

Porcelain medals by Maaïke van de Gevel

Breath as a theme¹

Arnold Nieuwendam

SEVERAL MEDALLISTS are making medals out of porcelain these days. One of these is Maaïke van de Gevel (fig.1), who has been working with this material for years and sculpts unique medallic objects with the underlying theme of 'Adem' (Breath). Examples of this are her recent series *Come Closer, Ademstroom (Breath Flow)* and *Ademruimte (Breathing Space)*. After a childhood during which she suffered from asthmatic bronchitis and other respiratory problems, she came up with the idea of investigating this theme through her artistic practice. In her work she examines her youth and investigates ideas around personal safety. Most of her creations are more or less a reflection of herself, a self-portrait.

Maaïke van de Gevel was born in Doetinchem in the province of Gelderland in The Netherlands on 29 July 1971. Having taken a preliminary course in art therapy in Nijmegen, she studied art history at the University of Amsterdam for a year. She then went on to the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, where between 1992 and 1996 she did her teacher training in craftwork, specialising in training in ceramics, three-dimensional sculptural forms and audio-visual work. From 1999 to 2001 she completed her sculpture studies at the Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam, where her teacher was Leo Vroegindeweyj (b. 1955). It was Vroegindeweyj, a teacher at the academy from 1983 to 2006, who supervised Van de Gevel's graduation project, in which she made small interventions in nature in The Hague's Park Sorghvliet to create a land art piece that was judged excellent by the examiners.²

For many years she has taught courses in hand-shaped ceramics in the Japanese raku tradition, bronze-casting and composing glazes, all of which are skills that she uses in her current work. From 1998 to 2019 she taught sculpture and 3D design at De Vrije School in The Hague. For six years, from 2003 to 2009, she was also a guest lecturer in sculpture on the foundation course of the Hogeschool Helicon, a

teacher training school in Zeist, and she spent two years teaching art and photography at the Geert Groote School in Amsterdam. These are all Waldorf (also known as Steiner) schools, where the teaching is based on anthroposophy, a philosophical system that aims to develop the talents and possibilities within every child. Van de Gevel now teaches in the studio of De Beeldhouwwinkel in The Hague. This sculptor's materials shop is a household name among sculptors in The Netherlands.

Since 1990 Van de Gevel has exhibited her work in The Hague, Amsterdam and other places in The Netherlands,³ but she is a relative newcomer in the world of medals. She explains her theme of Breath as follows:

Breath consists of a succession of works in various materials, including porcelain medal sculptures. The series is about the important role of the process of breathing in my life. The breath, which cannot always flow freely, inspired me to make lungs and clouds of breath in various forms. From very literal to more abstract representations. While moulding the clay I am practising the art of letting go, so that the air can flow freely. All of this is a deep and valuable quest for me. When expressing myself through moulding and sculpting I feel that I come closer to who I am.

I have a strong need to regularly work with my hands in the clay. I enjoyed doing that from an early age. It is an integral part of me. It brings me closer to myself. Sculpting is my way of expressing myself, shaping who I am. I prefer to use the porcelain clay without glazing, because I enjoy the feel of the pure material in my hands. In some objects I use rice in the porcelain to make transparency and vulnerability visible.

Examining a medal sculpture is an intimate process, an experience in itself, in fact. You take it in the palm of your hand; with a single finger you can feel the forms and you can examine the work very closely and from both sides. You can envelop it with both hands. Making contact with it like this, each medal tells its own story; the artist's



1. Maaike van de Gevel
in her studio, The Hague,
2020.



2. Van de Gevel: *Breathe me*, 2019, porcelain, 57 x 45 x 6mm.

story mixes with what the viewer experiences. While the viewer is looking at and touching the medal, it gradually takes on the temperature of his/her hands.

