

## Caressable Clay, Pictorial Sculpture

by Donald Kuspit

Surveying the variety of works exhibited over the course of 2013 at Greenwich House Pottery's Jane Hartsook Gallery, it seems to me they divide into two distinct groups: objects, such as the pitchers, vases, cups, plates, and bowls of Steven Lee, Kirk Mangus, Sebastian Moh, and Josh DeWeese, which are made to be caressed as well as used, and objects, such as those of Christopher Adams, Linda Lopez, Robert Raphael, and Jessica Stoller which are pictorial sculptures, that is, pictures in sculptural form.

"Some man must have been the first to run his fingers absent-mindedly over a rough vase," Paul Valéry wrote in his essay "On the Pre-eminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire," "and feel inspired thereby to model another, made to be caressed." [1] Ceramic objects appeal to the sense of touch, which is what the objects in the first group do. To me, their functionality is secondary to their "touchiness"-their texture. The aesthetics of touch makes them work as art; their everyday usefulness is incidental to their sensory appeal, even separable from it. The surfaces of DeWeese's and Lee's vessels become enigmatically emotional by reason of their seamless integration of opposing tactile sensations. The materiality of raw, malleable clay informs their ambiguous refinement, giving them a certain expressive frisson, amplifying their presence: their surface "stands out" by reason of the tension built into it. This is perhaps most evident in some of Lee's vases; the surface breaks open, collapsing the difference between dark, empty interior and luminous, rounded exterior. Outside and inside are at odds even as they are united by the same surface. Looking into the abysmally black interior, one clings to the radiant surface for dear life. The vessel is deconstructed, as it were, its skin punctured to suggest its uncertain character.

Indeed, the ceramic process is inherently uncertain, for it involves the "hazardous...use of Fire," its "essential agent" but also its "greatest enemy," as Valéry wrote. Fire is one of the four elements, and earth, in the form of clay-the ceramic material-is another. The ceramic object is the product of their marriage, which like all marriages is a compromise formation, but one that is not always a "harmonious mix-up," which is what the psychoanalyst Michael Balint calls a good marriage, but rather a misalliance, indeed, an unharmonious antagonism, like that between the inside and outside of Lee's ironically cracked vessels. Every creative process is inherently uncertain, and the finished product may reflect that

uncertainty, and sometimes seem unfinished-thus the conflation (confusion?) of polished, finished and primitive, unfinished surface on some ceramic objects-but as Valéry emphasized "the noble element of uncertainty...remains the dominating and, as it were, sanctifying element" of the "fire worker's great art." However great "his knowledge of the properties of heat, of its critical stages, of the temperatures of fusion and reaction...they can never abolish Chance." "Risk" is built into the ceramic process by reason of its creative dependence on fire. It may be used to make civilized ceramic objects, but it is inherently wild, as all the natural elements are. The ceramic artist may "catch fire," but he may not be able to control it. Lee's vessels are an object lesson in the deliberate use of unpredictable chance to dramatic effect. They call attention to the hazards of the firing process as well as to the properties of clay. They take a calculated risk, demonstrating the uncertain dialectic of fire and clay that informs ceramic art.

Sometimes insistent color informs the surface, as bright blue does in one of Moh's objects, and more restrained blue in one of Lee's vessels. Several of DeWeese's vessels are earth colored, as though announcing the "earthiness" of their material. One of Mangus's vessels is blackish brown, as though its clay came from the depths of the earth. Color becomes an attribute of texture, as though thickening the skin of the object. Sometimes it makes the object more caressable, sometimes color seems to seal it into a space of its own, but it always magnifies its presence.

However attentive to surface and material Adams and Stoller are, their works are sculpted pictures. All ceramic objects are three dimensional, but not all set out to picture something, plants with prickly leaves implicitly juxtaposed with the slithery snakes of other works in Adams's case, and flowers and skulls, among other recognizable things, in Stoller's case. The works of both are what one might call allegorical realism. Leaves and flowers symbolize life, and snakes and skulls symbolize the evil of death, the skull being a memento mori. The prickliness of Adams's leaves, some shadowy, as though decaying, some eerily white, as though morbidly alive, and the placement of Stoller's white flowers on a pitch black stone, suggest the inseparability of life and death. Nonetheless, the leaves and flowers are more alive than dead, as their forceful presence suggests. Stoller's bust (self?) portrait, with its agonized expression, makes the point clear: the colorful, lively headdress dominates the deadly pale face of the figure. The works of both artists are representational tour de forces, as their mastery of realistic detail makes clear. At the same time, Adams's tangle of snakes and interlocking leaves form emblematic patterns with an abstract complexity

of their own apart from the organic complexity of the natural phenomena represented. Adams's grand wall piece has the "all-over" look of a painterly abstraction; the vibrant signifiers of the abundant nature are in effect grand gestures, implicitly extending beyond the "canvas." Similarly, Stoller's objects are suavely formal; installed in a sort of grand still life they become eccentric abstractions.

