



# Ceramics and

# Americanness

Peter Schjeldahl

DAVID REGAN: SUCKER'S TUREEN (1993), 15" X 20.5", PORCELAIN. PHOTO: ANTHONY CUNHA.



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What do I know about ceramics? More than most of my fellow American art world professionals. Not a great deal. I can often, though not always, tell earthenware from stoneware. I have read most of one book, Garth Clark's *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present*, and bits and pieces of others. My best knowledge of the subject has come in bursts of intuitive illumination from indulgent, charismatic friends: Clark, Betty Woodman, Adrian Saxe. I owe a respect for even mediocre ceramists to one session at a potter's wheel, when I tried to make a vase and settled for something else, arguably a plate.

What do I know about ceramics, indeed? Come to that, what sort of knowledge is knowledge of ceramics? Is my culture's intellectual avoidance of the *métier* part of the *métier's* present significance? I believe so. Pottery may represent something that people become intellectuals to get away from. It epitomizes "craft," a word with an uncouth, dingy cast in American mandarin ears. (As if there were no craft in art or, for that matter, in art criticism!) But pottery's fundamental offense seems physical. Besides celebrating hand-dirtying labor, which mandarins pledge to shun, ceramics inhabits the optical blur of the all-too-nearby. It finds its meaning within arm's reach, at one extreme of an aesthetic spectrum whose other end is architecture. Nearly all of what we normally call "art" occurs in between, at the middle ground distances where eyesight is most efficient and critical intelligence ("seeing" abstracted) enjoys optimum grasp and elbow room. Making matters worse for the analytical mind, nothing in the arm's-reach zone can be relied on to hold still.

Functional ceramics insults contemplative detachment by being devoted to a quotidian Eros, a spirit of delectation knitted into ordinary bodily and domestic doings. This knitting is the social point and completion of practical ceramic art. While complicating sight with touch and touch with sight, ceramics complicates both with ritual, if we agree to regard normal use of ceramic objects as ritualistic—and why not? Use needs only a bit of special consciousness. Ritual is use plus contemplation.

There are tactile contemplation and visual contemplation, and then there is life. Usually we do not contemplate while actively living. When we do, that is ritual. Ceramics is a class of objects that make aesthetic ritual conceivable every day. Ceramics surrenders to art the privilege of uselessness. (In relation to architecture, the presence of ceramics proves that someone has moved in.) However—and this is a big "however"—in today's real world the surrender tends to be more theoretical than actual.

A marvelous cup delights eye, hand and soul. It elevates drinking, an activity of our animal nature. It is comforting to be thus pleased and thus elevated. We may reflect that life is pretty tolerable, on the whole, as we wield the lovely cup—if we do wield it. It may be too lovely to drink anything out of.

As with many people I know, my everyday ceramics are little better than dime store junk, to avert mourning over breakage. My wife and I own some nice old china for occasions and a few fine vessels. The latter are displayed on shelves, untouched except for the infrequent dusting. Not much comfort in that, is there? To feel responsible for and to a fragile thing is burden-



WILLIAM BROUILLARD: FISH BOWL (1992), 27", PORCELAIN.

some. (But what is life without elective burdens?) True connoisseurs of ceramics, as of anything, must know that comfort has little to do with their passion, and yet the art of the vessel may be materialized philosophy of comfort, comfort for comfort's sake. Right here, in the paradox of functional things robbed of function by their excellence, criticism wakes up with work to do.

A good collection of nonfunctioning functional ceramics is like a set of speculations on possible rituals, possible lives, in slightly melancholy alienation from lived reality. A splendid contemporary pot postulates a yearned-for, better world that is not: either not here or nowhere, no longer or not yet. It betokens that missing world. Like the effigy of an airplane set out in a jungle clearing by a cargo-cult tribe, it implores sky-borne gods to refurbish the common life in its image.

Such a pot is brute matter coaxed into figuring forth ideals of cultured existence. From pungent to delicate, decorous to wild, the object's range of appeal can resonate with all manner of personal and social happiness. We are reminded that arm's reach is the ambit of embraces, where the "in here" of ourselves gropes for erotic agreement with the great "out there." Of course, the out there in present so-called civilization is often a nightmare alley to which our splendid pot is a frailly countervailing dream. Some people, whether wealthy and dedicated or just dedicated, do actualize aesthetic ritual day to day, setting beautiful stuff on the table with a gallant flourish. At least in America, it seems hardly possible to live that way except a mite defensively, with an intimate defiance that risks the ridiculous. That equivocal

word "craft" calls to mind social stereotypes perhaps partly respectful while largely mocking.

On the respectful side, "pottery" in the United States has sturdy bohemian associations pitted against both the brutal imperium of industrial mass culture and the haughty elites of "high" art. It suggests a literally earthy pursuit with tints of leftish politics and conservative (Arcadian, Luddite) temperaments. To a country whose cultural history has moved in tidal waves of technical innovation and commercial exploitation, the craft ethos contributes eccentric riptides and eddies of the humane.

American claywork sometimes has ridden history's wave. In the 1880s the Cincinnati ladies of Rookwood introduced a craft of sensuous vigor for the thoroughly modern parlor. In the 1950s Peter Voulkos and his friends in Los Angeles extended the aesthetic of abstract expressionist painting to clay, where it breathed a new consciousness of Asia. Each such moment was doomed to brevity, but all are wonderful in retrospect and nurture the faint hope of recurrence that can keep a creative enterprise stubbornly aspiring.

