

Ceramics

Art and Perception

1994
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Satoru Hoshino
Ancient Woods-Land
1993. Clay, smoke fired.
Photo: Yoshihiro
Kikuyama

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Education of the public in the appreciation and value of ceramic art is part of the daily commitment of every potter or ceramist, as well as curators and gallery directors involved in exhibiting ceramics. At each exhibition, fair, newspaper interview, open demonstration or workshop, the opportunity for increasing public awareness of the art is realised through explanation and documentation by film or print. This education may be directed towards understanding of the aesthetic aspects of the work, the realisation of ideas through the ceramic medium, or the intricacy of techniques, skills and processes; such understanding explains the striving and dedication of the potter whose experience is needed to obtain particular effects of beauty of form and surface. A number of museums undertake this didactic role, providing full displays of techniques from the winning of the clay and other raw materials, forming and decorative processes, the vitrification of clay by firing in kilns of various types, to the purposes that ceramics have been used across historical and cultural ages. One such museum to offer a full educational display for the visitor is the Ariana Museum in Geneva, Switzerland. In the article on the museum in this issue, the re-opening of the museum, after a closure of 12 years, is described. This occasion allowed for new initiatives in the museum's educational role and two halls are specifically dedicated to explanations of ceramic techniques in the belief that understanding leads to appreciation of the role that ceramics plays in our lives.

The Everson Museum, in Syracuse, New York, is a museum with an extensive study and research centre. Under the directorship of Ronald Kuchta, whose article on appropriation and identity in ceramics appears in this issue, the Everson continues its active role in collecting and educating. Kuchta's article, based on his research on the collections at the Everson, questions why some ceramic artists are seeking to express themselves through cultural and historical styles not directly related to them. What is the attraction across cultures and history, he asks, and who is looking to the future?

This question is addressed by Tari Arata who, in writing on the work of Satoru Hoshino in the lead article in this issue, finds that formalism, adherence to fashion, illusionism and cleverness have dubious value. What is admirable in ceramics today, he believes, are those artists, such as Hoshino, making what is known as 'post-object' ceramics, who are working on the frontier. This means using clay as clay, with its physical properties realised structurally, clay used as solid form to express the relationship between physical action and matter. But read the articles: the authors have expressed their ideas with conviction and passion.

• With Claude Pisset in the didactic area of the Ariana Museum, 1993

Ralph Bacerra – Ceramic Artist

Article by Jo Lauria

RALPH BACCERRA'S CERAMIC CAREER SPANS THREE decades and transverse the path from traditionalism to postmodernism. Bacerra graduated in 1961 from the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles where he learned to become the master of his craft under the skilled guidance of Otto and Vivika Heino. Bacerra took over the helm from the Heinos in 1963 and served as the head of the Chouinard ceramics department until 1972. In 1983 he accepted the appointment of chairman of the ceramics department at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, a position which he holds today.

During his tenure at Chouinard, Bacerra had considerable influence over his students, notably Mineo

Mizuno, Peter Shire, Adrian Saxe and Elsa Rady. Bacerra and this generation of potters became identified with a new movement in clay referred to as the 'fetish finish'. This is a style which demands that the work be flawlessly constructed and deliberately seductive in both surface design and form. Although Bacerra feels that too much is made of his continued association with this style, it is clear that he believes in its underlying principles, saying: "Technique is a high priority. The skill has to be evident in each piece. That is to say that the form should be pleasing, the glaze and the colours are right and the design is completely worked-out. If these elements are not in place, then I'm not satisfied with the work."

Double-Walled Vessel, 1988. Whiteacre. 40 x 50 cm.



After leaving his teaching position at Chouinard, Bacerra spent the succeeding decade as a studio artist (1973–1983). This was a time of grand experimentation. Dating from this period are the handsomely simple salt-fired covered jars and the wonderfully inventive mythical animal sculptures which bespeak his often unsung whimsicality. The animal sculptures mark an important development because they are perhaps the first body of work where he couples his exceptional craftsmanship with the ability to express narrative: each sculpture transmits a sense of place and story.

Concurrent with the sculptural pieces, Bacerra began a series of forms which were based on a reinterpretation of ancient Asian vessels and glazes. The underglaze designs of the Chinese Ming dynasty

cobalt blue and white and the boldly patterned Japanese Imari ware clearly held the most appeal and presented the greatest challenge. The blue and white *Four-Legged Tureen* (1976) exemplifies Bacerra's skill in translating and personalising an antique Oriental style: fluid blue and white lines swirl and curl around the body and lid of the dish implying an animated hybrid animal that gracefully rests on four legs, like a frog that crouches before it leaps. Thus, traditional Chinese design elements are summoned by Bacerra to display his personal sensibility. Similarly with the Japanese Imari ware, Bacerra started collecting and studying this ware – the relationship of pattern to form and the application of overglaze enamels – and he quickly developed his own vocabulary of imagery.

