

Ceramics

Art and Perception

1999
ISSUE 38

INTERNATIONAL

Contents

ARTICLES

Curneen & Howell, Searching for Answers	<i>Sarah James</i>	3
George Timock: Raku Vessels	<i>Sherry Cromwell-Lacy</i>	7
Geoffrey Pagen's Transitional Ceramics	<i>Kate Bonansinga</i>	11
Julian Stair & Edmund de Waal, Interview	<i>Rob Barnard</i>	14
Sexual, Sensual & Suggestive	<i>Leon Nigrosh</i>	19
Delsol: Research on Light & Opacity	<i>Françoise de l'Epine</i>	24
Brigitte Schuller: The Grammar of Vision	<i>Gwendolen Webster</i>	28
Ceramics in the Australian Context	<i>Jo Litson</i>	33
A Potter's Journey	<i>Luo Xiaoping</i>	41
Constructing Self • Shifting Self • Horizontal Self	<i>Jihye Kim</i>	44
Bumble Bees, Pot Lids & Surgical Instruments	<i>Paul Scott</i>	48
"Not In My Lifetime"	<i>Paul F. Dauer</i>	51
Violette Adjiman's Architectural Forms	<i>Ariane Grenon</i>	54
Animals with Attitude	<i>Dawn Oelrich</i>	57
Hazel MacKinnon: Making a Splash	<i>Carolynne Skinner</i>	59
Couples in Clay	<i>Helen Lancaster</i>	61
Sidsel Hanum's Ceramic Minimalism	<i>Frank Falch</i>	63
River of Dreams	<i>Gail Bakutis</i>	67
Jackson Lee at San Bao	<i>John Stephenson</i>	69
Yael Atzmony's Value Laden Objects	<i>Arye Franco</i>	71
Annabeth Rosen: Camouflaging the Normal	<i>Kathleen Whitney</i>	73
Nina Hole's Charlotten House	<i>Claus D. Hansen</i>	78
Bastiaansen: Translucency & Immateriality	<i>Peter Paul Koch</i>	80
Alex Leckie: A Life in Clay	<i>Noris Ioannou</i>	84
A Decade in Review	<i>Robert Reason</i>	88
Bizen Ceramics	<i>Beatrice Chang & Patricia Pelehach</i>	90
The Serra Family Tradition	<i>J. Corredor-Matheos</i>	93
Michael Sherril: The Natural Response	<i>Carrie Frye</i>	97
Simple Slam: A Ceramic Aesthetic	<i>Helen Stephens</i>	100
BOOK REVIEW: Hans Hedberg, the fire, the heart, the clay by Daniel Minasian	<i>Janet Mansfield</i>	103



Cover

Paula Bastiaansen
Porcelain Form. 23 cm/diam.
Photo: Marja van Hassel



Editor Janet Mansfield

Business Manager Glenys Waller

Colour Separations Digital Pre-press Imaging

Printing GSM Press Pty Ltd Brisbane AUSTRALIA

Designed and published quarterly by Ceramics: Art and Perception Pty Ltd

35 William Street Paddington Sydney NSW 2021 AUSTRALIA

Telephone +61 (0)2 9361 5286 Facsimile +61 (0)2 9361 5402

E-mail ceramicart@clinipath.com.au

Internet <http://www.ceramicart.com.au>

Annabeth Rosen
Camouflaging the Normal

Article by Kathleen Whitney





Bowl with Cut Edge. 1998. 45 cm/diam.



Cake Tile. 1998. 25 x 50 x 50 cm.

NOTHING IS MORE PECULIAR TO AN OUTSIDER THAN the controversies of special interest groups. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift portrays one culture at bloody and murderous odds with another because of a fundamental disagreement in the way each culture defines 'true civilisation'. In reality, both cultures are nearly identical yet one side considers the other utterly and unredeemably barbarous because of the way the other side eats a soft-boiled egg. Civilisation and culture are determined by which end of a boiled egg is chosen for cracking open first.

