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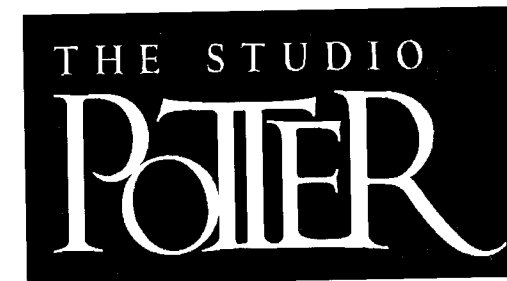
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The oldest rocks that we can find on earth are a mere 3.8 billion years old, nearly a billion years younger than the earth itself. It is impossible therefore to find a "fossil" record of the earliest clays. But there is a type of meteorite, called a carbonaceous chondrite, whose average age is about 4.5 billion years, comparable to the Earth's. Certain of these meteorites contain both liquid water and iron-rich clays. The same ones also reveal the presence of amino acids and other complex organic compounds. On the other hand, those that contain no liquid water reveal no clays, and those without clays have no organic compounds. Since each of the meteorites evolved in isolation in deep space, there is evidently a connection between the water, the clays, and the growth of long-chain organic molecules.

In its first billion years, Earth was a rather different place than it is now. Oxygen was rare, and iron was common and very reactive. Nothing grew on the surface of the planet, so the land flowed downhill into the broad shallow shores of the seas. Most clays formed there or near the seafloor vents, where fresh iron was pumped upward from within the crust.

Still today, in deep-sea trenches largely deprived of oxygen, clay species rich in iron and potassium form and evolve within the pore spaces of seabottom minerals, relatively protected from the surrounding events. These clays closely resemble what clays must have been on the early Earth. And they behave as though they were alive. They go through a process of transforming growth. A young one resembles a little worm, and blooms into a pattern of open curves. Another begins as an isolate thread, and grows into nodules that some scientists have compared to peppercorns but that also have the comb structure of a beehive or a sponge.

It might be argued that these patterns are nothing more than crystal growth. But the real question, as Schrödinger knew, is how life itself is related to crystal growth. Richly patterned clays might have served as templates for biosynthesis, that is, for the beginning of organic life. It is a statement so simple and obvious that it runs the risk of being ignored, just as the obvious case for plate tectonics was ignored for hundreds of years.

Consider the iron-rich mineral called kakoxen. Tubular in form, hexagonal and hollow in cross-section, this remarkable crystal species looks like nothing so much as the rose window of a Gothic cathedral. Exactly the same impression is given by computer simulations looking down the bore of a DNA molecule. Seeing both of these together, it is easy to believe that the protected interior of such a crystal might have been the site where organic polymers of the sort that would form nucleic and amino acids were born.

Hartman has an idea how the transition from these prebiotic clays to organic life might have occurred. In the presence of ultraviolet light, iron can sometimes capture

both carbon dioxide and nitrogen from the air, resulting in the production of citric acid, an organic compound. Amino acids can gradually be built out of citric acid. So seaborne clays on the ancient Earth, deriving their energy by feeding on CO<sub>2</sub>, nitrogen, and light, might produce the building blocks of organic life.

A basic question for Hartman and his colleagues is this: do (or did) clays reproduce? In other words, does the particular order expressed in one particular clay create further clays with the same order? Second, is this order dynamic? Does it lead to social interactions among clays?

