

If we are to believe Sigmund Freud's theory, the first stage of child development is concerned with primal creation and expression, with basic needs of absorption and excretion, with making at its most basic, through bodily processes. This first stage of development is called by Freud, the anal stage.

With the recent death of American ceramic artist Peter Voulkos, it is my hope that the anal stage of ceramics is finally over. This obsession of the field of ceramics for the primary qualities of materials ("this is clay"), for their sheer basic transformation (pushing and shoving), for masterful process and particular techniques (raku, woodfiring, etc.), and above all, this obsession with the personality of the maker ("this is me") and for individual expression ("I made this"), may now be put to rest. It is time to grow up, it is time to move on.

When another American ceramist, George Ohr, at the end of his working life and at the beginning of the preceding century, made thrown and folded "bowl" forms, he too was engaged with the material (he marbles two clays to make us aware of the surface and of the torque of throwing, he leaves the clay unglazed, undecorated, to reduce seduction so our eye, or hand, focuses instead on surface, on outline, shape and form), and he was aware of process (no one can throw a pot like he does, and he knows it) and, of course, he is also acutely interested in making an original statement and to express something of his long experience with these materials, these techniques, these forms. No one had ever made a pot like that before. This is truly a profoundly original form, something quite extraordinary when you think that it follows 10000 years of similar bowl forms. It does that while retaining the identity of a pot, with a base, walls, a lip dividing outside and inside, an opening at the top and the expected interior volume, all the familiar signs that tell us that we are experiencing a pot.

Yet, these late pots of George Ohr are endlessly exciting to me because they are engaged not only with materials and processes, or again only interesting because they were made by George Ohr, the "mad potter", but most importantly because they seem to me to be primarily conceptual objects, objects about ideas. In these bowls, the material and form, the ways they were made, thrown, folded, all reinforce the simple question I believe George Ohr was asking himself, intuitively perhaps, a question we can still ask and answer today: What is a pot? How does it operate? How is it experienced? What role does it play within culture? What is specific to ceramics within culture? When these pots were made, the only other comparable inquiries about space, reality, perception and experience to be found were in the early cubist experiments of Picasso and Braque. George Ohr was investigating similar problems, unaware of his contemporaries. Is George Ohr the first truly original American artist?

The American Tom Bohnert and the Canadian John Chalke are asking the same questions and answering them differently than George Ohr once did. Their work and that of many others worldwide, is a reminder that pottery has always been and still is the central preoccupation of ceramic as a specific genre within the history of culture

and that pottery is above all conceptual, formal and abstract. When I speak of pottery, I mean ceramics as a whole as I believe that ALL ceramic objects are pots at the conceptual level, insofar as they are by necessity generated from the inside out and that they imply volume instead of mass in their generative process. This interior volume is a space for containment, whether it is void, empty or full, literally filled or metaphorically pregnant. This potential for containment implies that pottery is about specific ideas (function, for example), but it also dictates particular forms and, above all, it manifests these ideas and forms through abstraction. This is particularly true when we come to the problem of surface and of decoration. But more on that later .

So, ceramics is intrinsically a cultural material, with social and historical properties and not only (as is so often the case now), a physical material with specific properties and transformative qualities. One of the first in the recent past to directly introduce culture and history in his work, was an early student of Peter Voukos, Michael Frimkess. In my opinion, Frimkess is making a significant, continuous yet still unappreciated contribution to ceramics (I could also have used Ken Price as an example here, but of the two, Frimkess was the pioneer and Ken Price's contribution has been rightfully celebrated already). By reworking within contemporary culture historical prototypes from various sources, Frimkess reaffirms the timelessness and, to paraphrase Paul Greenhalgh, the conceptual constancy of pottery and ceramics. More recently, British potter Greyson Perry does much the same in his disturbingly psychological work, combining familiar, conventional forms with highly charged surfaces that challenge our expectations.

It is my contention that the central operative concept of pottery (and again, by extension, ceramics as a whole as well as all other craft practices) is containment, a specific characteristic of volumetric forms. In a container, all binaries, oppositions, polarities and dichotomies (for example, top and bottom, front and back, interior and exterior, form and surface, image and object, high and low, male and female, etc.), are reconciled and brought together in symbiosis. Containers contest the hierarchical polarities and dualities of Western thought and discourses, exemplified by art theory and art history.

The main characteristic of containers is function, and function is the conceptual part of tools. If somehow art has come to imply a denial of function and art objects (or images) are always presented as useless (in a practical way), containers reaffirm function in direct bodily experience or even vicariously, by association with other similar familiar objects. When contemporary ceramists deny function, for whatever reason, the work (and especially if it refers to pottery forms) nonetheless addresses function as a potential inherent to containers. Function as process may be absent but function as concept is still retained.

