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**Cover**  
*Johan Creten, Odore di Femmina, Torso 1 (1997), 33" x 19" x 23", pink engobe on red-glazed terra-cotta.*

**INTERVIEW**

Suzanne Ramljak

✓ **Impresario of Clay**

Garth Clark, well-known gallery owner and author, argues that handmade ceramics is no longer a litmus test for ceramic art.  
**Page 14**

**FEATURES**



Janet Koplos

✓ **Attar of Roses**

The works of Belgian sculptor Johan Creten are both enticing and evasive and achieve a genial, if unexpected, balance.  
**Page 16**



Donald Kuspit

✓ **The Modernist Whimsy of Guido Geelen**

The author sees this artist's sculptures as the future of ceramics, certainly among the most intriguing clay works being made today.  
**Page 24**



Ezra Shales

✓ **An Unprudish Moment**

John deFazio, an artist known for an aesthetic too risqué for corporate America, has landed an installation for the MTV Network.  
**Page 28**



Celia Rabinovitch

✓ **Fearsome Poetry**

In his drawings, sculptor Stephen De Staebler uses the momentum established by responses to the model to impel his expressive lines.  
**Page 34**



Ian Wardropper

✓ **From the Sculptor's Hand**

The author explains how Italian Baroque terra-cotta models represent the difficulties artists must overcome in refining their compositions.  
**Page 38**

**CURATOR'S CHOICE**



Jo Lauria

✓ **The Los Angeles County Museum of Art**

The museum has selected an important large-scale porcelain wall sculpture by Ruth Duckworth.  
**Page 42**

**COMMENTARY**

Rose Slivka

✓ **Clay Into Art**

The veteran art critic registers her disappointment in the controversial ceramic installation at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
**Page 44**

