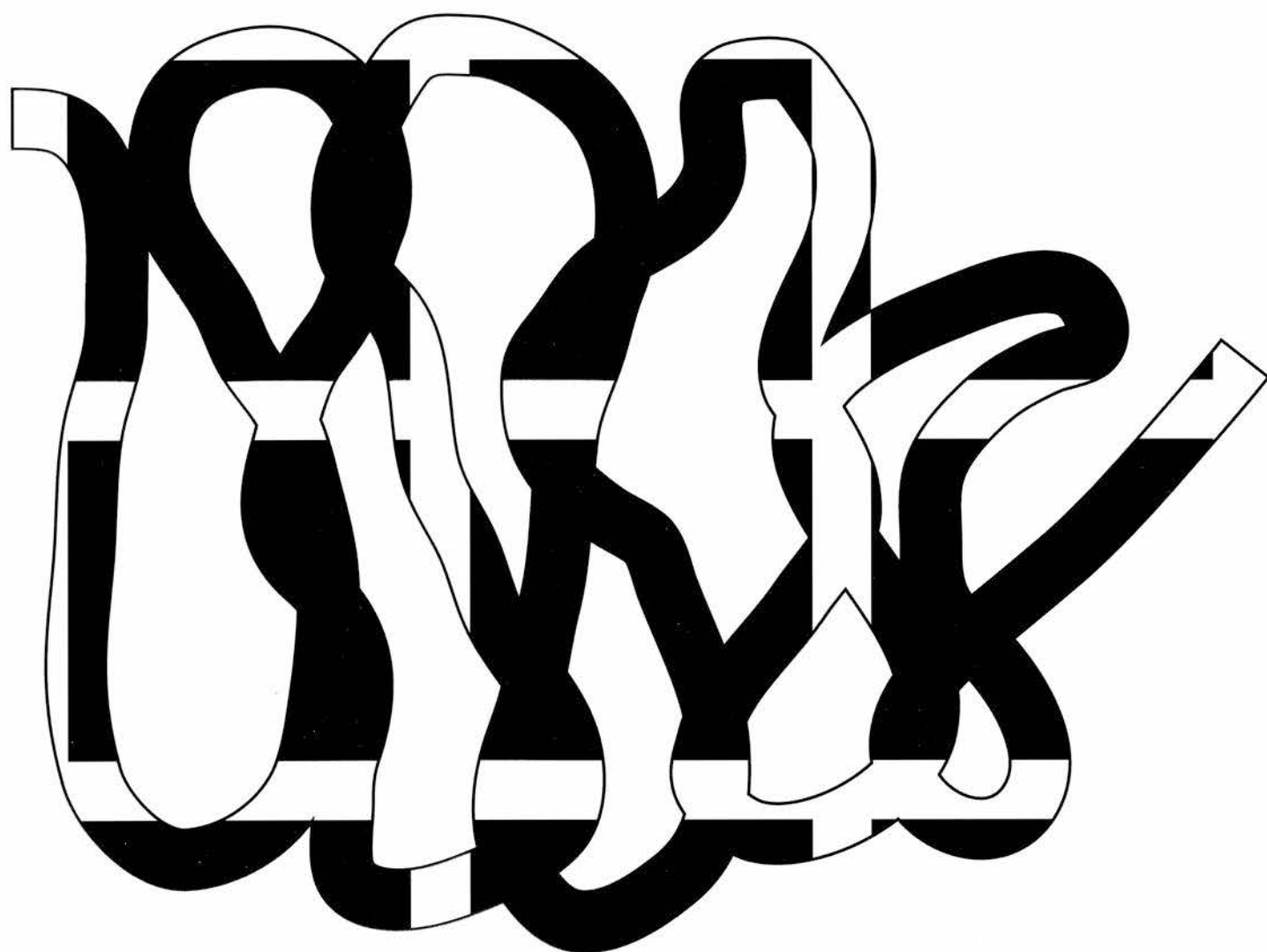
