

AMERICAN CERAMICS Vol.11 #3 (1994)

ARTIST'S PROJECT

Raymon Elozua: Fire and Steel

By Peter von Ziegesar

If the conventional thrown pitcher or teapot represents, in the mind of the potter, an attempt to distill something essential, beautiful and permanent about the human spirit and cast it into a material that is among the most lasting known to man, then Raymon Elozua's pieces of the last two years try to do the opposite. Elozua's *Teapot One*, for example, or his *Pitcher* represents vessels which have been savagely torn open, their skins removed, and bitter truths revealed. The metal rods that make up the structure of the pieces are twisted and corroded in the firing process. The flaking surfaces, jagged edges and snarled wires give off the appearance of industrial decay, of instability, of rot and faded strength that may hark back to the disintegration of the blue-collar neighborhoods of Elozua's youth in Chicago.

Paradoxically, the ragged contours of Elozua's current works are also beautiful to look at—shapely, as well as containing a kind of impish humor. Slip-covered mesh flags, draped in feminine curves and glazed with primary colors, flow through the interiors. Delicate tendrils of steel loop and surround shards of conventional pots (slip-molded from originals he found in restaurant supply houses) like vines on an arbor. The many aspects taken together form a whole which can be grasped at once or taken in slowly, from a variety of viewpoints (Elozua kiddingly terms his approach faux Cubism).

No one would be misled into thinking that this set of teapots, pitchers and bottles, with their enlarged scale (several feet high) and flayed surfaces are vessels in themselves. Instead, they are representations of vessels, or as Elozua prefers to call them "drawings". With their hard black steel lines and bright banner colors, the works recall Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's sardonic jabs at the icons of his own trade in the forms of super-enlarged "Expressionist" brushstroke, the angular "Cubist" wall portraits, the biomorphic "Surrealist" coffee-table sculpture, all composed of cartoon dots and set in anonymous deco living rooms. In the *Teapot*, the *Pitcher* and the *Bottle*, Elozua the critic stands back from Elozua the potter and challenges him to justify the presumed essentials of the trade.

Collaborating with artist Micheline Gingras in the early 90's, Elozua first began to combine terracotta and glaze with scraps of steel in a series of near life-size allegorical figures called *Demons and Sirens*. The figures were based, in part, on a vision of an apocalyptic landscape

which Elozua experienced while photographing abandoned steel mills in the central Rust Belt. In raw technique, these figures referred to vessels by two predecessors in the ceramics world: Thom Bohnert and Art Nelson had separately combined wire elements with low-fire Egyptian paste to create simple ersatz vessel forms of conventional scale. To Elozua, who had grown up welding and working on cars and who once labored in a steel mill, their construction, while exciting, lacked essential metalwork fabrication and scale. "They had the idea," Elozua says, "but never followed through with the implications."

For Elozua these implications concerned testing the limits of welding, twisting, bending, firing and otherwise manipulating the wire armatures, the metal medium upon which he deposited the clay. The possibilities of extending unassuming structural materials to the limits of painterly expressiveness were a major part of the challenge taken up by the artist. In fact, these armatures have become the repositories for the iconic fragments contained in Elozua's Vessel series. In their expressly decorative intent, one begins to see a light, mocking postmodernist urge manifest itself, much as in the colorfully painted bronze sculptures of Nancy Graves, or the antic, tangled forms of Judy Pfaff. Like these sculptors- whose playful imagery combined with the exacting standards of construction, have in a real sense, enlarged the possibilities of their field—Elozua has taken care to build into his pieces a great deal of technical proficiency. The marriage of a certain acerbic wit with an interest in—and emphasis on—explorations of craftsmanship goes to the heart of Elozua's aesthetic.

In recent years, digital computer manipulation has afforded Elozua an opportunity to add new layers of abstraction and wry commentary to his oeuvre. His discovery of the visual opportunities afforded by computers roughly coincides with his current preferences for mixed media in ceramics. "The beauty of the computer is that I can composite four views of a piece to give a better sense of the complexity of the work," Elozua says about the images on these pages. "My sculpture is created in the round. It goes around. You walk around it. No single photograph can capture that." Like Synthetic Cubism, the computer allows one to display a subject from a variety of viewpoints at once. Digital sampling, the craze of the hip hop music world, lets one take audio or visual snippets and arrange them in surprising juxtapositions with collage-like effect. This corresponds to Elozua's method of inserting "found" ceramic objects within the densely patterned structure of his pieces. Yet his highly colored and visually transformative computer renditions of his own works begs the question: what is the final product? Is it the digitized imagery on the page or the three dimensional originals, whose forms will be experienced by far fewer people? To Elozua, this issue is probably irrelevant. Each medium is a tool for discovery. Each may lead the mind of the viewer down separate and fertile pathways. Why split hairs when there's so much to do and think about?