Many of the works in the exhibitions are clearly abstract, and arranged in an abstract series. The repetitiveness of Adams's leaves and snakes, and their arrangement on the wall in a sort of "conceptual" series, gives them an ornamental presence. The art historian Wilhelm Worringer notes the "interplay" of the "purely abstract" and the "direct reproduction of nature" in ornament, adding that in its historical development the former comes before the latter, as though concrete nature could not be represented until its abstract patterns were understood.[2] It is as though natural flesh had to be supported by abstract bones-outer sense had to have inner sense-to be convincing. Arranged in a series, Adams's ceramic objects exist on the boundary of ornamental abstraction and natural representation. Abstract ornament plays a large role in such ceramic objects as plates, as Lee's show. The outer circle on the perimeter of the plate contains the inner circle at its center much the way the macrocosm contains the microcosm, the human figure in the inner circle suggesting the familiar ancient idea that man is the measure of the universe.

Lee's arrangement of objects in a grid, Mangus's lining up of vessels in two rows, Moh's grouping of vessels, DeWeese's grouping of vessels in tea sets and pairing of pitchers, Stoller's cluttered installations of diverse objects, turns them into details of an ornamental abstraction. Their individuality and differences become secondary to the abstract conformation that gives them an ornamental presence, whether as a wall ornament or as a household ornament. They may be decorative, but their abstract arrangement subverts their decorativeness. The art critic Clement Greenberg once wrote that the task of modern art was to subvert decorativeness-the decorativeness supposedly inherent to all art-without denying it. The ceramic objects in these exhibitions do that by becoming parts of an abstract pattern, ironically "modernizing" them, however traditional they may look.

As Greenberg argued, modernism in art involves emphasis on the medium, which is unavoidable in ceramic art, considering the malleability of clay-less fluid than paint and not hard like stone-and the fact that the ceramicist is directly engaged with it, that is, actually handles it, his

hands being his instrument rather than a paintbrush or chisel. The ceramicist's wheel may keep the clay moving, with dreary regularity, but the hands that artfully shape it into a meaningful object are more ingenious and creative. But in modernism it is not only the medium as such that matters, but the treatment of form and color as ends in themselves, abstracting them from nature to give them pure aesthetic purpose. Raphael's totemic ceramic sculptures and Lopez's installations, juxtaposing cubic cages, with grids on all sides, and quasi-naturalistic growths, bizarrely abstract and sensuously intense, as the contrasting primary colors on their lyrical, tendril-like forms suggest, are in principal decorative abstraction.

I am suggesting that the grid, with its modular forms-sometimes little squares, as in Lopez's cubes, sometimes little circles, as in Raphael's totems-is an abstract ornament, and as such returns ceramics, more broadly art, to the early abstract stage Worringer noted. Recognizing and elaborating universal patterns-sometimes simple, sometimes complex, and sometimes geometrical, sometimes biomorphic-had more survival value than describing the particular objects the patterns "inhabited." Vessels-pots, pitchers, cups, of various size and often of uniform shape, with whatever nuancing variations-were the first, "primitive" art form. They have an intimate connection with life, which makes them valuable. They held and preserved the water and grain without which human beings could not exist. And the wine and meat that makes life enjoyable. The painted birds on Mangus's vessels-sometimes nesting in the interior, like the black and red bird pecking at the earth; sometimes in flight on the exterior, like the white bird in the blue sky-reminds of us this life-serving purpose of the vessel. The vessel has a subliminal existential character, all the more so because it can break, becoming useless, for it can no longer contain the basic necessities of life. The shards of ancient pottery are relics of death, even they are pieced together to form a whole object-a sort of memento mori of basic art.

The ceramic vessel is inherently abstract, but I am suggesting that ostensibly progressive, "avant-garde," purely abstract ceramic sculpture involves an unwitting regression to and "objectification" of the primitive ornamental designs that covered the surface of the earliest ceramic vessels. Their ornamental designs were a sort of cosmic geometry, the small, intimate vessel itself a symbol of the large, remote cosmos in all its geometrical glory. It is the container in which we live and die, that is, are full or empty, like a vessel. It has its practical everyday use, but when it is viewed as an abstract form it acquires symbolic meaning. Modernist abstract forms seemed to have shed their symbolic import, in a

determined effort to be nothing but "absolute art," but the abstract sculptures of Raphael and Lopez show they still have evocative power, and thus can never be completely "autonomous." Raphael's totem is in principle an animist idol in primitive cultures, and Lopez's juxtaposition of colorful biomorphic forms and a rock-like blackish earth form acknowledges the paradoxical primitivism of nature, in which organic life, animated and gentle, can grow from inorganic earth, rock-solid and unmoving. The earth and fire essential to ceramics are primitive materials that evoke primitive feelings and ideas. They are implicit in the ceramic object which embodies them.

Every section of Raphael's ritualistic totems has a different geometrical pattern. Stacked together, they form a kind of contrapuntal visual music. The sacramental purpose of one totem is conveyed by the rectangular space cut out of one section. One can imagine offerings being placed in it, or candles lit in it. Sky-blue ornamental bands and luminous white sections alternate in the other totem, giving it a sort of heavenly-sacred-character. In my opinion Stoller's still life displays have a similar sacramental character. All the objects are in effect ritualistic offerings. I am perhaps overstating the matter, but I suggest that what expressively unites the variety of ceramic objects in the exhibitions, abstract and representational, painterly and sculptural, is that they treat profane clay with aesthetic respect, reminding us that elemental matter is inherently sacred, as the primitive people who worshipped fire and earth thought.

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