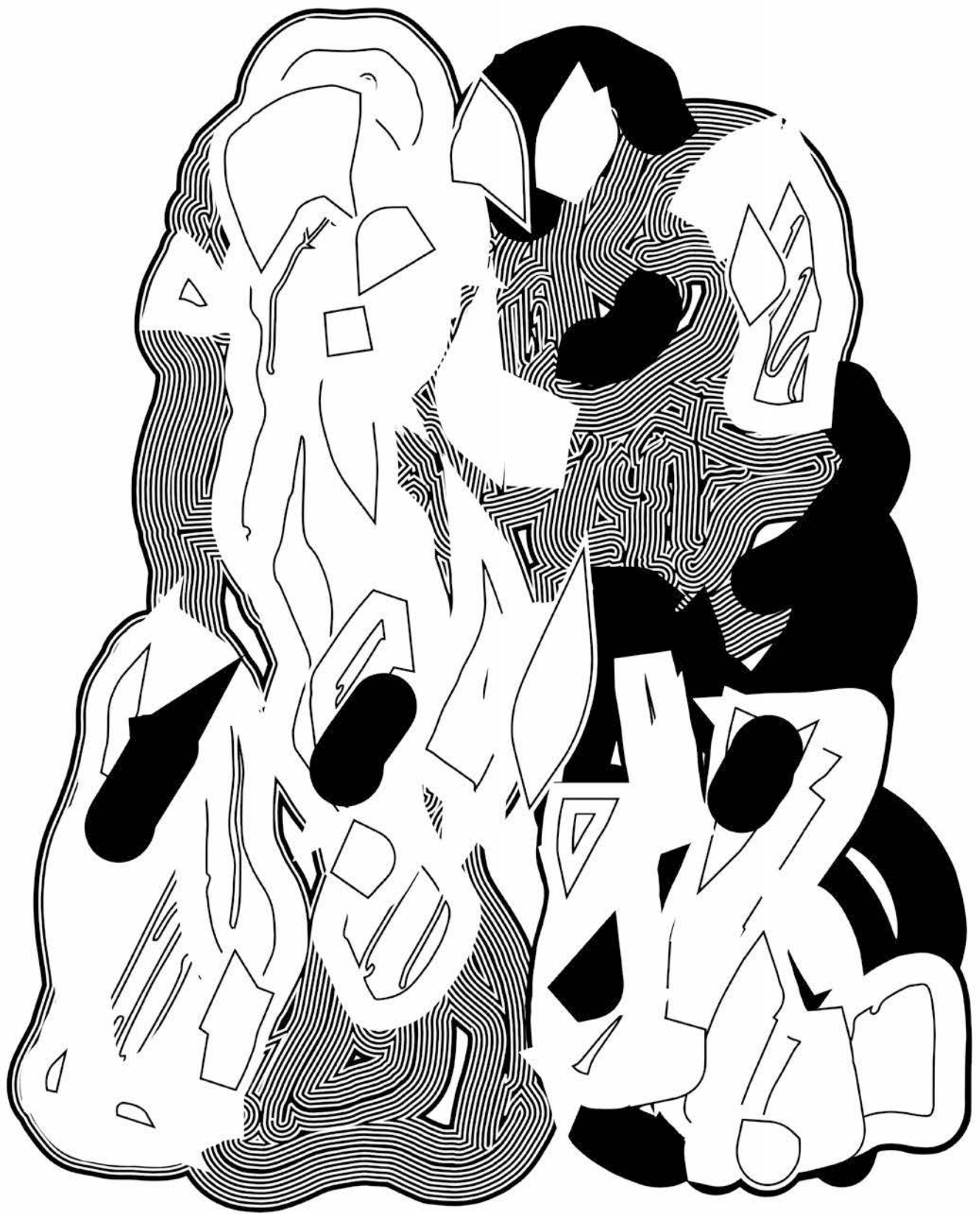




