

# Art in America

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## Potted History

**20th Century Ceramics**, by Edmund de Waal, London, Thames & Hudson, 2003; 224 pages, \$14.95 paper.

**Bernard Leach: Life & Work**, by Emmanuel Cooper, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004; 420 pages, \$55 cloth.

**Clay Talks: Reflections by American Master Ceramists**, edited by Emily Galusha and Mary Ann Nord, Minneapolis, Northern Clay Center, 2004; 136 pages, \$30 paper.

**Shards: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art**, edited by John Pagliaro, foreword by Peter Schjeldahl, preface by Ed Lebow, New York, Ceramic Arts Foundation & Distributed Art Publishers, 2003; 516 pages, \$45 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

**Sex Pots: Eroticism in Ceramics**, by Paul Mathieu, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2003; 224 pages, \$45 cloth.

### BY JANET KOPLOS

A rash of contemporary-ceramics books published within the last year suggests that something is happening in the field. The question is whether it's a new spurt of creativity, a reflective pause or a search for art-world credibility that motivates this outpouring. In any event, the five books under review here are different in kind from most previous nontechnical ceramics books, which have been either hagiographic or reportorial and in either case little inclined to ask hard questions. These new books are sophisticated and mature; they address philosophical and psychological issues of art-making that are specific to this medium yet understandable to anyone interested in contemporary art.

Thames & Hudson last fall published a new title in its "World of Art" series, *20th Century Ceramics*. Its author is Edmund de Waal, a British ceramist and scholar whose national and European perspective has been broadened by exposure to the East. The frontispiece of the book is Kazuo Yagi's *Mr. Samsa's Walk*, an avant-garde sculpture from the 1950s that consists of a standing ring with multiple protrusions, which has recently been on American tour along with the ceramics of Isamu Noguchi, and throughout the book de Waal treats Japanese ceramics with as much care and familiarity as he does European and American work.

De Waal covers a spectrum of work from turn-of-the-19th-century china-painting and art pottery to late 20th-century art "visitors" such as Tony Cragg. Interim considerations include the Bauhaus and other sites where "quotidian objects were shown to be radical in their role in the 'organization of a new life.'" De Waal is quite good at brief summaries, at formal characterizations and at shifting gears, always maintaining his emphasis on the meanings of ceramics. He calls Picasso's ceramics "a full-blooded taking on of artistic forebears," observes that Lucie Rie's sgraffito articulates transition points in her forms and also makes a powerful connection between archaic vessels and modern ones, and notes that the several Japanese potters who did workshops in America in the '50s were demonstrating pottery "as an exploratory, improvisational art." This is not a long book for one of global scope, so its treatment of some traditions is thin to nonexistent. But for what it does, it is a lively, engaging and earnest achievement.

Several years ago de Waal published a short monograph on Bernard Leach, who through his pots and his writing spread the influence of Japanese and Chinese

ceramics in the West. He excoriated Leach for narrowness, as well as for a false emphasis on utility and a foolish attempt to make inexpensive wares, both of which derailed pottery from the art track in Britain. In this new book, de Waal's treatment of Leach is more temperate, if necessarily briefer. He credits Leach—whose *A Potter's Book* of 1940 introduced Eastern approaches to ceramics, provided a modicum of technical information and hinted at how one might live as a potter—as an evangelist for craft values, an advocate of the pot as a means of tactile expressiveness and a carrier of tradition and of the potter as "symbolically independent of contemporary society" (an image that was powerfully appealing after World War II).

Leach gets his first full-scale autobiography in Emmanuel Cooper's book. Leach was such a skillful and prolific writer himself that I wondered why someone else would want to tell his story. The advantage of Cooper, another British potter and writer, is that he tells what Leach wouldn't, notably Leach's sexual peccadilloes and his lifelong religious search, which stretched from boyhood Catholicism to following a mysterious China-based but Caucasian guru, through his long evangelism for ceramics and his eventual devotion to the Baha'i faith (shared with his close friend Mark Tobey). Cooper has drawn from Leach's extensive writings and lectures as well as his private journals. While his focus is not the esthetic analysis of Leach's work, Cooper conveys an overall sympathy and admiration despite Leach's known failings: he was never as gifted a thrower as his Japanese friends, and he didn't know enough about kiln building or about managing a business. Moreover, he was a cad to his first and second wives and let his third, an American who cheated on him with other women, take over the pottery, to its detriment. Yet his books live on, and many important potters emerged from apprenticeship with him.