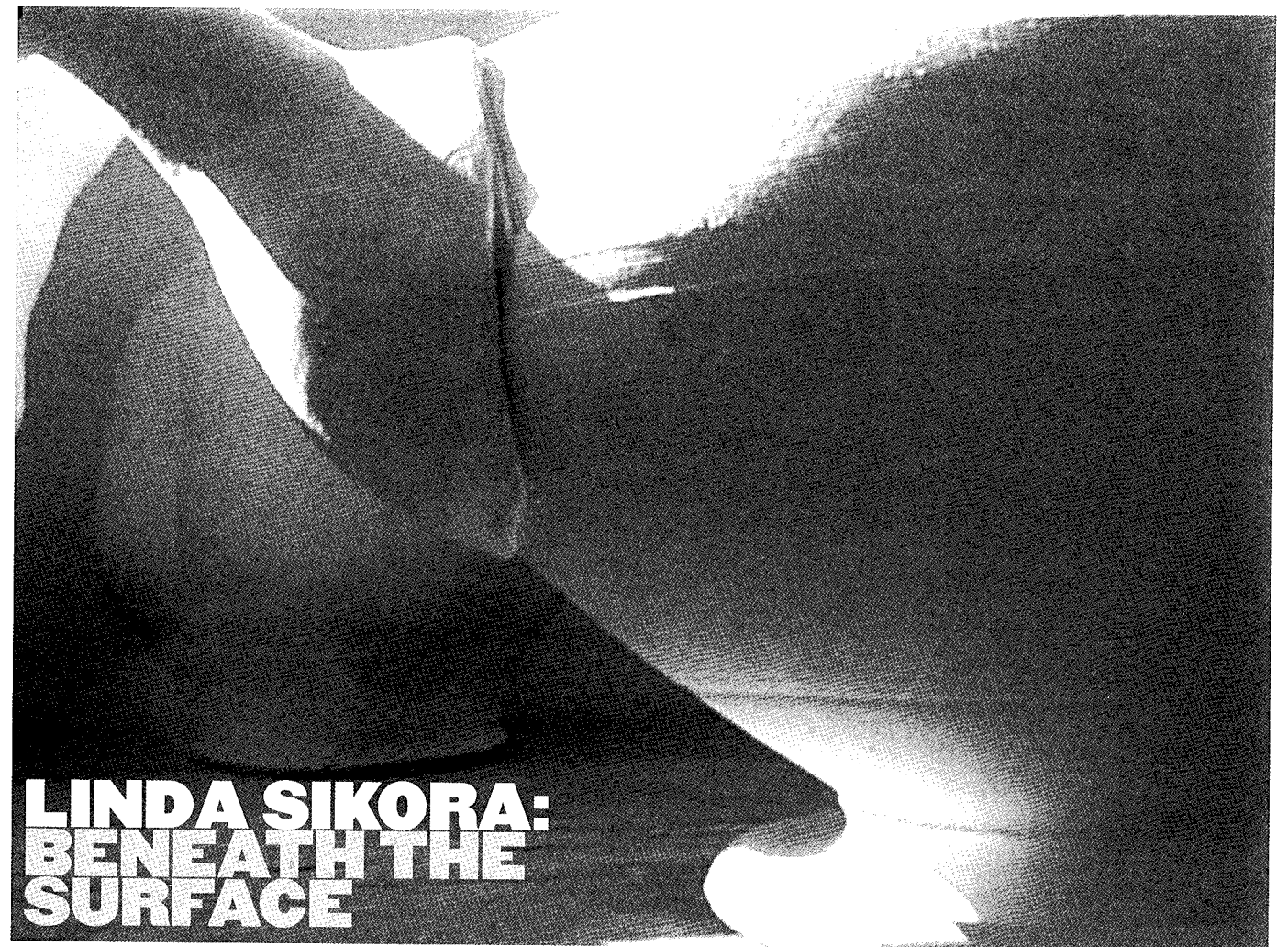
It's an exciting question, but possibly a blind alley. After all, the mythology of heaven is full of living creatures – the dwarfs, the fairies, the angels – who do not reproduce as we know it. Perhaps, instead, we could see life as a strategy for fulfilling the wishes of a given matter – whether molecular, cellular, or psychological – endowed by the creator with a constellation of possible forces. Whatever the matter may be, life is neither chaos nor prison, but process and freedom.

The crystallographer A. L. Mackay notes that any lifelike system requires "a stream of energy {that} passes through the system and its environment." Life begins in this interaction, where the energy is bent and diverted into little chaotic vortices, unexpected patterns, dynamic containers of information. A clay crystal, he says, fulfills just these requirements. He compares it to an abacus, well ordered but capable of many meaningful permutations. A certain minimum energy is required to change it from one state to another. It is therefore a code.

The clay code, however, is more complex than either the genetic code or human language. Only now are we beginning to catch glimpses of its order, and one cannot help thinking that pursuing it will be as fruitful and as endless as the cabbalists' search for that perfect expression of the Hebrew *aleph*, by which God created the universe.

It is said in Genesis 6 that once upon a time the sons of God came down to earth and begot children on the daughters of men. If we admit that clay is alive, we must say that it is both more ancient, more widespread in the universe, more durable, and more powerful than we are. Yet it is also less supple and less able to make abrupt transformations. Perhaps *this* Genesis story can symbolize the rise of life as we experience it, from the joining of organic and inorganic realms. Wouldn't it be strange if, in the history of the living, clay performed the function of angels?

