

AMERICAN

CRAFT

FEB/MAR '03 \$5



cover: VALERI TIMOFEEV—
Glass, 1999, gilded silver plique-
à-jour enamel, 4 by 3½ inches.
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AMERICAN CRAFT® (ISSN-0194-8008) is published bimonthly by the American Craft Council, 72 Spring St., New York, NY 10012-4019. Phone 212.274.0630 Fax 212.274.0690 www.craftcouncil.org. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. Copyright ©2003 by American Craft Council. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written consent is prohibited.

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The opinions expressed in AMERICAN CRAFT are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the American Craft Council. Address unsolicited material to Editor, AMERICAN CRAFT, 72 Spring St., New York, NY 10012-4019. Material will be handled with care, but the magazine assumes no responsibility for it.

AMERICAN CRAFT is indexed in Art Index, Design and Applied Arts Index, and Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. Book reviews are also indexed in Book Review Index. AMERICAN CRAFT is available in microform and electronic formats through ProQuest Company, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. Phone 800.521.0600. National newsstand distribution: CMG, 250 W. 55 St., New York, NY 10019-5201.

Postmaster: Send address changes to AMERICAN CRAFT, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-3000.

Printed in the U.S.A.

PETER VANDENBERGE

BY JO LAURIA

During a long, fertile career Peter VandenBerge has extended his passion for experimentation, developing a body of steadily maturing work. Consummately skillful, he has refined his approach to modeling, capturing essential human emotions and expressions in his signature elongated portrait busts and spindly life-size figures.

VandenBerge's resolute individualism, sensitivity to materials and artistic drive can be attributed partly to his tutelage under Robert Arneson, master sculptor and iconoclast. VandenBerge was among Arneson's first graduate students at the University of California, Davis, receiving his M.A. in 1963. Those were heady transformative years. Working with Arneson in ceramics, and William T. Wiley in painting at UC Davis, VandenBerge absorbed the Funk and Pop ethos of the time. "We all got nailed together with Bob Arneson, all of us working with him, around him," VandenBerge recalls. "That's where I got my first notion of what Funk was—a strange notion that we could give something a mental or physical twist; where something functional could become nonfunctional. It's about what kind of reaction you could get by pushing ideas and techniques beyond the limits. I realized I could do anything I wanted. It threw a switch in my head."

As VandenBerge recognizes, Funk was "about attitude; it was a term someone dreamed up." Funk has many definitions—in music it refers to an earthy free-spirited blues sound, but it also means an offensive smell. The first to apply the term officially to an informal but distinctive style of art that had developed in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s was Peter Selz, director of the University Art Museum, UC Berkeley who organized an exhibition there in 1967 called "Funk." Generally speaking, Funk ceramists make offbeat, satirical sculptures that comment on politics, culture and sexual standards, and they combine and use materials in a purposely experimental way. VandenBerge doesn't view himself wholly as a Funk artist, as he doesn't feel connected to the more radical work that employs a sarcastic and hyperbolic approach to drive home a point. VandenBerge's brand of Funk is less acid-tongued and is softer around the edges: he incorporates art historical references, surrealism, popular culture and personal histories into his narratives and rarely uses ironic or indecorous imagery. But he acknowledges that being part of the Funk movement had its impact. It is evident in the way he uses clay—directly exposing the process, allowing the roughness of the gritty clay and the uneven coils to be revealed. Funk shaped his techniques and widened his scope of materials, encouraging a free-for-all combination of colors applied as both underglazes and glazes to surfaces that have been highly manipulated. It also amplified his penchant to play the role of the sharp-eyed, irreverent observer of contemporary manners and mores, producing work that seems ingenuous at first glance but has a disquieting underside.

