

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

THE SHAKERS VERSUS THE ROCKETTES

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Kurt Andersen wrote in *Time* magazine about the Whitney's 20th-century design exhibition that "in the battle for America's aesthetic soul, it is the Shakers vs. the Rockettes. Austerity," he added, "has tended to lose the fight to pizzazz."

Andersen could have been describing just as accurately the opposing tendencies in contemporary ceramics in the United States. The interest in unglazed wood-fired pottery is, I believe, a reaction against what many feel is the trend in the last 10 years toward exhibitionism and ostentatiousness in the ceramic arts, and reflects the desire of some potters to find a positive alternative to the two most prominent genres in contemporary ceramics where the "Rockettes" seem to be thriving. The first is so-called "functional" pottery, a euphemism for the kind of hackneyed, mass-produced, market-oriented pottery (made for craft fairs and boutiques) that has stigmatized pottery as a genre capable of nothing more than crass and commercial tourist ware. The second is the postmodern vessel, a product of the greenhouse like environment of many of our university ceramics departments: it is a hybrid of painting, sculpture, and the vessel that is epitomized by the gratuitous, manneristic use of ceramic technique and the redundant, self-indulgent display of the ceramist's personality.

Potters, who are influenced by and work within the Japanese idiom of unglazed, wood-fired pottery, came to pottery originally not because they had the burning desire to provide middle-class America with a good \$2 mug, or because they felt the need to display their psychological hang-ups and emotional angst. They came to pottery because it moved them and spoke to them in a way no other art form did. It is the expression of that same kind of intense feeling and not the mere act of creating mugs, bowls and plates that is the goal of these potters. To them, wood firing – with its drama, romance and rough, naturalistic surfaces – seemed a perfect antidote to the gaudy, spiritless pottery that abounded at craft fairs across the country and the self-important, trendy vessels that filled the field's survey exhibitions. But more important than these attributes was the fact that wood firing as an "aesthetic" had a historical precedent in late-16th-century Japan, where it was made with the kind of self-conscious artifice usually associated with modern art. That and the knowledge that wood firing is still culturally, and aesthetically important in modern Japan is what attracted American potters who were looking for a historical premise within the language of ceramic art for their own aesthetic inclinations and philosophical concerns.

But can a mere technique like wood firing be the basis for an important movement in contemporary ceramic art? And is it possible to have a consequential American aesthetic movement premised on Japanese aesthetics? Both of these questions are valid ones, which have to be answered if wood firing is going to become more than a kind of quaint pastime practiced by what appears to be a group of reactionary potters. However, the assumption (by some in the ceramics field) that questions about the validity of foreign influences, historical references, even the outright appropriation of either, should be rigorously applied to a specific group of potters influenced by Oriental thought, and not all ceramic artists, in general, suggests a kind of cultural chauvinism inappropriate to a country dependent on a global economy for its survival.

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The pitfalls facing potters involved in unglazed, wood-fired work are essentially the same that face all ceramic artists in the latter part of this century. That is, how does one create intelligent visual statements that make use of the language of ceramic art without perverting it or becoming trapped by it? This can only be achieved by the ceramic artist after he or she has not only grasped the vastness and diversity of the language, but also comprehended its structures. Philip Rawson has suggested that the ceramic language has a set of structures – similar to the grammar and syntax of spoken language – which helps us decipher each other's statements, and that ceramic language, like every language, is based on common usage and signs. The pitcher, for example, is a generalized idea that we all share: the same is true of a mug or a bowl. We all recognized these forms probably long before we ever dreamed of making them. One of the reasons for this is that we understand these objects from their cultural function. When we begin to look at the ways these forms have been articulated in the history of ceramic art, though, we begin to see that some of these forms are merely clichés in the language – repeated over and over, utilizing the same obvious signs – while others are compositions on the level of poetry that exploit, not pervert, the language to appeal to our deepest feelings about life. This is when pottery ceases to be merely a functional tool for survival, and becomes Art. Rawson believes that pottery, "like other art, operates very much at the level of feelings rather than the simple naming of facts," and that the meaning of each pot resides in feelings. It is, I believe, the expression of feeling inside the language of pottery and not the mere act of creating pitchers, mugs and bowls that is the role of the modern potter. So how does the potter go about transforming mundane objects into objects full of feeling and emotion? (Some in the field would tell you that it is impossible for this to occur while the object retains its usefulness, but this opinion is contradicted by tens of thousands of years of ceramic history.) To achieve this feat, the modern potter has to make an exhaustive and ongoing cross-cultural study of the language of pottery and all its utterances. Great writers learn by devouring the written word: potters must learn by devouring the visual and philosophical elements of the vast numbers of great works that make up the history of ceramic art. Unless we pursue this course, we will remain, as Rawson says, "ceramically illiterate," condemned to repeating and mimicking the simple statements of others.

Another pitfall that faces those involved with wood firing is the tendency in the ceramics field to equate process with statement. Processes like wood firing have to be thought of in the same way one thinks – or doesn't think might be the better analogy – of writing words on a sheet of paper or moving the muscles of the mouth to make a statement. Process should only be seen as words, the things we use to create our own individual statements. Henry Miller, in his book *Reflections on Writing*, said it best: "I do not believe in words, no matter if strung together by the most skillful man: I believe in language, which is something beyond words, something which words give only an adequate illusion of." Whether or not wood firing in America fulfills its potential as a revitalizing alternative to the ostentatiousness and exhibitionism that many feel has gripped contemporary ceramic art, depends on our ability to avoid the pitfalls of marketplace trendiness, an obsession with process and the chauvinistic belief that to be modern, therefore relevant, ceramic art has to be explained by and understood in the narrow cultural context of Western modernism. If we manage to avoid those pitfalls, all that faces us is the formidable task of making work that fits Rudolf Arnheim's formula: "The purpose of art and craft is to make the world visible."