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A CONVERSATION WITH MARK SHAPIRO

Linda Sikora is one of our most thoughtful and articulate makers of functional pots and an influential teacher. In the summer of 2002 I saw an exhibition of her work at the Ferrin Gallery in Massachusetts that featured teapots and covered jars. The pots were strongly based in historic European porcelain traditions, yet had a playfulness and contemporary feeling that seemed to include other histories. It was as if Staffordshire somehow had met the pattern enamels of Tomimoto and been reborn alive in flowing movement. The forms were well structured yet unrestrained; ruffles and pinches in the soft porcelain surfaces animated selected panels in the rigor-

ously thrown shapes. The detailing was fierce: spiraling and sometimes pierced finials, complexly profiled handles, sweeping slab-built spouts, crisply turned feet. The surfaces too seemed to dance around the strong shapes; rich patterns of glazes trailed adjacent to one another, tessellated around the pots in geometric exuberance. And the surfaces were *just* holding their patterned clarity; a bit more time in the kiln, a touch more heat and the whole thing would flow into illegibility. Pyroplasticity, that fusion without collapse, was displayed with a stunning wit, pleasure, and virtuosity.

I talked with Linda in the late fall of 2003. What follows is a trimmed version of her comments from our conversation – necessarily condensed, for Linda relishes talking and thinking as much as she does making pots. A talk with her can be a journey through the cultural history of the last century or an impassioned discussion of her solitary work in the studio. I saw a number of themes emerge from our conversation and from her work, and although in her practice and thought these ideas are more intertwined than they will appear here, I have organized what I heard as the dominant ideas, beginning with the specifics of her studio work and moving to the intellectual framework and motivations that shape the making of these pots and inform her teaching.

#### WHITE POTS

*Linda's work took an unusual turn several years ago when she stopped applying glaze and made a series of white pots: round porcelain shapes, simply wood and salt-fired. Instead of polychrome glazed surfaces, these white pots showed only slight fire marking and a soft salt sheen.*

When I started to do the white work, part of the motivation was to find out what was underneath the glaze. I felt that I didn't really know what was under there. It was inspired by Staffordshire, of course, and by pots I was using at home. But I wondered if the white work could hold some of the energy that was starting to become apparent in the glazed work.

When the pots went from being very constructed to being quite round, it scared me a little bit, quite frankly. Part of this reaction was a response to my earlier work from graduate school which had depended on color and

construction. But I knew that in my house I liked to use simpler pots.

With the white pots, I knew each one had to stand on its own. I had to become more articulate in the handling, and the task of the finial or handle or the structure of the body shifted because I was asking it to become a more resolved piece. It wasn't a blank to be glazed. And knowing that they wouldn't be glazed humbled me to the forming process.

When I dropped the patterns, I really exposed to myself what it meant to handle the material in its wet state. The qualities that come from pushing and ruffling or tweaking the forms contained a spirit and an energy that was about play. And so much more: it had to do with gen-

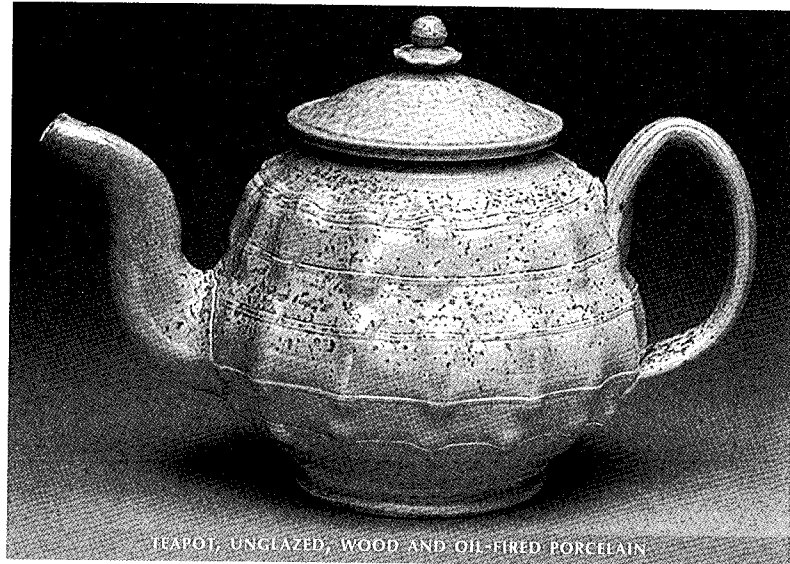
der and history, and also just human touch. It still holds my attention in terms of the associations it causes. I still make work that I intend not to glaze, and I'm still interested in white work. In a given run of pots, I don't always predetermine which ones will be glazed. A piece can be a complete thought without the polychrome surface only if the character is right; with the right accumulation of qualities, of gestures of