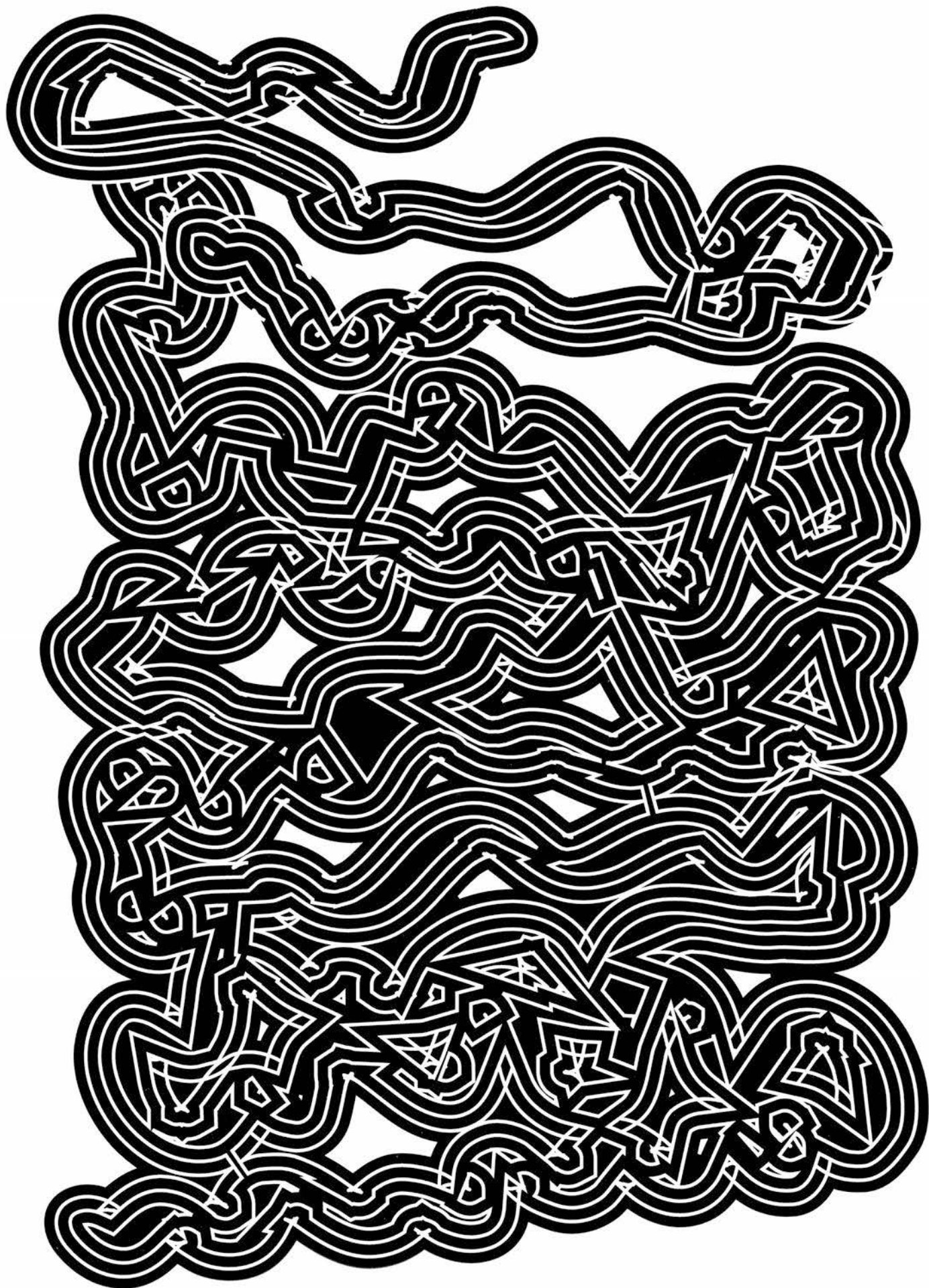
MARTIN BODILSEN KALDAHL
Probing the Floor, Sniffing the Air