This then is the thinking behind Van de Gevel's medals, all of which are signed with a rebus/monogram comprised of an architectural façade – the artist's surname, Gevel, means façade – and an M. Her first medal was called *Adem me (Breathe me)* (fig. 2). Seven small openings puncture the oval porcelain form. On the obverse is the text ADEM ME, with the artist's signature to the right. The reverse is left without text. Because the colour is uniform, it is the form of the medal and the various openings that create the tension. Also important here is the feel of the porcelain, which has a remark-

ably smooth surface. Another medal with the same title has more openings, giving it a more fragile appearance (fig. 3). Again, the reverse is left neutral and smooth, but, significantly, one opening has been left blocked, although, like the others, it protrudes slightly above the surface on the obverse. This adds to the tactile effect, but light also plays a major role here, for the thin layer of porcelain in the blocked hole has a translucency that hints at the world beyond the medal but does not allow that world to be seen.

Other medallic works are very different. In *Hier ben ik (Here I am)* (fig. 4), the tactile aspect is perhaps less important and it is the play of light and shadow that is its crucial attribute. From above the work resembles a marzipan rose, giving a sense of enclosure and protection



3. Van de Gevel: *Breathe me*, 2020, porcelain, 72 x 50 x 7mm.



4. Van de Gevel: *Here I am*, 2019, porcelain, 30 x 30 x 20mm.



5. Van de Gevel: *Flow of breath me*, 2019, porcelain, 82 x 63 x 5mm.

6. Van de Gevel: *I breathe you through the night*, 2020, porcelain, 59 x 59 x 3mm.



7. Van de Gevel's *I breathe you through the night* (fig. 6) held up to the sky.



for a core hidden deep within, but when placed upright the text – the medal's title – comes into view. Another work, called *Ademstroom me* (*Flow of breath me*), takes the form of a continuous strip of porcelain (fig. 5). Again, the title of the medal and the artist's signature are punched into the obverse, while the reverse is left unadorned. The open shape intrigues through its fragility and the light that shines through the large openings. The ribbon-like form with openings was again used in a later medal entitled *Ik adem je* (*I breathe you*).

Light is also a key element in the circular *Ik adem je door de nacht* (*I breathe you through the night*) (fig. 6). Here the title of the medal is divided between the two sides, 'I breathe you' on the obverse and 'Through the night' on the reverse. This encourages the viewer to turn

the medal and to contemplate its meaning. The surface is uneven due to the irregularities created by mixing rice in with the wet porcelain. During the baking process the rice is burned away, leaving traces in the form of openings. These small openings combine with the relative thinness of the medal to create a startlingly beautiful experience, for, when the medal is held towards the sky, the light shines through in an almost kaleidoscopic way (fig. 7).

A particularly pebble-like medal called *Dichtbij me* (*Close to me*) is from the artist's ongoing *Come Closer* series (fig. 8). Its oval form fits comfortably into the palm of the hand, with the glazing on both sides adding to the sense of smoothness. Again, the title is divided between the two sides, with *DICHT* (*Close*) on the obverse and *BIJ ME* (*To me*) completing the sentence



8. Van de Gevel: *Close to me*, 2020, porcelain with glaze, 69 x 50 x 5mm.

on the reverse. In this way the two sides are brought together and an understanding of the medal is not possible until it has been turned in the hand. An imprint of the artist's forefinger on one side, just visible as a slight protrusion on the other, adds to this effect and acts as a further suggestion of tactility. This seems to be an object designed to be carried in the pocket and, from time to time, to be held in the hand – a sort of talisman or amulet. It is intended for a loved one who is distant. Unable to meet, the holder can place a finger in the imprint and experience in that way a feeling of closeness