Zig-Zag Bird Plate, 1983. Whitecaste, 58 x 40 x 10 cm.



Bacerra's aesthetic appropriation gave rise to numerous platters, soup tureens and nested boxes. In all of these pieces, the historical reference remains, but the symbolism and the colours – birds and flowers rendered in more muted, saturated tones become Bacerra's signature art. This signature symbolism is a natural outgrowth of his developing love of rare flowers and cacti, teamed with his fascination with the interlocking pattern techniques of M C Escher. At about this time Bacerra became interested in raising exotic plants, particularly unusual varieties of irises and orchids. Hence, an entire series of work based on these floral design elements emerged. Similarly once he mastered the Escher positive/negative grid technique, he evolved a body of work which used this patterning application, predominantly the

dimensional wall tiles of interconnecting bird shapes.

In the mid '80s, Bacerra returned to more sculptural forms. His next two series included large slab-constructed shallow platters and double-walled vessels (1986–1988). It is apparent that this grouping developed from the Inari-inspired period but now the surface is graced with intricate interwoven patterns based on geometry and perspective rather than on fauna and flora.

A further innovation in this work is that the dimension of the piece dictated the design treatment. The rims of the platters are cut in geometric shapes and the double-walled vessels contain sculptural geometric protrusions. In essence, these extensions force a constant play between three-dimensional volume and two-dimensional illusion of space. The overall

Portrait Vessel. 1991. Whiteware. 80 cm ft.



effect of this surface patterning/form integration is one of visual stimulation and excitement: the eye is teased to explore the pieces by being pulled through and around circles, squares, triangles and by being led down paths constructed of lines both straight and curved. This is Bacerra's hand at play. As he says: "There is playfulness in this work. Shapes jump out and recede. They move forward and go back. They intertwine with one another. Seemingly flat surfaces become dimensional. Straight lines become curved. Most people don't understand this unless they become involved in the work."

The virtuosic surface manipulation on these pieces formally established him in the ceramic community as a designer of great imagination and technique.

In the most current series of *Teapots and Portrait Heads* (1988-1992), Bacerra has recaptured and expanded upon the gestural freedom and figurative expressiveness of mythical animals. The organic form of the teapot is derived from moulded limbs of a tree and the handle, spout and lid knob are cast from moulds made from small twigs. The twisting body and gnarled appendages anthropomorphise the pot and the oft-times textured or mottled glazes create a skin-like covering over the surface. And contrasted with this biomorphic quality is the characteristic striped, dotted and woven pattern detailing. These two distinct attributes combined render these teapots interesting on several levels: they are functional in that they can hold and pour liquid, they are objects of beauty and decoration, and they engage in a dialogue as they are abstractions of the human form.

It seems a natural progression that Bacerra should turn next to the human figure for further inspiration. The *Portrait Head* series is a grouping comprised of several large scale slab-built male and female busts which, structurally are based on the vessel form. These figures are certainly the culmination of all of Bacerra's expertise and experience. These works are actually pots with volume; they are decorative jewels, richly patchquilted and gleaming with bright colours and lustres, they are figures possessing a narrative quality wishing to reveal some untold story

Of all the works, they are the most postmodern in concept: they are an example of the melding of classical, cultural and contemporary influences. He says: "I have never thought of my work in postmodern terms but I suppose in many ways it fits the definition. My pieces are based on traditional ideas and engage in certain cultural appropriations - in form, in design, in glaze choices. However, my work is not postmodern

in the sense that I am not making any statements - social, political, conceptual, or even intellectual. There is no meaning or metaphor I am committed more to the idea of pure beauty. When it is finished, the piece should be like an ornament, exquisitely beautiful."

At present, Bacerra divides his time between teaching at Otis Art Institute and working in his studio which is in Eagle Rock near to

his residence. He has just completed a commission of impressive proportions for the Los Angeles Main Library. He originated the design schema for 3500 square feet (325 square metres) of tile which will adorn an interior wall when the rebuilding of the library is completed.

Since Ralph Bacerra typically works on one series for two years, it is likely that he is now in the phase of generating a new project. And because he makes it a policy not to discuss work in progress, it is anybody's guess as to what may develop after the *Portrait Heads*. Assuredly whatever new object emerges from his studio will display his singular style of decoration. And, I am equally sure, the next body of work will, like the work which preceded it, continue to extend and transcend the limitations of the medium.



Four-Legged Tureen, 1975. *Whiteware*, 28 x 30 cm.

Jo Lauria is a freelance writer and a ceramic artist. She wishes to thank Eduardo Lazo for the use of interview material. Photographs by Anthony Cunha, courtesy of Garth Clark Gallery. Ralph Bacerra has been one of the key artists among the original ceramists represented by Garth Clark Gallery from its inception in 1981.



Untitled Teapot. 1989. Whiteware. 42.5 cm/ft.