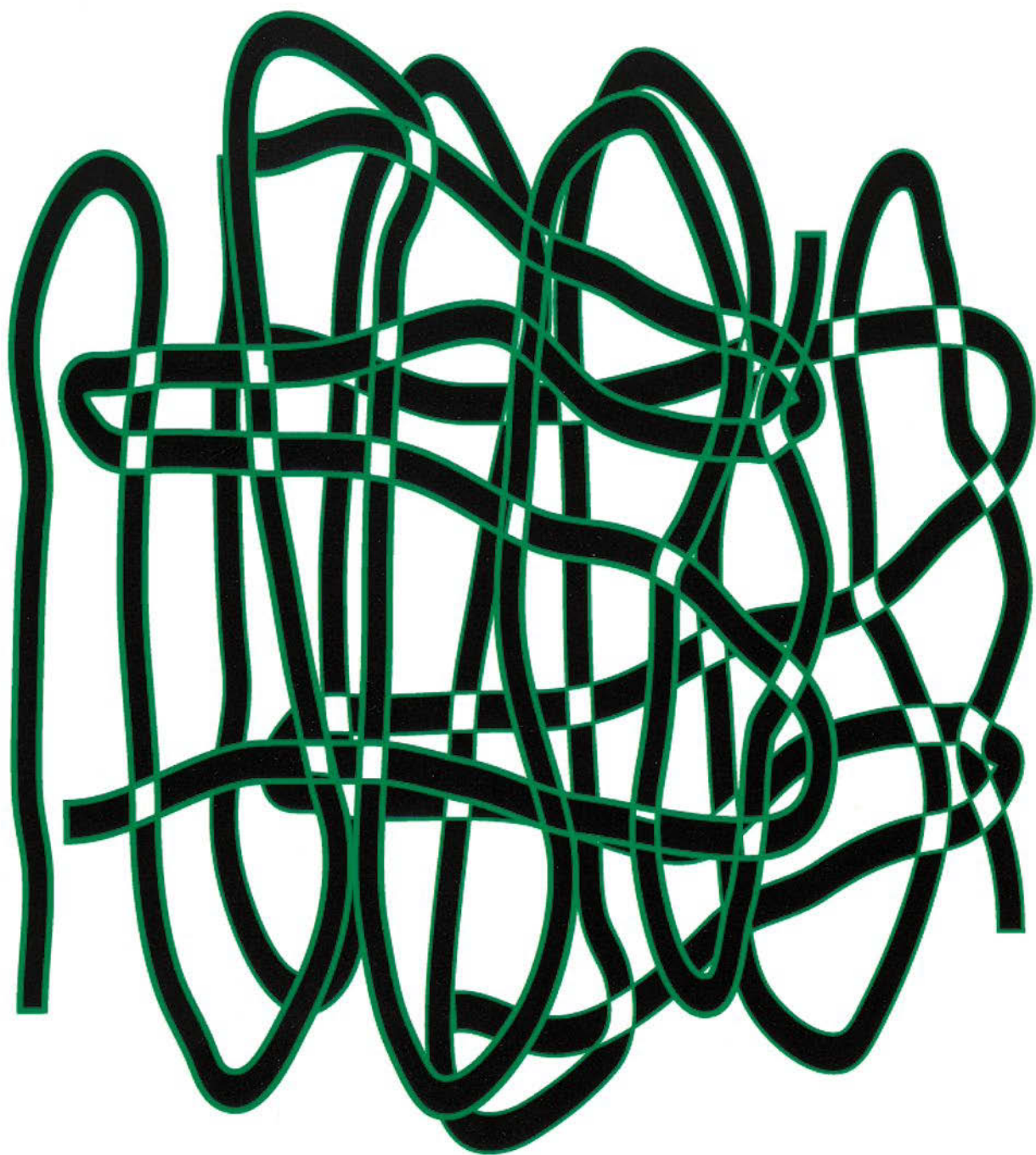
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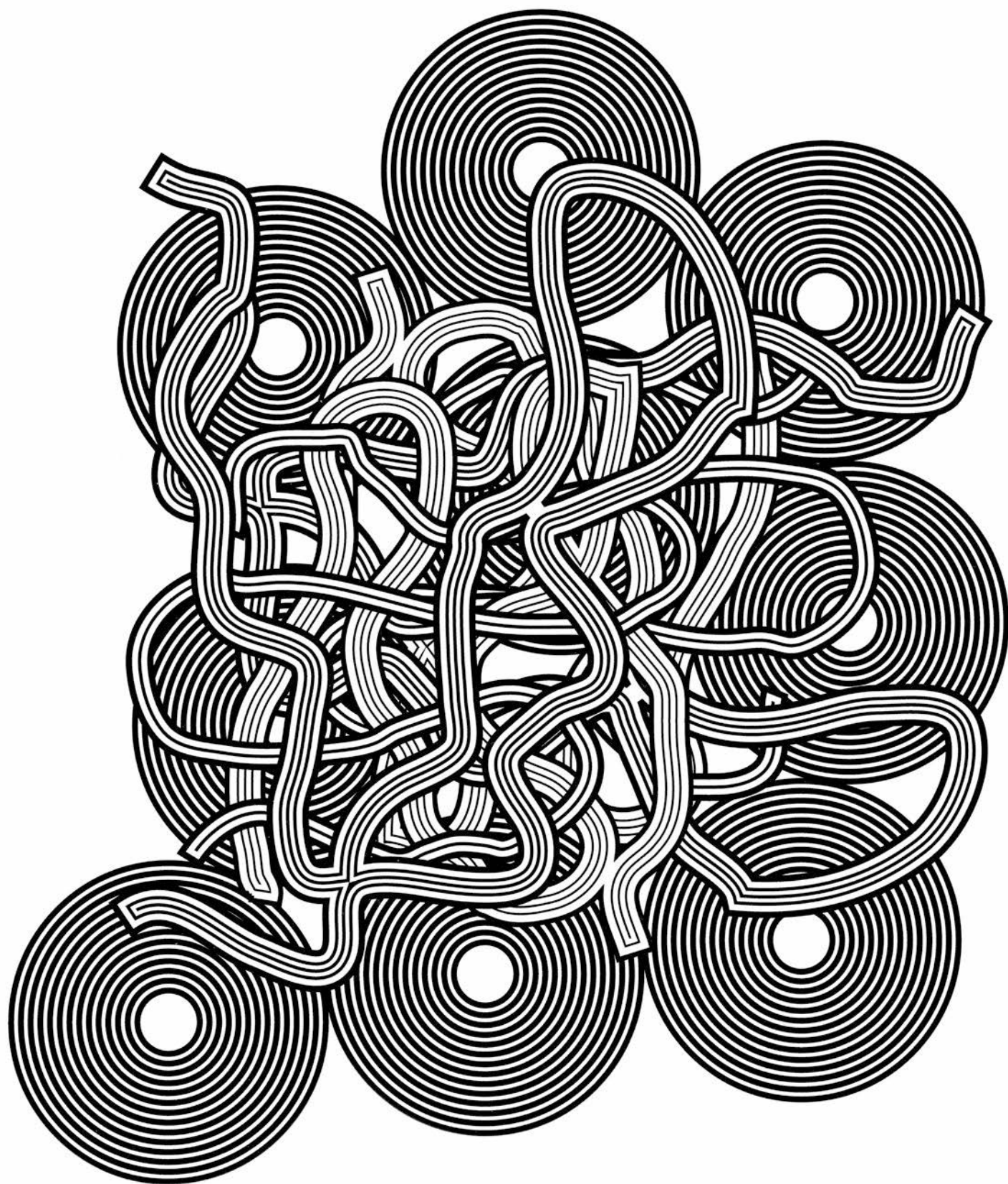