After graduation from UC Davis, VandenBerge moved to San Francisco's Haight Ashbury neighborhood, where he became part of the vibrant and tumultuous Bay Area art scene of the 60s. He "saw the whole Hippie daze come right through."² He was aware of the lush, colorful paintings of cakes, pies and confections by the Pop painter Wayne Thiebaud and the satirical frog tableaux by his friend and former fellow student David Gilhooly. The works that he produced at this time, funky by anybody's definition, were playful, cheeky anthropomorphic vegetables, prompted by a visit, with Gilhooly to the farmers market in San Francisco. "Struck by the forms," particularly of the root vegetables, VandenBerge created zany ceramic containers in the shape of humanlike carrots, turnips, radishes, beets,



All Peter VandenBerge's works are coil-built clay with slips, stains and glaze. PAGE 61 Hood, 1985, 36 by 12 by 16 inches, collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Smits Ceramics Purchase Fund. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Peter VandenBerge with work-in-progress in his Sacramento, California, studio, 2000, photo/Tony Novelozo; Portrait of Vincent and the Yellow House, 1998-99, 39 by 19 by 13 inches, photo/David Brooks; Soenda Skater, 1997 62 by 28 by 8 inches, photo/Tony Novelozo; Upstream, 1998, 39 by 17 by 15 inches, photo/Tony Novelozo.

squash and eggplant. Soon he narrowed his cast of edibles to the bushy-headed carrot. The carrot containers then evolved into sculptural environments placed in darkly humorous settings. A typical work, as VandenBerge describes it, consisted of "a carnivorous lady carrot in a house with a tile roof and you could see into the house from all different angles. She had bones lying on the floor. In those days in San Francisco Vegetarianism was popular."³

VandenBerge played with the theme of cavorting carrots for several years and, exhausting its possibilities, was casting about for a new idea. In 1975, while teaching at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University he "almost unconsciously" embarked upon his first elongated head, which would evolve into an iconic series. "I was throwing some cylinders, and I stacked them together on top of each other and started pushing and pulling at the clay. Then a nose started appearing, then the eyes. I started building them out of coils and made them larger and more elaborate. I just liked the idea of the shape and was interested in making the form and dealing with the attitude the figure has about that form."⁴

Thus began a more than 25-year love affair with modeling portrait busts and full figure sculptures. The most obvious influences—Alberto Giacometti, whom VandenBerge met in his youth, and Amedeo Modigliani—can be seen in the elongation of the head, with the prominent nose bridging the upper and lower parts of the face; the flattened cheekbones and stretched earlobes; the broad-stroked features reduced to shorthand abbreviations; and the severe frontality. VandenBerge realizes that Giacometti and Modigliani looked to Etruscan and African tribal art for inspiration, so he, too, feels connected to the school of early 20th-century modernism that appropriated and abstracted this iconography and made it part of the language of modern art. Further for VandenBerge, the elongation is a formal application of two spiritual concepts. The thin-faced extended portraits and the spidery, thrusting verticality of his narrow figures are symbolic of the human desire to transcend earth and reach toward the heavens, like the soaring spires capping the Gothic cathedrals that captivated the impressionable VandenBerge in his travels through Europe. And the narrowing of his figures to streamlined forms so compacted that the air seems to float through them is his way of engaging *Nakazora*, the Buddhist term that describes the concept of "empty air" or the space that exists between sky and earth.

Born in the Netherlands in 1935, VandenBerge spent his childhood in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). At the time, his father worked as a geologist for the Shell Oil Company and young Peter would sometimes be allowed to accompany his father on expeditions "up and on the rivers" and over mountains where he would see crocodiles, monkeys and elephants, and experience other exotica.⁵ He also recalls the spirituality of the Javanese and Balinese people, how he was constantly surrounded by Buddhist icons that he "absorbed through osmosis and that settled in his being."⁶ Such works as *Buddha Babe*, 2001, represent VandenBerge's recognition of his childhood experience and his attempt to demystify it.

If there is a common thread throughout VandenBerge's work it is the intense interiority of each portrait and figure. The sculptures are based on people he has known, or are likenesses of fictional characters from books and movies. Some are straightforward portraits, but most are composites of memorable characters, coiled together in one bust, and some are pure fabrications based on faded recollections. They are mysterious and aloof—revealing fragments of their story but leaving much unsaid, details to be "supplied by the viewer's imagination." *continued on page 88*