(A sign of the popular incomprehension of ceramics in the United States, by the way, is the still-very-limited reputation of George Ohr, the turn-of-the-century genius of Biloxi, Mississippi whose protean, incredibly delicate pots, *sui generis* in ceramic history, came to light in a neglected warehouse in 1972. This classically American hero, practically without ancestors or heirs, rode into town, shot up the place, and rode away. I am told that he has a growing name in Europe—a reproach to natives of his country,

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where he should be taught to schoolchildren as a national treasure akin to Walt Whitman.)

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On the mocking side, seriousness about pottery stirs satirical thoughts of self-righteously insular utopians, unconscious of their privilege, who flaunt bumper stickers recommending wood fires as an alternative to nuclear power plants. It suggests humility pumped up to a fetish. The Platonic product of such a world view is an object smallish, brown and morally overbearing. So the zone of American functional ceramics, while mostly speechless, is anything but tranquil. Like the private life (whether bohemian or bourgeois) whose dignity and amenity it conventionally idealizes, the field is invaded by traffic noise of prejudices and discontents. I am struck by how little of the work seeks to deny this unquiet condition. Much of it in one way or another deploys a peculiarly American talent, born of necessity, for countering assaults on the human spirit by seeming to join them. Open-ended irony reigns.

A major irony of making ceramics today resides in the contrast between modest, personal, unique manufacture and arrogant, impersonal, mass production culture. Emblematic of the contrast is an exceedingly crude piece by Annabeth Rosen, an unwieldy slab of a platter with gear-toothed circumference. This work bows to mechanical form with hilarious clumsiness, as if an oaf tried gamely to pirouette. Rosen, whose rugged fruit baskets of snakelike forms confirm her talent, advances with her platter a sort of talentless sublime, a level of dysfunction that no machine except the human hand could descend to achieving. It is a pon-

derous tour de force of light wit, and is strangely satisfying. Ann Agee's production of Delft-like porcelain is an industrial pastoral or blue-collar idyll. Agee has worked in an informal residency at a Wisconsin factory that makes bathroom ceramics. There, amid marching toilets, she has produced commemorative ware that is part diary, part journalism and sheer poetry overall. It is sort of mock-heroic court art, celebrating a nobility of richly individualized ordinary workers and a domain of Midwestern scruffy town and shaggy countryside. Why do such a thing? Agee's lyrical commitment to a radically humble project reminds me that the best American lives (maybe the worst, too) ring variations on the answer "why not?"

Rosen and Agee are makers of allegorical objects. Signs—either embodied as in Rosen's platter or incorporated as in Agee's decorations—strike me as a dominant theme. Another is mutability, the embrace of clay's readiness to assume any sort of shape at the potter's whim. With a well-developed tradition once centered in the San Francisco Bay area, the American bent for ad hoc and outrageous ceramic form makes a virtue of the culture's vice of absent standards. It is a bit muted by functionality, but an observer needs no critical pointers to note mutability's burbling omnipresence.

Signs signify discontinuity. Their presence means the lack of whatever they refer to. Where an allegorical pot refers in image or form to a traditional mode of ceramics, it declares that the mode is dead and revivable only and precisely as an image of itself. An example is Julie Terestman's vaguely Viennese/



Bavarian romance, tradition recalled with the oddness and intensity of a fever dream. The past haunts rather than informs such work, though with anything but deathliness in Terestman's case. Her ghosts are extraordinarily nimble.

Signage and mutability differently react to the marginal status of ceramics in American culture, alternatively trying to overcome and resolving simply to enjoy it. Signage raises clay's voice to shout across a gap to a possible audience. Mutability takes antic advantage of a situation without rules. When American ceramics are good, they tend to be extravagantly signifying or extravagantly free. When bad, they are often pretentiously signifying or trivially free.

There are important exceptions to the rule of irony in ceramics. The accomplished Peter Beasecker is a serious designer in a modernist vein more European than American. His elegant teapot variations suggest selfless aesthetic research, a laboratory of style. Then there is a triad of Sarah Coote, Mark Pharis and their former student in common Linda Sikora, three potters who demonstrate continuity with modern ceramic traditions of conspicuous handwork and meditative formal concentration. If I were to own one piece it might be a Sikora teapot with quilted body and pinkly blushing spout. It purely distills formal and sensuous pleasures of ceramicness. It's quietness is like a sudden hush, as when a wind drops. Sikora's is a conservative pot, despite its pinkish audacity, and practically un-American according to criteria of ironic self-consciousness that I have been loosely developing. But then, it is highly American to con-

tradict oneself, as Walt Whitman assured us. I never argue with Walt Whitman.

I have no idea how Americans have impressed British clay folk, whose ways are just about totally unknown to me. Will American claywork strike them as rather frazzled in its uncomfortable, energetic variety? If so, they will be well onto the sensation of trying to pursue anything aesthetically sensitive in today's United States. This culture feels like a bad back rub. We—whoever "we" are, a question at the crux of the problem—are not serene. I am interested in how pottery, a symbol of domestic serenity, registers our nervousness while irrepressibly scheming our betterment.

This essay originally appeared in the catalogue accompanying the show entitled "The American Way, Views on Use: Function in American Ceramics" a touring exhibition organized by Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth, Wales, and curated by Scott Chamberlin and Betty Woodman.

Artists featured: Ann Agee, Peter Beasecker, William Brouillard, Sarah Coote, Deirdre Daw, Kim Dickey, Jane Dillon, Ann Gabhart, Alec Karros, Paul Kotula, Andy Martin, Mark Pharis, Gregory Pitts, Annabeth Rosen, David Regan, Judith Salomon, Linda Sikora, Sandy Simon, Julie Terestman, Bruce Winn, David Wright.

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