**REVIEWS**

Page 48

✓ **Stephen De Staebler**

Dore Ashton

✓ **Richard DeVore**

Jeffrey Mongrain

**Steve Dixon**

Karen S. Chambers

Page 49

✓ **Claudia Fitch**

Matthew Kangas

✓ **Sergei Isupov**

Rick Newby

**James Jansma**

Susan Goldenson

Page 50

✓ **John Mason**

Fred Camper

✓ **Ichiro Matsuo**

Gerard McCarthy

**Judy Moonelis**

Karen S. Chambers

Page 51

✓ **Alena Ort**

Ezra Shales

✓ **Ken Price**

April Kingsley

**John Rohlifing**

Jeffrey Mongrain

Page 52

✓ **Piet Stockmans**

Chris Macleod

✓ **Grace Bakst Wapner**

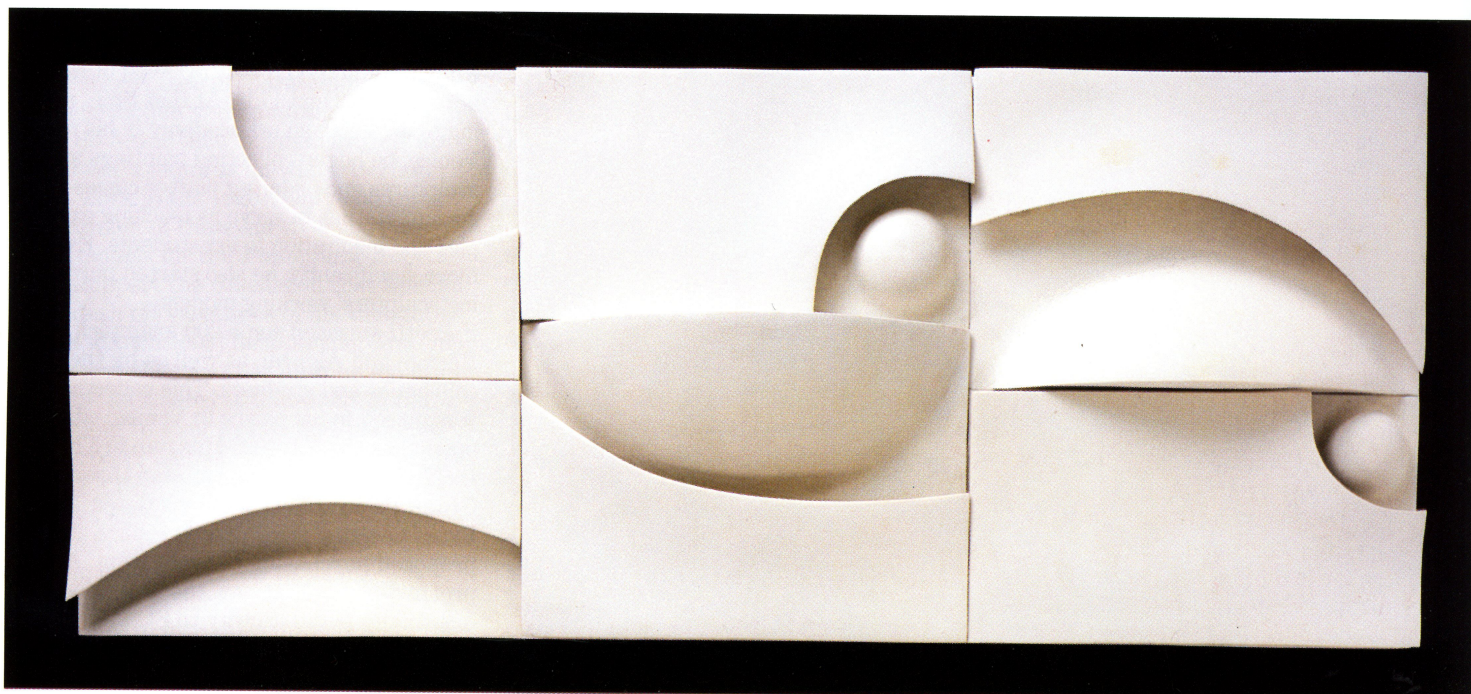
Suzanne Ramljak

**Stan Welsh**

Julia Chiappells

***The Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Selects a Work by Ruth Duckworth***

*Jo Lauria*



*Duckworth mines the deepest essence of organic form—human, flora, fauna, and celestial—and reduces these forms to pure abstractions.*

*In this ongoing series American Ceramics asks museum curators to discuss recent acquisitions of ceramic art of particular merit and how such pieces complement their museum's collections and collecting philosophies.*

The Decorative Arts Department of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) realized a long-established goal with the recent acquisition of an important large-scale porcelain wall mural by Ruth Duckworth. *Untitled Wall Sculpture* was completed in 1997 expressly for our permanent collection.

Duckworth considers this sculpture to be special and unique as it is the first time she has created a completely unglazed porcelain wall mural, something she has been yearning to do for the last ten years. LACMA's interest in acquiring a significant porcelain mural spurred her on to meet the challenge.

Acquiring a major ceramic piece by an internationally acclaimed artist such as Ruth Duckworth is a stated mission of the museum. The Decorative Arts Department has made concerted efforts within the last 10 years to develop the area of contemporary ceramics and build on the core collection given to LACMA in 1987 by the esteemed collectors Howard and Gwen Laurie Smits. The museum now has more than 500 objects, a collection exemplary of its depth and range of both vessel and sculptural works from America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, with a concentration on California artists.

Ruth Duckworth is arguably the doyenne of contemporary ceramics. Now in her 80th year, she has exhibited internationally since 1953 and is the recipient of the American Craft Fellow Award (in 1993), the highest commendation given to an artist working in a craft medium. Her family fled Nazi Germany to England when she was 17. In London, Duckworth maintained a close relationship with ceramist

Lucie Rie and was inspired to study ceramics. A natural talent working with stone transferred superbly to clay, she soon mastered the technique and distinguished herself in the field. In 1964 Duckworth moved to the United States to accept a teaching position at the University of Chicago. Throughout her long artist career, her most distinctive work has been her large-scale murals, both in bronze for public commissions and in porcelain for private commissions. *Untitled Wall Sculpture* is a remarkable study of abstracted form. The piece is made up of 12 separate slabs, six of which comprise the lower, structural base layer, and six of varying shapes overlaid onto the base. The resulting composition is a melody of undulating geometric forms—balls, half-circular disks, rounded curves, and sweeping arches—that leads the eye on a passage over soft protrusion, through silken crevices, into milky shadows, and around the smooth edges that define the borders.

Like all of Duckworth's sculptures, *Untitled Wall Sculpture* is nonrepresentational and non-literal. Duckworth mines the deepest essence of organic forms—human, flora, fauna, and celestial—and reduces these forms to pure abstractions so that they become metaphors of the organic and morphemic fragments of things that she perceives in the world. Balls and circles in her work might refer to breasts, suns, moons, and mushroom caps; and deeply cut furrows might suggest buttocks, plowed fields, mountain divides on the horizon, and the sensuous folds of budding flowers. Duckworth's perspicuity in articulating form, the power of her austere shapes, and her ability to render seductive surfaces gives her work shared sensibilities with the stone, metal, and wood sculptures of Constantine Brancusi, Henry Moore, and Isamu Noguchi, artists she greatly admires. Yet her work has a far-reaching authority, as she may append

forms from various inspirational sources, but the resulting visual syntax is always personal and defining. Indeed, Duckworth emphatically places her personal mark on all her sculptures, consciously celebrating handwork and process. Allowed to remain on the surface of her porcelain are the memory of her hands touching and manipulating, and the slight imperfections of the construction or firing procedure. For Duckworth, these artistic aberrations are essential as they evoke both the vitality and vulnerability of the creator. Ruth Duckworth's *Untitled Wall Sculpture* will be included in LACMA's forthcoming traveling exhibition *Defining Moments in Contemporary Ceramics, Selections from the Smits Collection and Related Works* scheduled to open at the museum in the spring of 2000.

*Jo Lauria is Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

*Page 42: Untitled Wall Sculpture (1997), 23 1/2" x 56" x 6", unglazed porcelain.*