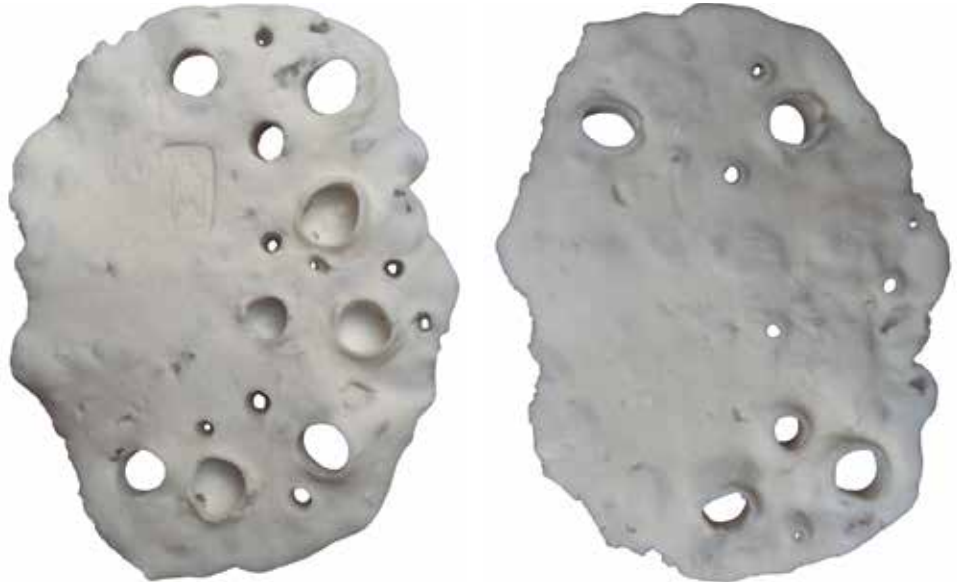
The rough surface of *Ademruimte (Breathing space)*, a medal in the shape of a lung (fig. 9), acts as a contrast to *Dichtbij me*. Here, the surfaces and edges are frayed, and there are several openings of different sizes. Again, rice was used in this model. Partly burnt away and partly glazed, this has resulted in the openings

and the partial transparency noted in *Ik adem je door de nacht*. The absence of text allows these features free reign.

The final medal reproduced here (fig. 10) is from another ongoing series titled simply *Adem (Breath)*. This marks a return to the features noted at the beginning of this article. Small craters are combined with smooth surfaces in an oval form, whilst the title, *Ik adem me (I breathe me)*, is impressed into the obverse along with the artist's signature. This is another medal to be carried in the pocket.

For air and breathing, the themes that permeate Van de Gevel's oeuvre, white porcelain is the perfect medium and allows her to express her thoughts in a very original way. Rather than relying on words, she makes poems about her life that are tangible, elaborating on her themes by means of subtle variations: openings that range in both their size and their number,

9. Van de Gevel: *Breathing space*, 2020, porcelain with glazed rice, 76 x 56 x 5mm.



surfaces that are smooth or slightly rougher, forms of different thicknesses, glazed and shiny or matte. In this repetition one can see a sequence in which the newest work is based on what has already been created. Everything is executed to the highest quality. Tactility is vitally important, but so is light, with the amazing translucency of thin porcelain providing the artist with particular opportunities. The unique works that she creates occupy a special place in the world of medallic art.

Maaïke van de Gevel is an enterprising artist, who ventures into many fields of art. An important feature of her work is a desire for the security that close contact with other people can bring, the need for someone 'close to me'. Her childhood experiences thus inform her art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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10. Van de Gevel: *I breathe me*, 2020, porcelain, 72 x 45 x 7mm.

NOTES

1. A version of this article appeared as Arnold Nieuwendam, 'Penningobjecten van Maaïke van de Gevel', *Muntkoerier*, xlix (2020), 7/8, pp. 47-9.
2. A. Lagendaal, *Grenzen vervagen* (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academie, 2001), p. 167.
3. See Maaïke van de Gevel, 'Galerie Joghem. Juni-expositie', *Peligraaf* (Amsterdam: Centraal Laboratorium Bloedbank), 4 (May 1997), p. 19; E. Ex, *Europa Zomer Expo 2019* (Zwolle/Wijhe: Museum de Fundatie, 2019), p. 30; F. Ter Haar, 'Gewoon transparant glazuur', *Klei Keramiek Magazine*, xl, 5 (September-October 2020), 5, pp. 38-9. Recent exhibitions are: *Come closer*, Oude Kerk, Scheveningen, June-July 2020 (with Elly Poldervaart Sekeris); *The space between*, Korte Vijverberg, The Hague, December 2020 (with Vera Holland and Elly Poldervaart Sekeris); and the joint *#artistsupportpledge*, Exposition De Balie, Amsterdam, December 2020 - January 2021. For one of her porcelain works serving recently as a prize, see J. Van Calsteren, 'Winnaar selfie-actie bij De Wereld op zijn KopS x Muzee', *De Scheveninger*, 26 January 2021, p. 5.