Containment has to do with the relationship between an object and its environment. Containers are bridges for experience. They are about difference as continuity, not difference as rupture (which is how images operate, by creating a distance, a removal from reality and from real experience since there is always a division between images

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a distance

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and lived experience). Containers always permit a "space between". They connect to reality and they connect two realities: the object with the experience. In its dealing with space and by reconciling exterior and interior, pottery is conceptually neither here nor there, but between spaces, in the interstitial. It is a solid space between two emptiness, one inside, one outside the object.

The other aspect of containers is that their abstract form yields a surface that begs for decoration. And along with function and containment, decoration is the other central concept of pottery (and ceramics and all craft practices). Historically, that decoration is also often abstract in nature, when various signs and marks usually refer to symbols of various meanings while, interestingly enough, being found universally throughout time, in all cultures. Surface treatment (or decoration) greatly complexifies the conceptual aspects of pottery, by combining image with object. The form itself operates as an object while the surface operates as an image. This combination of image and object is another characteristic of containers and of all craft practices.

Being myself more interested in graphic representation than in symbolic abstraction, I present here two examples exploring the psychological battle between life and death, in the case of Bernard Palissy (France XVI Century), and sexuality and desire for Johan Creten (contemporary Belgium). Decoration in ceramics is in itself a vast subject of inquiry. I will simply reaffirm here its connection to representation when it refers to the natural world, and to abstraction, when it refers to signs and symbols, usually connected with the spiritual world. It is good to keep in mind that abstraction and representation were particular obsessions of Modernism and thus, of 20th Century art theory, art criticism and art history. This predilection of Bernard Palissy for organic chaos (organised chaos...) bringing together life and death, creation and destruction, is an example followed by many recently, among them Viola Frey, Annabeth Rosen and John de Fazio. Their work embodies another aspect of ceramics, the particular relationship between ceramics and time. By taking discarded, cheap, throw away and impermanent objects from pop culture and translating them into ceramic materials, their nature is changed from transitoriness to permanency. Ceramics is resistant to time due to its particular physical properties, but also because the material itself has no intrinsic value (contrary to metal, for example), because it is non-recyclable (even if it is sometimes reused differently than originally intended), and because even when broken and reduced to a shard, this fragment can still convey the original nature, function, meaning of the object, through millennia.

Notes fountain in Mexico

A container may be covered with images, signs, texts of all kinds, but the object itself, the container alone doesn't represent anything. For this reason containers, in and of themselves, are the ultimate form of abstraction. And the resistance still found in art discourses and art institutions for containers as objects, for containment as a valid concept for contemporary culture to explore, is really a resistance to abstraction as concept as well. Containers as subjects are readily present in all form of image making (2D or 3D), but containment as a concept is not part of the discourse on art yet. Only abstraction as style is acceptable, in the end, and art history is really nothing but the history of styles. We are told that abstraction is an invention of early Modernism, when

in actuality, both within the form of the container and often in its surface treatment as well, abstraction in ceramics (and in all other craft practices) is as old as we can go back in the history of the field.

I strongly believe that ceramics (and other craft practices) have given to Modernism its central tenets around conceptualism, formalism and abstraction and in the process lost their historical rights to these concepts. Instead we got from the modernist avant-gardes their obsession with individuality and originality, which were traded, in a Faustian bargain, with tradition and anonymity, which became, sadly, irrelevant. I am with novelist Milan Kundera on this, when he argues in his book "The Art of the Novel" for "the end of individualism, the end of art as expression of irreplaceable personal originality." At the most basic level, ceramics is the memory of humankind. Yet our culture doesn't need pottery and ceramics. We live in a time of impermanence, of obsolescence, of transitoriness and expendability, of the throw away. The role played by ceramics historically (to preserve and contain time) has been taken over by photography and more recently by digital technologies and virtuality. Yet, ceramic objects and pots are still needed for the future to create a link with the past. In a culture where everything becomes obsolete instantly, where everything exists to be discarded, including art, that which will be left of this culture, this global culture, will still be the ceramic objects we produce, as has always been the case. The permanency of ceramics also creates a responsibility. And the pots we are making, the vast majority of them, are not taking that responsibility very seriously.

There are many ways to investigate the concepts that are specific to ceramics. For example, in the work of Canadian ceramist Leopold L. Foulem, it greatly matters that the material reads as ceramics, but what the actual clay is is largely irrelevant. It is also crucial that we understand the object as a teapot, yet in one case the teapot is represented by a void, and in the other object, although all the elements composing a teapot are there (the spout, the lid, the handle, the volumetric body), function is clearly impossible. This denial of function is not political (only) as is so often the case in what we have come to call the "non-functional vessel", where the object is non-functional in order to be considered as art and thus raise its status and/or its market value. Here, the denial of function is purely conceptual, in order to make you think of function and the implication of its absence in experience. And finally, the work is not original either (these are reworkings of historical forms) and we learn nothing about the maker, about his sensibility (or lack of), his abilities (or lack of), his talent (or lack of). Material is irrelevant, technique is irrelevant, personality is irrelevant. This irrelevancy is revolutionary.