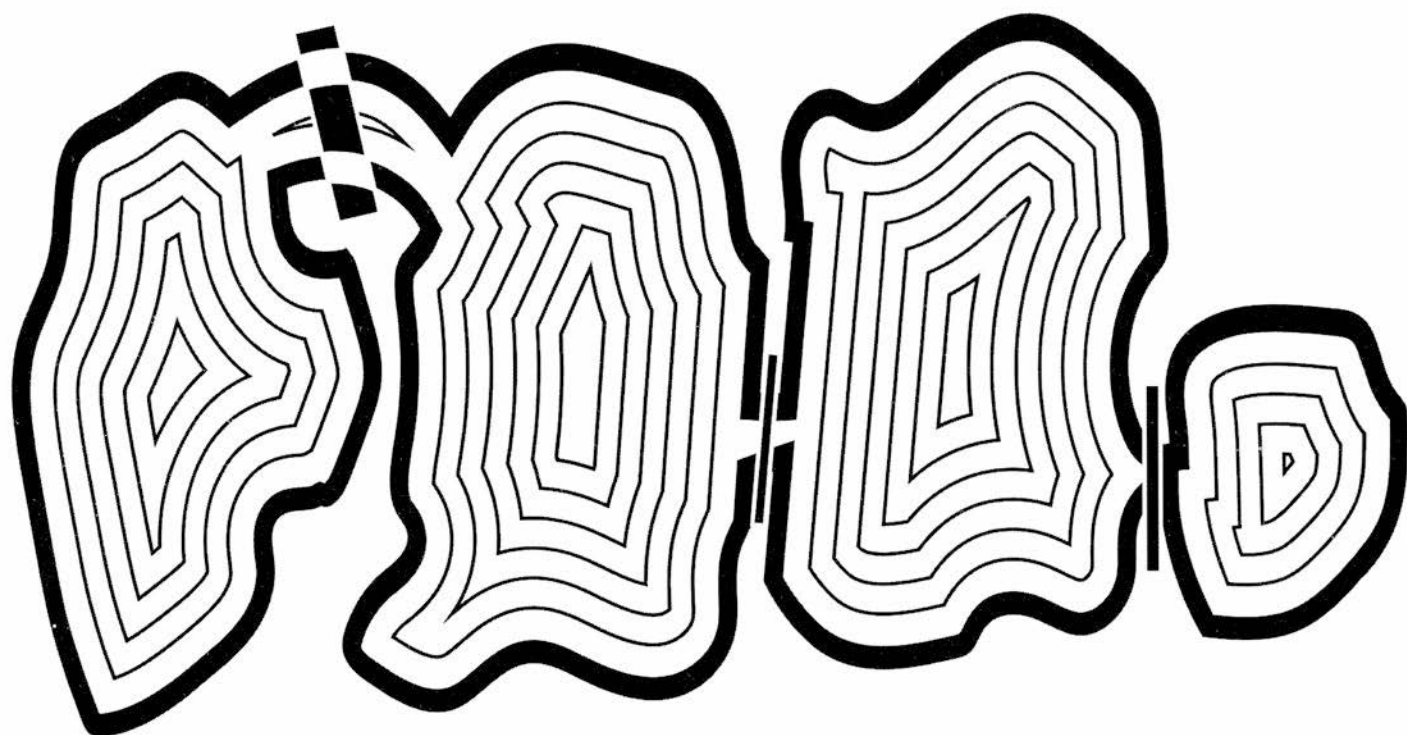












Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl: Probing the Floor, Sniffing the Air

With essays by Glenn Adamson,
and Jorunn Veiteberg

Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin

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Christina Rauh Oxbøll

CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark presents the exhibition Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl: *Cuts, Stripes and Knots – a ceramic retrospective* in autumn 2024, coinciding with the release of the present monograph. The exhibition offers a retrospective view of Kaldahl's persistent exploration of the sculptural potential of ceramics over more than three decades, complemented by several new pieces created for the exhibition. These recent works demonstrate that the artist's passion for clay and urge to explore new possibilities of form remain as vital as ever. Together, this monograph—*Probing the Floor, Sniffing the Air*—and the exhibition provide a comprehensive introduction to Kaldahl's lifelong dance with ceramics.

CLAY's connection with Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl dates back to the founding of the museum, in 1994. That year, Kaldahl had created his monumental sculpture group of three anthropomorphic vessels at Tommerup Ceramic Workcenter on central Funen. After showings in Copenhagen (at the Charlottenborg Autumn Exhibition in 1994 and, later that year, in the lobby of Denmark's National Bank) and in Saint Petersburg, Russia, the sculpture group returned to the island of Funen, where it was installed in the CLAY museum park. Here, against the backdrop of the old protected oak trees and the maritime traffic sailing through Little Belt, the more than two-meter-tall, vaguely humanoid ceramic vessels have stood in quiet conversation ever since, unperturbed by the changing weather and the passage of time.

Kaldahl's personal expression is characterized by his continuous experimental investigation of the artistic and technical possibilities of clay. Aided by his exquisite craftsmanship and mastery of the material, he has a formidable ability to immerse himself in an intensive process in which objects emerge in a dialogue between artist, technique and material. In this process, his dual background as artisan and artist is clearly evident. Based on an idea and analogue or digital drawings, he shapes the clay into three-dimensional form. Often surprising and sensuous, the objects manifest themselves through impactful and graphic color effects and a profound grasp of form in a playful engagement with both simple and complex constructions. His works invite a wealth of possible interpretations in a vibrant combination of abstraction and suggestions of both natural and cultural phenomena—but always with the underlying concept of form as the core feature, regardless of scale.

With impressive vigor, ever since earning his master's degree at the Royal College of Art in London in 1990, Kaldahl has developed a unique sculptural expression by restlessly and consistently flouting acquired skills, challenging himself and generating new possibilities. Today, his works are in demand by an international art audience and are found in esteemed museum collections, both in Denmark and abroad. Concurrently with his own artistic practice, Kaldahl has proven himself an exceptionally accomplished curator and organizer. He was one of the driving forces behind the exhibition platform Copenhagen Ceramics, which he initiated in 2011 together with fellow