hand and mind in the making... you may have a piece that refuses glaze. That's what it felt like, a refusal. But also, when I come to the glaze cycle and approach the forms that still require glazing, surface and form come together in a truer dialogue than before. The dialogue between those two aspects of the process becomes much more complex, though I hope it can become complex without becoming complicated. Without complicating the simple or simplifying the complex.

#### ROUNDNESS

*The white pots were insistently round – a careful study in proportion, scale, and detailing within symmetrical circular volumes.*

The work I made in graduate school was constructed, off-round, with blocks of color. This may have had something to do with the built and cast work of 18th-century Europe, or with the lack of advocacy for round pots at the time... and I can't discount my lack of throwing experience. After school I became much more interested in the round forms I was seeing in the world. That meant I had to address my



throwing in a different way; it's one thing to make a form on the wheel that you are going to cut up, and it's another to throw a pot from one piece of clay. So I started to readress what it was to throw. I was using and seeing round pots, but for a time I remained confused about why I was interested in them. At first, I thought it was that they were simple. Simplified. Then my work became quite simplified, and I got lost because that didn't engage me. It was really the *roundness* that interested me. I needed to have a certain amount of intensity in the work, and for the pieces just to be simplified and for all the glaze to go away...it left me not knowing where I was. But then I came to understand that I wanted them to be round not because

round was simple, but because it was complex. I was also learning something more about throwing, and I was very excited by that. The construction and colors of the earlier work seemed to transform into the rhythm and movement of polychrome glaze patterns. In turn, that fed back into how I could articulate the pieces on the wheel and play with the soft forms.

#### NEED

*Clearly the white, round work represented a moment of questioning, a gathering of information and energy. If that work pared something down, the work at the Ferrin Gallery seemed to have digested that simplicity and*



*jumped exuberantly to a greater expressive range. I wondered if Linda had felt that leap, and more generally, how she experiences creative growth.*

Recently, I was giving a demonstration and I was talking about my previous habitual refusal to trim. It had to do with the way I was throwing the whole form. I had a lot of very clever ways to resolve a pot without trimming. But then suddenly I needed it. There was no way I could get to what I needed, which was something about the underside of the pot's belly, unless I began to turn the feet of the forms. I needed to get to the underbelly. I had no idea what that meant, but I *needed* to get there. Someone else might never need to get there but I did; it felt like a real question to me. So the trimming began and, sure enough, it became a significant part of the language of the work. What happened underneath the pot changed everything. It changed the finials and the edges where the lids meet the rim. All of this came out of a deep-seated need: the same kind of need as when I wanted to get under the glaze. I see a cycle in my work that moves through an additive, compiling, layering phase and then shifts into a discerning, discriminating, sorting phase. The need to turn feet might have been the initial act that has me moving from the complex to the elemental and around again. Maybe how you identify need – how you say, in your work or your process, what you need – is the momentum of the work. Maybe what you describe as a leap in the work happened when I was able to confront a need that I hadn't been able to see before.

#### COLLABORATION

*Often growth happens in exploring historical sources, too. Linda spoke of how she looks at influences.*

Excitement about a historical piece can lead one to discover something in the studio. I started thinking that some people call these types of attractions sources, which is interesting because source implies that you go find it. You go to the source. That is the gesture of going toward. Then I thought, some people call them influences, which suggests something coming at you. "It influenced me", or "I was influenced by it". As if "it" did it to you. Two ways of looking at it.

