

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

JEFF OESTREICH – A KID IN A CANDY STORE

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Jeff Oestreich's work has undergone a number of transformations since he returned from his apprenticeship in 1971 at the Leach Pottery in St. Ives. Through all of these changes, though, his work has retained one constant and that is his unabashed joy and enthusiasm for pottery making. He began studying pottery in 1965 and like many young potters at that time, read Bernard Leach's *A Potters Book*. Leach's portrayal of a potter's life had immense appeal to Oestreich's romantic nature. So when he graduated in 1969 he decided against graduate school and instead applied to the Leach pottery for a two-year apprenticeship. He admits to being disappointed early in his apprenticeship, he was unprepared for how rigorous and disciplined the work was. It was completely antithetical to the way he had been taught pottery in the United States. Eventually, however, he came to love the rhythm of making and firing and found himself completely absorbed in this "organism," as he called it, where everyone had a task and was skilled at it. He struggled, while he was there, to find his own voice, making his own work in the evenings and on weekends and even rebuilding a small salt kiln for that work. It was, nevertheless, a trying time and he left exactly two years to the day that he arrived.

When he returned to the United States in June of 1969 he tried to model his work on the Leach model by spending part of his time making standard ware and the rest making one of a kind work. He developed 12 prototypes and had a brochure printed offering those pieces. It was an utter failure, only one store asked for things for which they never paid. He again turned to the Leach model and decided to make tiles. After finishing his first batch he received a reprieve in the form of an unexpected check and dropped the project, realizing that his heart just was not in it. He wanted to make what he wanted, but he still didn't know exactly what that was. One thing he did know was that he wanted to shed the Leach look. When he reflects on those days now, he realizes that all the pitfalls he experienced then were blessings in disguise because they made question himself and search for answers about the direction he should be pursuing with his work.

He built his first wood fired kiln in 1980 and it proved to be a turning point for him. He was still making some repetitive standard ware, but the wood fired kiln was so labor intensive that he began to feel the need to spend more time on each piece. He began reduce the amount of standard ware he made and started to spend more time on altering the other thrown work. He describes this period as restless; he wanted to combine in his work both the lusciousness of glazes and the surface quality of wood firing, yet didn't quite know how to achieve it. In the mid 1980s he had his first exhibition at Garth Clark Gallery in New York. It was the boom period in American ceramics; new galleries and publications were springing up and with them new collectors. Oestreich embarked on yet another course, the gallery vessel. He focused his energy on a teapot form and a vase form. It seemed a natural direction at first, because he was becoming more interested in color and oxidation (something that had always been heretical to potters from the Leach school) and was focusing even more on altering pieces after he took them off the wheel. It was an exciting time for him; he gained recognition and for the first time some financial success. After ten years of making these pieces, though, he began to lose interest. The pre-planning was enormous and the construction was time consuming. It was a totally different standard of

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making from what he was accustomed and he was uncomfortable with it. All the things like warping, glaze skips and variations in surface that he delighted in were unacceptable in the genre of the gallery vessel. They had to be flawless. Oestreich had no doubt heard Leach echo John Ruskin's admonition in his famous chapter, "The Nature of Gothic" from his book *Stones of Venice* in which Ruskin argued that,

"Nothing that lives is or can be rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent.

In all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty.

...to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality."

When he eventually quit making those pieces in the mid '90s, he returned to a new version of domestic work. He had discovered soda firing and felt like he was finally "home." He was able to combine his love for the exposed clay surface that wood firing provided with his love for glaze and bright colors. This new uncovered freedom to like color made him feel he said, "like a kid in a candy store." While this work appears strikingly different from his wood fired work of the early '80s, it is filled with the same kind of intensity and made in the same spirit as that earlier period. It is, for example, domestic in both size and nature, and made for the home as opposed to the gallery. Yet they still retain some of that architectural quality of the gallery vessels. He no longer, however, makes "purely functional" work for the public the way he did in the '80s. He hasn't made a casserole, for example, in fifteen years, partly he says, because he doesn't use them but mostly because he no longer feels the kind of moral obligation that came from his St. Ives training, to make functional pottery merely for its own sake. He simply makes things that he is passionate about and hopes that others will find them compelling.

Art Deco has become a source of inspiration for his newest work and you can see the influence not only in the way he applies glazes to create specific Art Deco patterns but also in the angular quality of the forms. His attraction to Art Deco is not only its symmetry and order, but also its sense of playfulness and its expressive quality. And that, it seems, is what Oestreich appears most interested – exploring how he can make his work more expressive. In his newest work, for example, Oestreich works at creating tension by employing different types of formal and mannered feet that appear at odds with the rather sturdy nature of the rest of the pot. Oestreich is after what he describes as "elegant sturdiness."

Oestreich has always worked intuitively, sensing the direction he should take his work rather than intellectually calculating the next move. Often it is not until much later that he realizes why he chose a particular path. A few years ago Oestreich, for instance, decided to rent some of his property out to a local farmer to grow organic crops. One of the first things the farmer planted was rye. That fall the rye ripened to a deep golden color the intensity of which amazed him. He returned the next day to photograph it and was suddenly struck with not only the color of the rye but the deep blue of the sky and the brilliant green of the fields, he realized for the first time that all the colors that he had been working to achieve in soda firing had been around him all these years. Nature had been the source of his palette without his realizing it. Because he does not offer intellectual rationale for these new directions, it is difficult sometimes for viewers of his work to understand these seemingly incongruous departures. I am

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sure that when he started his series of gallery vessels for example, many potters may have felt that he had “sold out” and succumbed to the marketplace and that his use of oxidation was a betrayal of his Leachian roots. And when he left that period behind collectors of his gallery vessels were probably dismayed at his return to domestic work and may have wondered if he was regressing artistically. Oestreich, however, has always been more concerned with his own vision than with what others thought and that coupled with his prodigious output of work is more than enough to make him an important figure in American ceramic art. His intuition and the manner in which he steadfastly follows it, make his art what it is. One can plainly see in his work his struggle to realize his own vision and no amount of intellectual theorizing will get us any closer to understanding this personal struggle than looking at the work itself. He is his work and in his work we see his life, full of restlessness, passion and the joy of discovery.