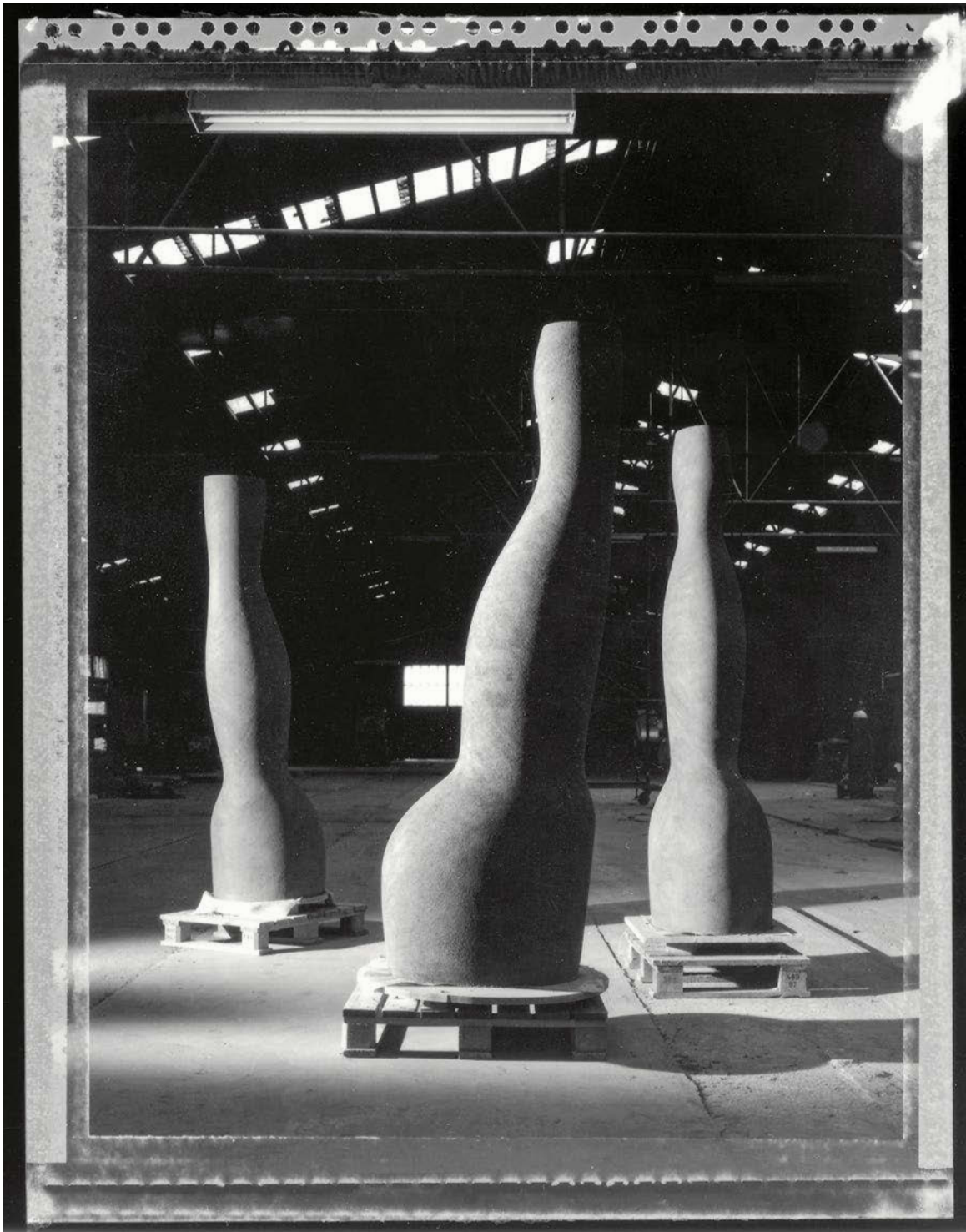
ceramic artists Steen Ipsen and Bente Skjøttgaard. Over the course of the first three years, the group launched twenty-seven exhibitions of works by ceramic artists from Denmark and abroad in its own gallery in Frederiksberg as well as an exhibition in Paris. In 2019, Copenhagen Ceramics was behind a major event at CLAY Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark: the exhibition *Ceramic Momentum: Staging the Object*, which was an exciting international encounter of 23 ceramic artists from Denmark, the United States, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and Chile.

In parallel with his artistic practice, Kaldahl has demonstrated his didactic abilities during his many years as a lecturer in the Royal Danish Academy's design programmes in Copenhagen and on the island of Bornholm. With his profound knowledge of ceramic processes, keen grasp of design, and powerful sculptural expression, Kaldahl has thus helped to shape several generations of talented ceramic artists and makers. He was also one of the initiators of the Royal Danish Academy's SuperFormLab: an advanced interdisciplinary workshop for 3D modelling focusing on experiments in materials such as ceramic, plaster, concrete and glass.

It is, thus, a highly accomplished and multi-faceted artist who now has the opportunity to focus fully on his own artistic practice and development. The exhibition at CLAY lets Kaldahl express himself as both a curator and an artist. His personal selection of works and his stringent exhibition design frame the presentation, in which pieces from different periods appear side by side, illuminating each other and pointing to possible connections and contrasts.

Warm thanks go to the foundations that made this monograph and the exhibition possible. With great sensibility and subtle understanding of Kaldahl's art, graphic designer Jeanne Betak has created the visual graphic expression of both the exhibition and this book. In the book, Kaldahl's work is introduced and interpreted by Glenn Adamson and Jorunn Veiteberg. The main emphasis of the American design historian and curator Glenn Adamson's essay, "An even newer Laocoön," is on Kaldahl's practice after 2012, in which he constructs objects from extruded tube sections in a randomized process. In "Anatomy of the knot and other studies of form," the Norwegian art historian Jorunn Veiteberg invites the reader on a tour of Kaldahl's journey of artistic development over the past 30 years exemplified by selected pieces and periods. The two essays are accompanied by a torrent of beautiful photos that spark wonder and fascination with the ever-changing vitality and diversity of Kaldahl's work: objects created with sublime command of material and form, which he challenges by means of the simple but ever-varying construction principles of *cuts*, *stripes* and *knots*. The result of this playful and explorative process is a unique artistic microcosm that connects an anonymous and automated vocabulary of form with individual, bodily experience. An artistic universe that enters into the topical debate about what it means to be human in the modern, digital age.

Working with Kaldahl has been a dynamic and tremendous experience. It is thus with great pride and joy that we at CLAY can release this book as we present the most comprehensive exhibition yet on the work of Kaldahl—one of our most significant contemporary ceramic artists.



Glenn Adamson

Consider the *Laocoön*. One of the most famous sculptures of antiquity, the work depicts an unfortunate Trojan priest flanked by his two sons (portrayed, curiously, at smaller scale). All are wrapped in the heavy coils of giant sea serpents, sent by the gods; the snakes have crawled up from the depths, and will soon pull the trio to a watery death.

