



Steven Young Lee

THE BIG WALL AT GREENWICH HOUSE POTTERY'S JANE Hartsook Gallery always seemed to ask for something expansive. Steven Young Lee commanded the wall all right, but how interesting that he did so with an ordered, tight, focused installation of 300 handleless baseball-size cups. The exhibition title names the colours of each set – red, blue and white – in an order

A Review by Janet Koplos

that declines a patriotic association. Instead it speaks to ceramics history with copper red and cobalt inlay, and white slip that pools greenishly around each circumspect foot and evokes celadon.

The cups are arrayed in 10 rows of 10 on squares of plate glass that are slotted into horizontal aluminium channels. The presentation of multiples in rows brings to mind Mary Roehm's *If*

Red, Blue and White Red, Blue and White Red, Blue and White Red, Blue



You Look Closely You Might See Yourself from the 1990s or the more recent installation works of Edmund de Waal. And it makes one speculate on the motivations for such numbers coming from artists who have no interest in being production potters. Roehm's far more organic works make reference to the body and de Waal's attenuated forms have a spatial emphasis that makes the space between as important as the objects themselves. But Lee's rounded, literally cupped forms have the inward emphasis common to pottery and a visual density that makes the objects in this systematic arrangement into punctuation points.

Lee's objects, as noted, have that different reference,

Facing page: Red.

Above: Blue.

Both installations are porcelain with white Slip. 4 x 46 x 50 in.

to ceramics history. The porcelain material, the glossiness and the colour schemes all speak of China (and by extension Korea and Japan). Each cup also has an incised pattern. These, to me at least, are not specific to Asia but recall any number of decorative precedents from Africa to Europe to the US and not exclusively ceramic ones. The colour settles in these incisions but also migrates downward in a wet curtain. This raises another question, because Lee is far from the only ceramist playing with this slippage

and White Red, Blue and White Red, Blue and White Red, Blue and White



Above: White. Porcelain with white Slip. 4 x 46 x 50 in.

Facing page, top left: Sugar and Spice. Porcelain with cobalt inlay. 3 x 20 x 20 in.

Facing page, top right: Snips and Snails. Porcelain with cobalt inlay, epoxy and gold leaf. 3 x 20 x 20 in.

Facing page, below: Vases with Landscape and Eagles. Porcelain, with cobalt inlay and decals. 10 x 11 x 23 in/ea.

Sugar and Spice and Snips and Snails are collaborative pieces with Beth Lo.

and movement of glaze colour – an insider’s interest that to an unknowing viewer probably looks like a production mishap. The white is much subtler and more refined but for that reason seems less related to our time, where the indication of motion, calling

attention to the processes the object has undergone, is a given. The grid, too, is intrinsic to our time.

Looking at the red and blue objects, the viewer is drawn to the patterns. On the white pieces, one studies the variation in object size and shape, particularly in an oblique view, where the smallest differences in height or in width of mouth are noticeable. Lee’s object-fields, overall, are repeatedly curtailed: regular horizontal rows, regular spacing, regular form. Yet they seethe with activity within that coercive configuration.

On the opposite long wall of the gallery were two



large platters with scalloped edges and a rim divided into patterns of nets, hexagons or scales, in blue and white that does not wander. In the centre, within a middle-eastern looking band, a simple female figure has been attached in the piece called *Sugar and Spice*, while the corresponding *Snips and Snails* has a small, trousered boy. Both figures are by Beth Lo and both, in this collaboration of two people of Asian descent living in Montana of all places, are covered with warm white and have only one painted feature: a pair of black lines that give them 'slanting' eyes. The boy plate also shows major cracks in the centre – maybe he played too rough? – that have been spectacularly repaired with gold.

Arrayed across the centre of the room were seven pedestals with a like number of vases. Two of them – one with copper inlay running nearly to black, the other a cobalt scale pattern – are exquisitely formed vases that form a baseline for the other works on pedestals, which are the erupted forms that Lee is best known for today. Ornamented with an octopus design and a red scroll pattern, among others, these pieces represent perfection seemingly collapsed or blown up in the kiln. But while the reference to the risk inherent in ceramics processes seems obvious, it does not seem sufficient as an explanation – although maybe it is in the diptych called *Vases with Eagles*, in which the brush painting on the sides fades from attention as one is caught up in the leaning almost-collapse in which the forms are frozen. Any pot represents motion stilled, but these more so. In these works you see the thickness of the wall, you see the surface alteration of glaze, you get a sense of volume that is usually implied but now exposed. The inflation of pottery is exhaling here. Furthermore, pattern is interrupted, utility is precluded and it is apparent that any pottery involves 'the workmanship of risk', although David Pye meant something more narrow by that term. And there is something more. This is a ruin, damage beyond hope of gold-lacquer repair; it



is the incident around which all other aspects of the object take second place. A sense of force contradicts the expected serenity and propriety. Time and motion are held for our examination, as George Ohr did in a different way. But is there also something implied here of the loss of skill, the forgotten respect for individual manual mastery? Is it something that separates us from the past? Is it the catastrophic failure that our planet, too, may be subject to?

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