John Berger talks about the relationship between a painter and a model as a collaboration. If you think of models as sources, then when you see something in a museum that you might acknowledge as source or influence, you make a decision to enter into a collaboration with it. You are excited by it. Why? Because it stirs up something that's alive in you. It stirs up things maybe in the form of a question, maybe in the form of identifying, acknowledging, relating. What interested me was what he says about the risk involved. If you stay too far away from

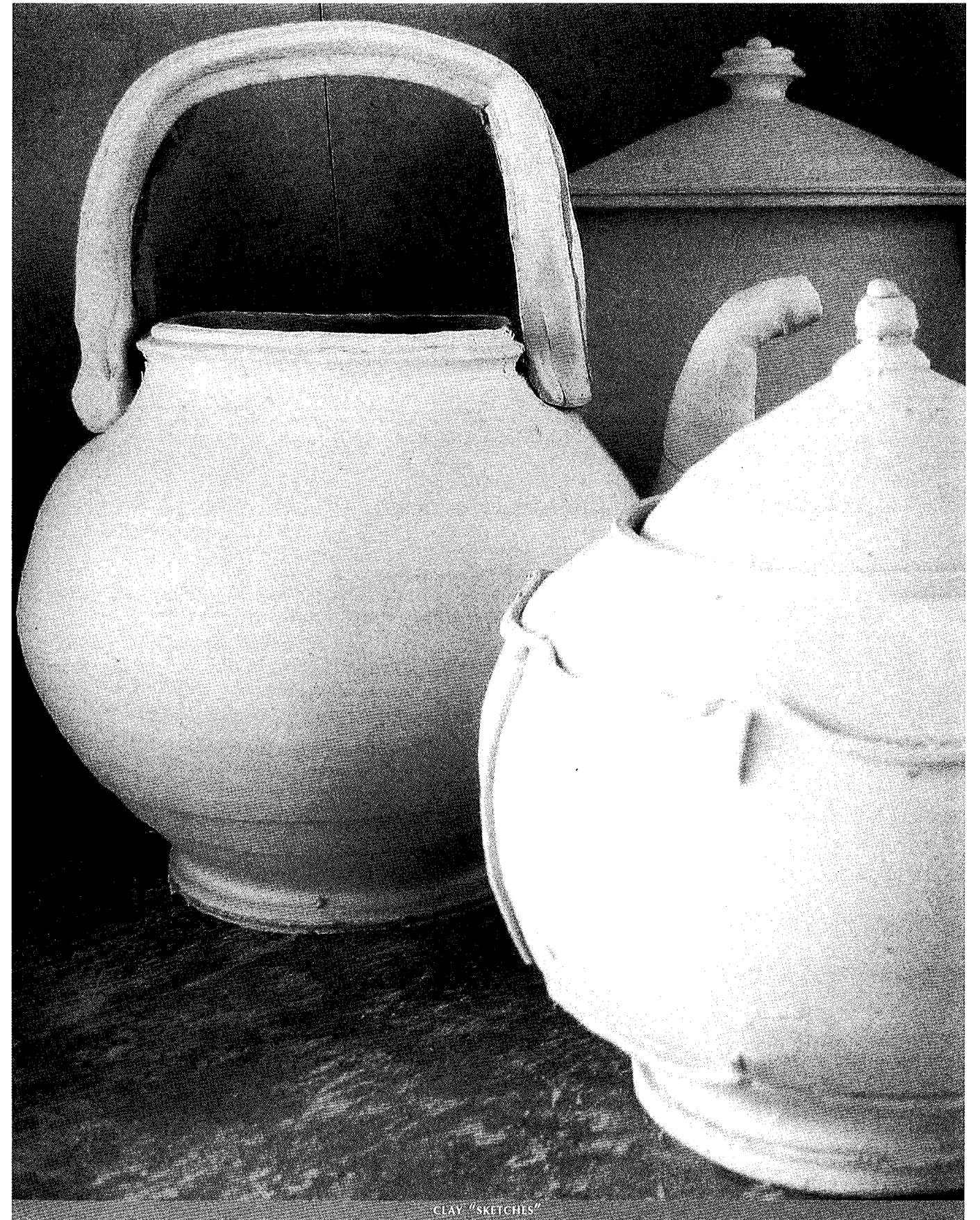
a source, you might remain at what he calls "copying distance," or "art historical distance". On the other hand, to go too close means you might lose yourself. Maybe the place in your work where you enter into a collaboration and don't lose yourself is where the work is most alive. Ultimately, maybe, you could say that you risk seeing what it is in you that attracts you. I've entered a collaboration with enameled Staffordshire. We'll see where it leads. The thing about doing work that evolves over a lifetime is that there has to be a willingness to risk making visible certain aspects of yourself.

