

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

RUDOLF STAFFEL

1 2

Published in *American Craft*, 49(6), Dec/Jan 1990.

As I walked through "Selected Works: 1935-1989," a retrospective of Rudolf Staffel, I was surprised to find myself comparing his art with that of Peter Voulkos. Both are intent on capturing and freezing the spontaneous gesture in clay, and both appear to be committed to the vessel even though they don't explore a large variety of forms. (The majority of the 57 pieces in this exhibition, for example, were based either on the cylindrical vase or bowl.) And, as is the case with "action" artists who rely totally on intuition and the "moment," the gap between Staffel's and Voulkos' successes and failures is wide. The longer I looked at Staffel's work, though, the more I couldn't help feeling that it was every bit as adventurous, expressive and significant as Voulkos'. How then could I account for Voulkos' huge reputation and Staffel's relatively modest one?

Up until about 10 years ago, Voulkos was the model of a ceramics superstar. A hard-drinking, aggressive, macho performer, he excited and galvanized ceramists at workshops across the country. The charismatic Voulkos was perfect in the role of the modern artist as alienated hero à la Jackson Pollock. In a field where critical discourse was rare, that kind of charisma and showmanship was as important – if not more important – to an artist's success as aesthetic content. Things have changed, however. The focus of ceramists and all their institutions has for the most part shifted away from an artist's persona to what he is saying in his work, and how eloquently. In this new climate we can, perhaps, finally begin to assess the importance of less flamboyant artists, like Rudolf Staffel.

Staffel, who was born in 1911 in San Antonio, Texas, and taught ceramics at Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art from 1940 until his retirement in 1978, is best known for his translucent porcelains. It was interesting, therefore, to see some of his early work in stoneware. The earliest, a wheel-thrown bust of an African-American male, titled *Head*, ca. 1935-36, reminds one of both an African tribal mask and a North Carolina face jug. In sgraffito on the back is a tableau depicting the lynching of a black man. Poignant without being overly emotional, the bust projects not only despair and outrage but also the sense of helplessness one feels when confronted with the lack of humanity and the injustice of one's own culture. Although none of Staffel's later pieces use imagery or have direct political content, they all share the same kind of seriousness and purpose.

Since the early 1960s, judging from the works on display, Staffel has been obsessed with the idea of translucence and how to achieve it. In the exhibition brochure, he says, "Process precedes ideas, the work is strictly determined by process in relation to my ability to invent processes. Translucence was about the only thing I wanted." This approach may explain some of the less successful pieces in the show. In these, color, form and surface treatment all struggle against each other for recognition. The result is like a fibrillating heart whose uncoordinated movements keep it from performing its vital role.

When Staffel is in the proverbial "groove," however, his pieces have an extraordinary sense of urgency rarely found in contemporary ceramic art. He achieves this without using any of the tricks that others employ: tremendous scale, luscious, eye-catching glazes or attempts to make clay look like something

>>

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

RUDOLF STAFFEL

1 2

else. *Light Gatherer*, 1984, is an example of how much feeling and excitement Staffel can put into a small vase. It is only five and a half inches high, with a narrow, articulated foot and a mouth that is almost as wide as the vase is tall. Staffel has squared it by pushing his finger on the inside, up through the porcelain, creating on the outside four distinct vertical ridges. On one of these planes is a deeply incised, fluid drawing that climbs over the lip of the vase and then seems to jump across it to continue on the inside of the opposite wall. In *Vase*, 1988, we see this dialogue between the inside and outside again as Staffel alternately pushes his finger almost through the wall of the vase from the inside and then the outside to form a knobbed surface that simultaneously collapses inward and explodes outward. The well-defined foot and lip compress and intensify the energy contained in the dented, fissured surface. It all appears so utterly simple that one can't help wondering why it is so moving.

In this and in other successful pieces, translucence plays a part, but it is not the element that makes the work so strong. Included in the exhibition were three bronze chalice forms done in 1967. They are about 18 to 20 inches high and have the same plastic quality as Staffel's hand built vases constructed with overlapping patches of porcelain. Staffel has given up translucence for the tensile strength of bronze; which allows these chalices to have the height, gracefulness and sense of permanence impossible in clay. The bronzes are every bit as moving as any of the porcelains and show that it is Staffel's creative intelligence, not the inherent properties of any given material that makes his vessels so powerful.

It is a healthy sign that a field previously preoccupied with the ostentatious, self-important and boastful is broadening its criteria for significance to include subtle and sensitive statements by unassuming artists like Rudolf Staffel. One can only hope that this welcome trend continues, and that Staffel's work will enjoy the critical scrutiny it deserves.