commissions for a number of public spaces, including an order for eighteen unique pieces for the Gresham Palace Hotel in Budapest, gracing the marble fireplaces in a splendid Art Deco building. The Four Seasons Hotel in Amman, Jordan, the Millennium and Metropolitan hotels in London and a private apartment in Moscow – 'with a virtually limitless budget' – designed by Fox Linton, are backdrops her work suits. As Irish president, Mary Robinson commissioned several works for diplo-

Technical Notes

The series *Strange Attractor* comprises seven similar structures, to be arranged at will, one black and six white. Each piece was made from six separately thrown and turned pieces. Five cones were joined to a central sphere from which holes were cut to allow a free passage of air into the cones as well as making the structure lighter. The pieces were glazed after bisque firing with slip made up from a 50/50 mix of body clay and glaze slip. The projecting cones were unsupported during firing and allowed to bend with the heat and weight, encouraging a naturalistic rather than mechanical feeling.

matic gifts, including pieces for the Clintons and for Jacques Chirac. Recently she staged her fourth solo show at James Graham & Sons gallery in New York, marking a ten-year relationship.

Vivienne Foley's approach is intuitive, and she compares her actions to those of the dancer or musician, striving for the creation of something unique in the moment. Whether classically flowing or abstract and probing, it is work that exemplifies beauty. **CR**

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CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: *Bird Forms*, porcelain with ivory crackle glaze and black magnesia glaze, 2000, H max. 42cm | *Connected Form*, polished porcelain, 2002, L42cm | *Connected Forms*, porcelain with white slip, 2003, L max. 29cm.