Neither an expression of transcendence, like the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, nor an emblem of graceful perfection, like the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoön* seems to stand for complexity itself. It may be a Greek original or a Roman copy—that matter has never been settled—and was discovered only in 1506 at the height of the Renaissance. Michelangelo watched as it was excavated from the Esquiline Hill, in Rome, and its vigor exerted a powerful influence on his own sculpture and painting. But a work so convoluted, so anguished, was bound to attract more than admiration. John Ruskin shuddered at its “contemptible tortures.” The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing, in an essay inspired by the sculpture, drew a distinction between visual art and poetry, viewing the former as trapped in permanent stasis. Much later, Clement Greenberg, the dominant art critic of midcentury Abstraction, would invert that argument in his influential essay “Towards a Newer *Laocoön*.” Art might be fundamentally non-temporal, he wrote, but this limitation was actually intrinsic to its power: “For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.”

Now, this historiography would seem to have little to do with ceramics—a medium that could be described as essentially, extravagantly temporal, a kind of poetry in its own right, registered through the accumulated imprints of making and firing. But, when confronting the work of Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl, the *Laocoön*, and all the things that have been said about it, come immediately to mind. Kaldahl, like Greenberg, speaks of the “energy deriving from the direct physicality of the works” as being of primary importance. One could further say—extending Greenberg’s response to Lessing—that Kaldahl’s works are like models of time itself, holding the abstract flow of temporality fast and making it sensuous. Time is usually understood as linear, something that can be clocked. Experientially, however, it slows down and speeds up, and loops upon itself. In our waking hours, memory intertwines with direct perception. At night, the dream state makes its elusive passage through the mind; everyday temporal laws are suspended. And when we consider time as a social phenomenon, what we see is true multiplicity: each person, each place, each culture keeping to their own rhythm.

This complex subjective flow is just what is captured in Kaldahl’s sculptures. To compare them to the *Laocoön* is not just to notice a visual rhyme—though it is indeed striking how much his conjoined tubes, dodging in and out of central masses, resemble the antique sculpture’s sinuous serpentines and twisting torsos. Kaldahl’s works also powerfully evoke the

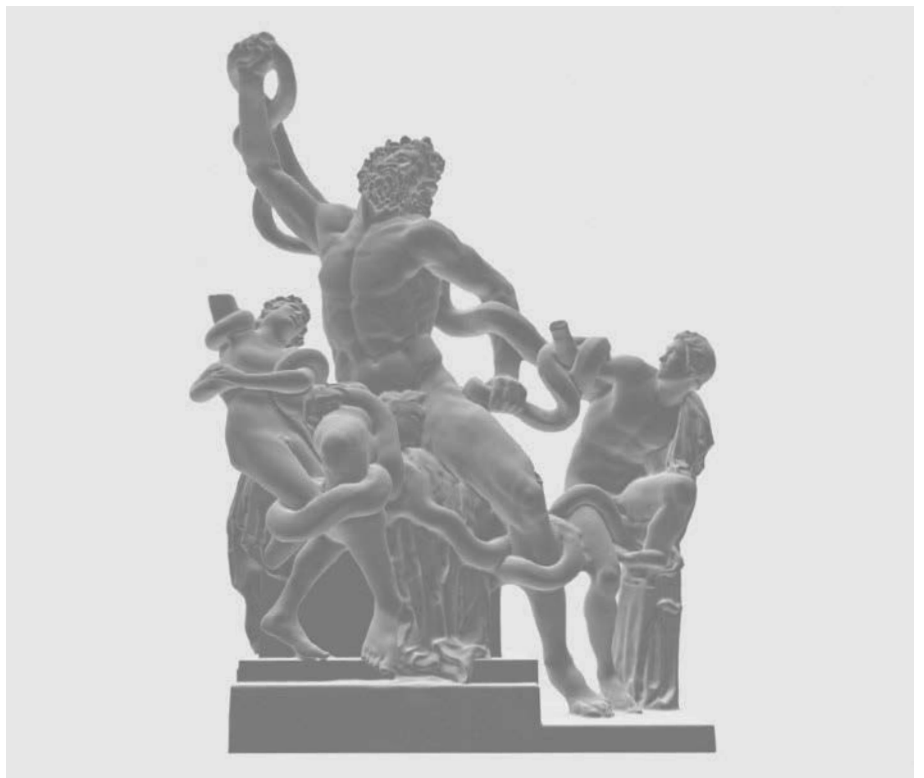
most famous words written on the ancient sculpture, by the pioneering art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (which were quoted by Lessing): “As the depths of the sea remain always at rest, however the surface may be agitated, so the expression in the figures of the Greeks reveals in the midst of passion a great and steadfast soul.” An artwork may be perfectly still, yet still convey a maelstrom within.

To understand how Kaldahl manifests this dynamic, it is helpful to know something of his process in the studio—for him, as for most ceramic artists, making and meaning are inextricable. His signature tube forms are actually not coiled (as pots and snakes are), but rather extruded. This accounts for their even consistency, which approaches that of pure geometry. Having produced a clay cylinder, he cuts it up at odd angles, and then repeats the procedure until he has a quarry of units, varying somewhat in length and shape. Then he builds, joining the components together in a semi-random sequence. The angled face of each cut placed against another produces an unpredictable vector.

As he works in this way, joining one unit to the next, “starting in one corner and letting it develop on its own,” as he puts it, the sculpture finds its own shape. The process is totally continuous, such that it actually traverses Kaldahl’s sculptures from one to the next. He is constantly resupplying himself, creating a stock of shapes and drawing from it, the basic technique ramifying endlessly, as in the operations of a genetic code. Sometimes, as in a majestic five-part wall mural that he completed in 2023, he groups his sculptures in sets, as if to emphasize this torrent of formal possibility.