Many other makers are exploring conceptual ideas in ceramics, in their own way. I have shown a few already. Two more examples, where content as concept also plays a role, would be Wu-Min (contemporary China), with a subtle political commentary on present conditions in his country, or Warren Mackenzie (contemporary USA), with an exploration of the great potential for thrown forms to refer to body parts and sexuality. In both cases, the objects are obviously pots, they are potentially functional, yet the main focus is on meaning.

Let me quote again from novelist Milan Kundera: "The spirit of the novel is the spirit of continuity; each work is an answer to preceding ones; each work continues all the previous experiences of the novel. But the spirit of our time is firmly grounded in a present that is so expansive and profuse that it shoves the past off our horizons and reduces time to the present moment only. Within this system, the novel is no longer a WORK (a thing made to last, to connect the past and the future) but one current event among many; a gesture with no tomorrow."

Kundera again: "The sole raison d'être of the novel is to say what only the novel can say." And we need to communicate with the ceramic objects we make, the things that only pots and ceramic objects can communicate, not only in a formalist, modernist fashion of truth to materials in their transformation, but for the cultural implications carried by these objects.

We have to keep in mind that to work in craft practices today is highly subversive and contestatory. The current definition we have for art is really a definition for images and images are largely impermanent and mediated (that is to say not "made"), images are intrinsically institutional (and really only exist within institutions), images are localised (and operate in very specific places) and again, images are highly contextualised (and do not exist outside institutional context) and art, that is to say things that are to be experienced solely visually, is also directional and operates correctly only when right side up. Crafts on the other hand are permanent (specifically for ceramics) and conceptually constant (the concepts do not change, since there is no need to change them), craft objects are hand made (and unique, contrary to machine made, large scale output design objects, which are otherwise conceptually very similar. Yet in order to be cheap and easily produced, design objects tend to be formally simpler and less idiosyncratic, something that might change soon with the growing use of computer technologies which will permit endless complexity and variety to be instantly introduced), crafts objects have no need for institutions to exist, they belong and operate everywhere, in any context, including art contexts, of course, and craft objects are not directional either and they retain their identity even when upside down. To work in craft practices today is to subvert and contest the very nature of contemporary art and objects reaffirm the limitations inherent in images. While in no way denying the extraordinary power of images, the whole issue lies at the central conceptual differences between images and objects. Images are conceptually meant to operate solely visually, they are experienced with the eye and, interestingly as well, through language. Objects on the other hand, are conceptually much more complex since while being experienced visually, they also incorporate other senses, at times ALL other senses. An object is conceptually a thing in the world and simultaneously an image of that thing as well. If the surface (or the form) of the object also holds other images, the complexity is even greater. Objects operate largely beyond (or before) language which makes them inaccessible or at least difficult to access (contrary to images) by theory.

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This resistance to discourse and the difficulty to be apprehended through language,

and this subversive and contestatory nature of craft practices is enough in itself to create and explain the present absence of ceramics in the histories, theories and discourses on art. Yet, if art history and art theory were to absorb the extraordinary and specific contribution of craft practices to material culture, their deeply conceptual, formal and abstract nature, then the whole of the history of art would have to be rewritten from the ground up, something that is not going to happen soon, but will eventually be done, out of necessity. For now, dismissal, silence and invisibility will continue.

To begin the process, it will be necessary to reappropriate our historical rights to conceptualism, to formalism and to abstraction, and begin internally the reappraisal of craft practices in their central and vital contribution to culture (something that is unfortunately truer historically than now).

Craft practices are autonomous practices, despite the tremendous hegemonic pressures to co-opt them, make them conform and rejoin other artistic practices (who operate as images, sculpture for example). It is by retaining their "radical autonomy" (Kundera, again) and by acknowledging the radical autonomy of its history, that all craft practices (and particularly ceramics, in its own limited way,) can also say things about the human condition that no social or political thought could ever tell us.

Ceramics books are still largely concerned with materials, with processes, with techniques and equipments, as are most potters and ceramists out there. Even ceramic history books are but a long series of various lists of styles, periods, names, dates, biographical details, etc., largely irrelevant and meaningless. It is time to redress the balance and it is time to better articulate the role played by ceramics and the position it centrally occupies within culture. In order to achieve acceptance and for the real impact of ceramics to be finally felt, there is a pressing need to clarify and explain, to ourselves first and to others, the value of its essential contribution.

If the anal stage of ceramics might be near its end, the next step might be an oral stage, where ceramics will finally start speaking and its many voices will finally be heard.

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