#### THE PLEASURE OF THOUGHT

*Linda returned often to the way thinking and words lie at the heart of her creative experience.*

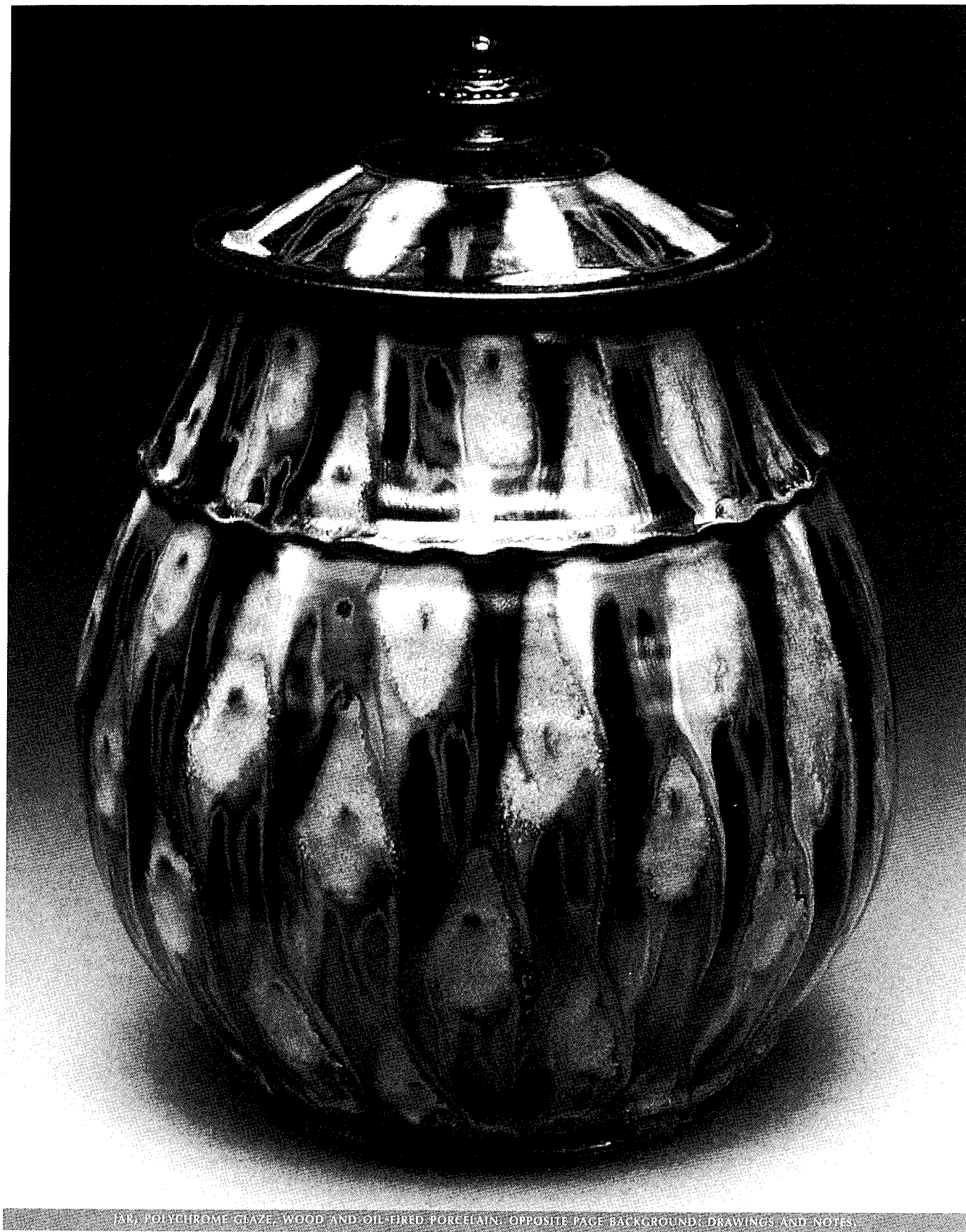
Two weeks ago I was reading a collection of essays by the poet Lyn Hejinian. I've been particularly interested in reading about the way poets use language – how language lives in the world and what it does, how ubiquitous it is and how we use it. As I was reading certain sections of this text, I would substitute the subject 'pots' for language and poetics. Like speaking or writing or reading, the process of making pots becomes a vehicle for life inquiries, but its recognizable and familiar nature might cause one to underestimate its range. For example, my needing to know what's under the glaze. Why would that even occur to anybody to need to know that? Many people making work with incredibly complex surfaces may never need to ask that question. But somehow, because of my story, I have a real question about what's underneath there. It's not just a formal or historical question, or a technical or conceptual question. It seems to me it's also about the "underneath parts" of identity. What is it to be a person in the world? Am I Canadian or American, 'of' the East or 'of' the West? When I'm in the studio I find myself thinking, and playing with thinking as material, as a way to be conscious in my life, to generate my own sense of meaning about what I do and who I am.