The evergreen controversy between clay users who make functional objects and those who make sculptural objects is a variation on Swift's battling egg-eaters. This argument continues to have a vivid life in the pages of many ceramics-oriented magazines. In many ways, it is not a frivolous argument, it goes to the heart of one of the basic issues of modernity: the fluidity of standards for establishing monetary,

philosophical or aesthetic value. This is a particularly frustrating situation when assessing the machine versus hand-made, the functional compared with the useless object. The issue is further complicated by partisan tensions within the hand-makers camp. One part of the ceramic culture accuses the other of a lack of craftsmanship; their opponents declare craft to be a non-issue. The latter is disinterested in basic ceramic technique, firing temperatures, glaze chemistry, formal construction techniques; the former is completely uninvolved in any of the contemporary dialogues regarding object making.

Annabeth Rosen is one of the few clay artists who has been able to make good aesthetic use of these hoary fine arts versus craft issues. Rosen's work is fabulously, gorgeously useless; it draws its passion, form and *raison d'être* from extended dialogue with the functional. This dialogue is accompanied by a sophisticated, tongue-in-cheek recognition of how fundamentally silly, irrelevant and limited the art versus craft arguments are. In a recent statement regarding her work, Rosen discusses the notion of hierarchy in ceramics: fired versus unfired clay, glazed versus unglazed ware. She doesn't mention, yet is clearly conscious of, additional craft-world hierarchies: the requirement to exhibit skill/technique/craft particularly in the making of functional objects. Rosen's work is a deliberate object lesson in the simultaneous importance and worthlessness of craft. Commenting on her work, Rosen has said: "The pieces are descended from ideas of functional pottery or ideas rooted in decorative architectural elements or abstract sculpture. Either way, I've never felt a need to categorise and name the function of the work... my interest is in how my idea penetrates the material."

Conceptually, Rosen's work deals with the nature and function of utility and decoration; like the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, she contends with primal forms and the psychological meanings of quotidian objects in order to reveal their semiotic and symbolic natures. Thoughtfully clumsy; her work uses awkwardness as a form of gesture, a method of creating inflection. Hers is a cooler, more cerebral and analytic version of Peter Voulkos' abstract expressionist technique.

Like many contemporary sculptors, Rosen responds to the social role of objects and the interactions they evoke. The work takes established ceramic forms: vessels, plates, bowls and tiles as a formal starting point; the basic homely familiarity of the shapes evokes clear associations with the needs of the body, with hospitality, domesticity and routine. The body of work presents a united front in terms of colour: Rosen's glazes are more than just a supplement to form, they consider the relationship between illusion and materiality. Rosen's odd acid greens, sugary whites and mustard yellows are not used as mere



Packed Tile Red & White, 1998. 47.5 x 50 x 20 cm.

a delicate balance that demands skilful maintenance.

Rosen's tile work has few precedents; its closest relatives are the large, heavily detailed, deeply carved terracotta tiles used to embellish turn of the century buildings and subway stations. These large tiles and tile mosaics were "packed" (to use Rosen's own term) with detail: using high relief, they created a vertical variation on still life or tableau. In the early part of this century, such tile-work was a way of giving industrialised building techniques a distinctness of character, an identity that individualised the mass produced aspects of its construction. Louis Sullivan's buildings are particularly distinguished by this use of tile.

What Sullivan's terracotta did in the civic realm, Rosen's do in the private. They distinctly reference a specific type of labour: the repetitive actions and attention demanded by the handmade. In doing so, they underscore the intimate relationship between creativity and domesticity. They present themselves as the end product of repetitive effort, the consequence of much attention paid to small detail. The production of Rosen's tiles relies on specific ceramic processes in typically idiosyncratic fashion.



Detail of tile.