When Kaldahl first fully committed to this unusual improvisatory method, he had a couple of questions in mind. The first was about the role of intuition: whether a form could be valid if allowed to happen of its own accord. To understand why this was so crucial, it helps to take a step back

Laocoön and His Sons
Marble, 208 cm × 163 cm × 112 cm
Still from 3D model
Vatican Museums, Vatican City



in his biography. For the first part of his career, Kaldahl was a studio potter, making objects that were at least notionally utilitarian. That early work remains easy to love, and to admire. It shows his debt to the humanistic traditions of the Nordic region, which he retained even after he was exposed to the experimentalism that prevailed at the Royal College of Art in London when he went to study there (1988–1990). He had many lastingly influential encounters in London, including with the Pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi, whom he remembers as a generous if somewhat irregular presence—“he invited you out, took you to meet people, dropped something on your desk”—and with Alison Britton, then leading a dramatic sea change in British ceramics.

Four Green Circles, 2000
Stoneware, 13 × 51 cm



To this day, Kaldahl says that he feels connected, “as if by an umbilical cord,” to the British ceramic *avant-garde* that came of age in the nineteen-eighties. Some of the debates that raged at the time—notably, the fraught question of the pot’s potential fine art status—meant little to him. But Britton’s idea that a vessel can be a material metaphor, in which “life has been translated through still life and beyond into some ghostlier, more ambivalent form of object,” was fascinating to him. Throughout the formative period of his career, Kaldahl turned such a possibility over in his mind and his hands. He was well aware of the advantages of having an established vocabulary, as studio potters do; but also of the limitations that this could impose. Gradually, after completing his studies at the Royal College, he abandoned standard functional pottery shapes, “getting rid of a lot of stuff that had gotten in,” and worked more sculpturally, more abstractly. An early example is *Four Green Circles*, of 2000, in which a series of bowl forms are nested within one another. While one could certainly use it as a table centerpiece, there is a strong suggestion that much larger forces are being centered in the piece, or are radiating outward from the act of making, like radar waves or ripples in water.

That sense of outward implication has been intrinsic to Kaldahl's work ever since. A representative (and wonderful) transitional piece from 2002 entitled *Other Planes #3* exemplifies this. The overall contours of its upright trunk could be those of a tree or a person. The shape is articulated by horizontal stripes of black and white; although their starkness is moderated by the halving that occurs at the edge of the glaze, there is still the sense that a rigid geometry has been imposed upon the organic form. And then there is a third logic present, in the clean cuts of the "limbs" that emerge from the vessel, leaving a set of orbiting ellipses. These at once serve as compositional focal points, and create a strong sense of incompleteness; the piece is like a poem whose lines all end mid-sentence.

This new exploratory direction left Kaldahl curious about the nature of exploration itself. "What if I could make a doodle, half conscious?" he asked himself. "Could I do that slowly, over a week or a month?" The answer was yes. He took his initial steps with works like *Knot Pot #1* (2004), in which the strong visual contrast of earlier works like *Other Planes* is combined with a meandering element, which could almost be an extremely elaborate handle, but involves itself unpredictably in the overall shape, cinching it in at the middle. The year after he made this work, Kaldahl was awarded a research position at the Danmarks Designskole (the Danish School of Design) (2005–2008); he recalls it as an incredibly generative time in which he created a huge reservoir of potential ideas. Meanwhile, the linear knot elements were finding diverse forms of employment, lying like specimens in basins, conjoining themselves with the forms of natural branches, and embedding themselves in the sides of vessel-like masses.

Other Planes #3, 2002
Stoneware, 75 × 43 × 42 cm



Knotpot #1, 2004,
Stoneware, 42 × 44 × 30 cm



Orange Accumulation, Spatial Drawing #62, 2021
Earthenware, 77 × 92 × 48 cm



In retrospect, however, the knots seem most significant as the antecedents of Kaldahl's extruded and sectioned tubes. He began using these as his primary construction modules in 2012, in works that he refers to generally as *Spatial Drawings*. They do indeed have the improvisatory quality of a rapid sketch, and sometimes are planned in advance, as Kaldahl roughs out a format in pen and ink. But this is only ever a starting place; by introducing the element of chance, he has been able to let go of his own authorship to some extent, reacting to his compositions rather than controlling them. At the same time, he has been able to ensure coherence both within each sculpture, and across his body of work, by virtue of his focused technical repertoire.

This has led Kaldahl to pose himself a second question, more cerebral, and harder to answer definitively. How might he complicate the relationship of ornament and form? This is a great topic for a potter, a concern that he shares with many other ceramists—in his own native Denmark, one might think for example of the great midcentury designer Axel Salto, and Kaldahl's contemporary Morten Løbner Espersen. Like both of them, Kaldahl elides the conventional distinction between the "body" of the object and what is applied to it. Yet his tubular forms present an unusual solution, or rather, a set of open-ended possibilities. While their internal repetition does set up a pattern—a hallmark of the ornamental mode—there is also a neutrality to them. Tubes, after all, are most often encountered as infrastructure, whether in the plumbing of a building or the blood vessels of the human body. And as he has worked with this vocabulary, he has found himself emphasizing that evocation of pragmatism. The sculptures have become less classical, less figural (a bit less like the *Laocoön*, in fact) and more like feats of engineering. At their most extreme—the densely populated *Orange Accumulation, Spatial Drawing #62*, from 2021, is an example—they come across as self-propagating, as if Kaldahl were communing with forces scarcely under his control.