I am very interested in thinking as a way, not just to really know something, but as a way to *experience* something. How I am with the work in a non-verbal way, how I reflect on the work or speak back to myself about the work, or how my thinking moves from the minutia of detail in the finishing of an edge to a notion of universal magnitude, is how I pay attention. I remember listening to a poetry workshop led by David White. An audience member posited that poetry recorded first-hand experience. White's response was that indifferent poetry records first-hand experience while great poetry brings first-hand experience into the room. I think about this in terms of pottery form: indifferent pots record their relationship to function, history, material culture, etc. Great pots bring these experiences into the room.



CLAY "SKETCHES"





JAR, POLYCHROME GLAZE, WOOD AND OIL-FIRED PORCELAIN. OPPOSITE PAGE BACKGROUND, DRAWINGS AND NOTES.

Poetry says the unspeakable. And thinking can approach the unknowable. I was interested in how Hejinian talked about acknowledgement. To acknowledge something isn't to know it, but rather to be able to understand that it is there. To approach it without knowing what it is. I'm excited about what I reveal to myself when I try to articulate what I'm thinking. It's a very personal experience. It's just deeply pleasurable.

#### IMAGINATION

*When does thought become transformative, where does the imagination flourish, and how can a pot activate that experience?*

Lyn Hejinian's writing about how Gertrude Stein looked at the differences between public and private spaces is very interesting to me in this regard. In ancient Greece, Hejinian writes, the *polis* was the cultural space, where men would go and share their ideas. That was supposed to be about freedom of speech. That was the free space, the male space, the public space, the political space. And then there was domestic space, which was the woman space. Stein raises the question, is the public space really the space of freedom? Where is the mind truly free?

In the public space, I am Linda Sikora, artist. But in the private space, in the studio, the 'I' disappears. This, Stein would say, is freedom. Stein argues that the true freedom of thought comes from those spaces. You could say that is the studio space, or if you are thinking about objects and functional pots, you could say it's the kitchen space or the domestic space too. And that's very interesting because, for me, pots are imagination.

Why does someone take a piece home? They take it home because it reflects themselves back to themselves, right? Ultimately, in some way it becomes connected to who they are or who they would like to be. So I would say, when they take a pot home, they take home their own imagination – and sure, they're taking home the potter's imagination too. If you stay with Stein's idea about the home being the place of the true freedom to think – well, one Sunday morning drinking tea I realized how potent that is. I have a certain teapot, and often on Sunday morning when I might read and write, I use this pot. I don't use it during the week. I was sitting there and drinking tea, thinking about this issue of the household sphere and imagination, and I realized that this pot was about so many of those things. For example, it was about tea on Sunday morning. It's a small teapot and a small cup and there is a specific activity connected to it. The act of continually filling up the small cup with tea and drinking it is very different than drinking from a big cup that keeps the tea very hot at first and then it becomes cooler and cooler as I drink. This little cup is hot every time I refill it, and so it does this wonderful thing of slowing time down because

I'm sitting there and the tea is always hot again. Then when I see it sitting on the window sill during the rest of the week, the teapot is about slow time, and thinking time and writing time. That's the imagination part, the part I build up around it once I take it home. I do not need this pot to drink tea, but I do need it to offer my imagination back to myself, which in the end is why anyone needs a pot anyway. So pots live in that private space, the place where Stein says masterpieces come from, in the truly freest space of the human mind. And when we bring a pot home, we bring our imagination into the house of our mind.

#### VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

*Throughout our conversation, in many different ways, Linda kept coming back to her thinking about the visible and the invisible – whether it was about what lies hidden under the glaze or the belly of a pot, or about the public and private, or the way in which the context of a pot changes how it is seen (or not seen).*

I'm interested in the way that pots can both be highly visible objects sitting in the gallery, where you can't touch them, and can completely disappear into domestic activity. The same object does two things and is experienced in two very different ways. I'm so excited by the way pots traverse these spaces. Someone asked me once whether it is okay if my pots are not used or touched. And I said, it has to be, doesn't it? In the process of working, I'm looking at a piece one to one for a good amount of time. Maybe it's good sometimes to put your hands behind your back or in your pockets and just look. Because pots do have something to say as objects, as form and color, as human activity and sheer will – as expression in the world. It sometimes helps to keep your hands off and look a little closer. But when a pot ends up in the household, it's in another kind of context where you can pick it up and use it, and you can judge it on those terms. Are you compelled to pick it up? If you do, does it perform well? Is it pleasurable? I think it's wonderful if people can pick up a teapot of mine and use it. But do I think it's bad if they just look at it? If it rocks their world, then good. But of course I expect it to perform in a manner that is excellent in terms of its purported function, too.

My point is that I'm really making pots to be in both of these places. I'm not making them to be in one or the other. And I don't value one over the other. I actually think pots are powerful in the way they move between those places. The big jars I'm making, for example, are not going to be picked up and carried around. You might put something in them, but I really made those pots to fill my own frame. I wanted them to be twice as big as my head. I wanted to feel what potting was on that level and to experience a large field of pattern. So that's a different kind of pot and they are more deliberately about being looked at.



The teapots, I think, are wonderful in the way they're attended to, and they can be most satisfying to use. They work well. That's the thing about the visible and invisible places that pots operate. That activity in between, the way they traverse these spaces, is deeply, deeply interesting to me. Actually, it is a big question in my life.

#### POTS IN THE ACADEMY

*Linda is a functional potter teaching in a school of art. I was curious to hear her take on the role of functional pottery in the academy today.*

Pottery moves around; it doesn't settle into the tidiness of categorization, the expectation of what happens where. I think pots traverse cultural spaces and theoretical categories *because* we are uncertain about what those spaces and categories are. So be it. There is much we need to be uncertain about, and one aspect of teaching is to give the students the tools they need to develop their practice with confidence and rigor in the face of uncertainty.

As Paul Greenhalgh has said, ceramics has "boundaries that leak," a kind of true interdisciplinarity that is perhaps the next stage of modernism, with its dissolving of concepts and categories and cultures. This kind of thinking gives me hope that academia is a place where that can be explored. Even if it doesn't have the intellectual support or scholarship yet, I think it's growing. In academia maybe you can create a situation, or model something, that the culture can learn from.

I would argue that choosing a form like functional pottery for one's artistic inquiries has no more limitations than any other form, than video or sound or sculpture or any visual art form. It's not so much the form that is the issue, maybe, but the notion of the familiar. So how do you make the familiar work for you? How do you make the familiar your material? How does that serve as subject when you're an artist? A lot of my intellectual query has been about trying to understand what the familiar is and what it does, in positive ways, in negative ways. What the spaces are it lives in.

#### ENGAGEMENT

*An impulse of many potters since the beginning of the studio pottery movement has been to make the "moral pot"; there was a conviction that handmade pots could change the world with their representation of values and their advocacy of these values through use in daily life. I wondered if Linda sees the "familiar" she speaks of as subversive or socially transformative.*

I was thinking about all of the great philosophical movements, social, artistic movements of the later 19th century and the turn of the century, and what they were trying to accomplish. And earlier even, Ruskin, and the Arts and

Crafts movement, which had some great, beautiful notions about fairness, about how to live in the world. All of these movements were about challenging existing hierarchies, creating a new vision for the future, a kind of humanist utopia.

But do I think pots can change the world? They change the world as much as plumbing changes the world, as much as activism changes the world. I think imagination changes the world. But the question of what is underneath the glaze, of what is underneath generally, can be a really important question in the world. If it can be held in an artist's life, even just one life, it's held. It's held, and it exists. It has an energy and it goes out and moves through the culture. There's a spirit that it carries with it.

The question is whether or not you can be in the world in a way that is awake and seeing, regardless of what you are doing. Present. Engaged. Then we can take that conversation and we can make it be about a pot. Or we can make it be about other types of art practices, about completely other disciplines, about life. In my own thinking, I'm always connecting pots to that larger picture. I can't walk into a classroom and teach out of a place that is myopic, because that won't help the students once they leave; it won't help them make connections in the world and act out of their own authority. I try to teach how to be intense and focused, how seeing what is right in front of you is seeing the world.

#### NOTES:

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*Hejinian, Lyn. The Language of Inquiry. Berkeley and Los Angeles,: University of California Press, 2000.*

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