

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

OTTO NATZLER 1

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Otto and Gertrud Natzler, perhaps the earliest proponents of the “vessel” in its modern configuration, began their collaboration in Vienna in 1935. In 1939 they came to the United States and set up a studio in Los Angeles, where they worked together until Gertrud’s death in 1971. Gertrud was the potter and created all of the forms, while Otto immersed himself in glaze calculation (he is said to have created more than 2,000 glaze formulas). Otto Natzler says that the aim of their collaboration was to “create a vessel in which form and glaze were so inevitably welded that one could not imagine the particular form with any other color and surface on it.”

There is no sense of that earlier collaborative aesthetic in Otto Natzler’s latest efforts. The mostly slab constructions, while much more expressive and less vessel-oriented, seem to fight their glazed surfaces for recognition and importance. Often, the result is visual cacophony that leaves any demonstrable potential unrealized. There does not appear, for example, to be any attempt at welding glaze and shape so that they coherently express emotions or ideas. On the contrary, these objects seem to say little more than “if you don’t like me in this pitted yellow glaze, I come in aquamarine satin matte as well.” The glazed surfaces, in fact, seemed to be the whole, show. There were even full-color, poster-size photographs by Natzler’s new wife displayed throughout the gallery to “call attention to and interpret the detail found in his glaze surfaces.”

All this attention to surface, while understandable given Natzler’s background, is disappointing because there are some potentially powerful images beneath those garish facades. One of the strongest is a circular shape with a tall, narrow, cylindrical base. Natzler did a number of variations on this theme, but the most intriguing one was displayed in the rear of the gallery, distanced somewhat from its gaudier cousins. It seems almost like a mistake. The glaze on this primeval, monolithic object is a simple, non-descript brown that has no particular appeal in and of itself. And that, perhaps, is the key to the piece’s success. For once we are allowed to glimpse the maker’s sensitive manipulation and treatment of form that bespeaks a more serious set of concerns. This piece may not be a triumph of ceramic engineering, but it is an eloquent aesthetic statement.

Natzler’s work reminds one of a rower with an overdeveloped right arm. Unless the rower constantly compensates, his course is inevitably altered. At the moment, Natzler seems to be rowing in circles.