One of them was Warren MacKenzie, now retired from teaching at the University of Minnesota but still producing functional pottery in his Stillwater, Minn., studio. MacKenzie is one of 13 senior American ceramic artists who lectured at the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis in the first years of the center's corporate-funded Regis Masters program (1997-2000). Those lectures have been transcribed, edited and published in *Clay Talks*, each with a brief introduction by the center's director, Emily Galusha. With one exception, they are spoken texts and so have the spontaneity and naturalness that make for pleasurable reading. I was so engrossed that I forgot to take notes the first time through. The speakers were asked to address their influences and to evaluate their own work, with the consequence that life decisions, creative dilemmas, etc., are central to the talks, while the social and esthetic history of the middle and late 20th century becomes immediate in their stories: for example, Robert Turner's conscientious-objector status in World War II, Karen Karnes's potting at Black Mountain College and communal living at Stony Point, N.Y. (John Cage was a neighbor), and Eva Zeisel's apprenticeship with one of the last master potters in Budapest and her subsequent design work in Soviet Russia before she found her way to America. Peter Voukos's talk is an evasive yet ultimately revealing series of jokes at his own expense, while Betty Woodman speaks with almost confessional directness of family interactions and her own shifting artistic identity.

Garth Clark, from South Africa by way of Britain, introduced himself to America in the '70s as a ceramic historian—an unfamiliar title here. He organized a survey for the Everson Museum in Syracuse ("A Century of Ceramics in the United States 1878-1978," with Margie Hughto) that to some degree defined a formerly shapeless and under-researched history. He has since written a total of 27 books, although he's perhaps better known as a New York ceramics dealer with a gallery on 57th Street. The recent *Shards* is a collection of his occasional writings and ephemera, edited by a young artist whose work has recently been shown at Clark's gallery; his editor's note suggests that he has become a bit self-important with this responsibility. The book is oddly designed, with gray print that's not the most visible, and a great deal of space between the lines, so that the volume ends up far thicker and heavier than it need be. The organization is also flawed. The book starts with essays about artists, which are in alphabetical order—mostly. Then there are thematic essays, but they're not in chronological order, so you can't follow the development of Clark's thinking (which in fact deepens and warms) or easily grasp his changes of heart.

But it's still vintage Clark, and he is a delightful writer—vivid and varied, opinionated, witty, thorough. Peter Schjeldahl, in a brief foreword to the book, calls him a welcoming voice, "confident in the reader's appetite for grown-up complexities that are explored with clarity and feeling." Clark speaks of audiences of potters hissing when Jeff Koons's name is mentioned, says the best work of English Pop ceramist Richard Slee "positively vibrates with emotional insincerity," and argues—against recent trends—that "pots do not cease to be pots when function is subverted." His topics range from sales patterns to the absence of a body of analytical writing about the work of American clay's most famous figure, Voukos. This is a book that encourages marginal notes, because one wants to debate the issues and contentions Clark raises. His knowledge and his style are beyond compare.

Paul Mathieu is another ceramist who writes, but he would rather it were not so. He tells us that he writes only to bring up the themes of gender in ceramics that he wishes someone else had verbalized. A Canadian who teaches at the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver, Mathieu is an impassioned advocate of the quality of touch that he believes makes ceramics almost invisible in our present eye- and theory-dominated era. Probably just to prove that it can be done, he applies the writings of a large number of modern philosophers and critics to ceramics, and he identifies Erotics, by which he means "our relationship to reality using *all* senses," as the right term for this material. While he looks at sex in ancient ceramics and in Third World pottery, and includes a contributed chapter on sexual imagery in Renaissance Maiolica by Catherine Hess of the Getty Museum, his analysis of contemporary Canadian and U.S. work constitutes the major part of the book. Reflecting on the symbolic and tactile eroticism of throwing and opening a pot, he also notes the inside/outside dynamic and the associations with penetration. He sees sex in abstract forms and in allusions to organic growth, as well as in the literal depictions painted on surfaces and sculpted as figurines. Not all the works illustrated are of compelling quality, but Mathieu offers a deeply researched and thoroughly considered contemporary argument on a tightly thematic subject—something rare to nonexistent in ceramic literature before now. □