She works with hammer and chisel on already fired pieces; regarding these to be "as fluid and malleable as wet clay". Regarding her use of this process, Rosen has said: "Of all the shocking things in ceramics, the explosion of a piece may be most shocking. Exploded parts erupt, get turned upside down and back to front... This event can be as exciting as it is disappointing. Sometimes a broken shard is a more potent idea of an object than the object itself." Created largely from shards, the tile work is made up from already fired parts that have been broken, reassembled, reglazed and refired with the addition of wet clay.

This technique of building form departs radically from both ceramic and sculpture tradition; she employs a form of additive, three-dimensional collage that rejects the fluidity and malleability of wet clay. Her method turns the usual sculptural sequence on its head by beginning with destruction and finishing with re-assembly. Rosen also reverses inherent ceramic logic which is based on transition from wet clay (unfinished state) to glazed and fired object (finished state). The tiles can be viewed vertically (hung on the wall), or on a horizontal support. Horizontally, their

abstract elements seem to become more real, presenting an odd tableaux-objets; a second kind of reality, a surrogate for illusionism. Hung vertically they obliterate the distinction between painting and sculpture. From either perspective, they are, in Rosen's words, as "a collection that functions as one piece."

Resulting from a process of controlled accretions, the tiles are intended to "...have pattern where no pattern was intended; rhythmic organisation not by repetition but by accumulation". Each fragment influences the next, blending their formal qualities like tastes or scents, inviting and repelling touch. Rosen's compositional artistry is everywhere apparent in her contrasts and analogies of sizes and textures, organic and geometric form, monochromatic and complementary colour schemes, the opacity and transparency of her glazes.

Rosen's vessel forms are the vertical counterpart of the tiles and share with them their method of production. These are even more idiosyncratic than her various forays into revising the standard platter/bowl/server formulas. The vessels are hybrid forms that may or may not be able to contain liquids. Her *Hollow Form Coil*, 1998, 37.5 cm (15 in) tall, is part of a group of similar forms enclosing a cylindrical space; as if the tiles mutated, wrapping around themselves. Like the tiles, the vessels mingle attraction and repulsion, merge organic with inorganic interpretation, invite both ironic and naive response. Because of their visual relationship to torsos as well as vases, they initiate an entirely different range of object-meanings than the tiles. They are erotic, ludicrous, considerably less inviting to touch; verging on the grotesque.

As original as this work is, it can be associated with artists such as Jean Dubuffet, Kurt Schwitters and Simon Rodia, who also use the accumulative technique. Like these artists, her work has extraordinary emotional and associative range; the tile pieces can appear fragmented and deteriorated, the organic references they bring to mind call attention to the interaction of man and nature. They conversely appear as fundamentally urban, a kind of low-key, pop-cultural take on junk culture. The fragments comprising them seem to have a history, to have been recycled into a different life. They bear traces, reminders, shady references to a previous form, another life. The tiles can be seen as a kind of archaeological specimen; appearing to the viewer as pieces of a life, bits of the environment. These born-again artifacts have the kind of intense beauty that one finds in the peeling décollage of abandoned billboards, they are as poignant as old graffiti.

Rosen functions within a conceptual border-land where the generally segregated notions of abstraction and the concrete senses meet. The potency of this work, its kick, is derived from a complex artistic brew that merges the blunt, jokey vernacular of pop art



Tall White Hollow Form. 46 x 37.5 cm.

with the refinements of abstraction and minimalism. Her objects reflect a conviction that normal things are never as straightforward as they seem: the normal is mere camouflage for the odd. Because of the manner in which she makes standardised, comfortable forms angular, cartoonish, exaggerated, the work overturns expectations and reminds its viewers that the quotidian holds odd surprises. Through her idiosyncratic handling of the material and her intimate knowledge of the ceramic tradition, she merges ceramic processes so that function, physicality and the generic are surrounded by the aura of philosophical reflection.

NOTE:
All quotes are from Annabeth Rosen.

Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor using clay and metal. She lives in Albuquerque, NM, and teaches at the University of New Mexico. Caption title page: *Hollow Form Coils*. 1998. 37.5 cm/ft. Photo credit: Lee Fetherree.

