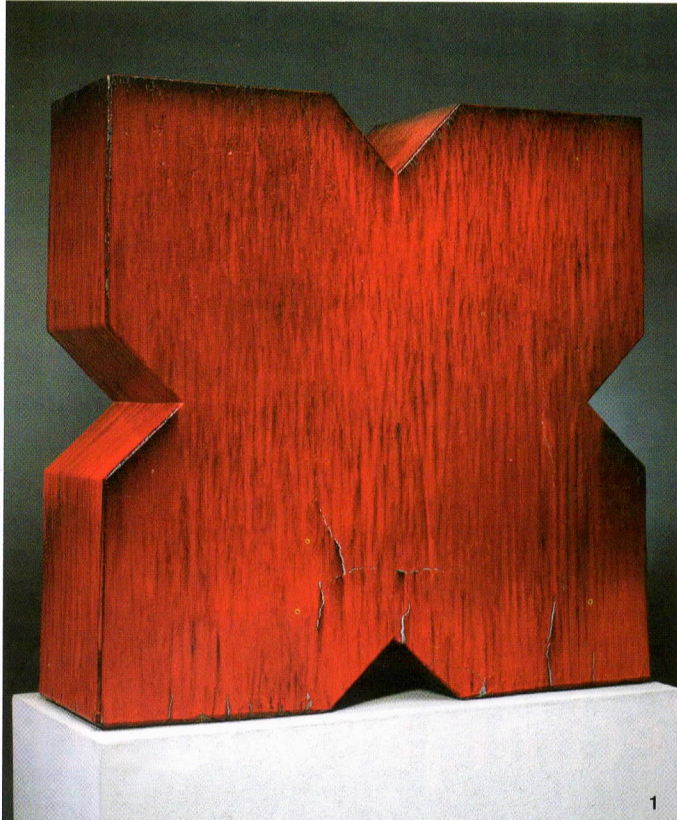


pacific standard time

by Kathleen Whitney



In 1970, Susan Peterson, then professor of ceramics at the University of Southern California, was asked by CBS-KNXT to create “Wheels, Kilns and Clay”; 54 half-hour television episodes on ceramic art. Peterson presented a range of ceramic subjects including handbuilding, throwing, decorating, and firing. The series was rebroadcast for two years and is still available on DVD. The program was one indicator of the tremendous interest in and popularity of ceramics in Southern California. This DVD (on view at the American Museum of Ceramics Arts in Pomona) is just one of many films, objects, and documents on view during “Pacific Standard Time,” a year-long, region-wide series of exhibitions dealing with Southern California’s art history between the years 1945 and 1985.

The end of WWII transformed Southern California’s art community, creating an environment characterized by experimentation and a need to create innovative and original objects. The years between 1945–1985 are particularly interesting because they saw the introduction of new technologies, art practices, and attitudes that were specific to the region and distinctly different from those of the rest of the country. During this time, Japanese decorative techniques and raku were introduced, industry developed a new relationship with the arts, and every extant technique was pushed to edge.

Although prewar Southern California already had a considerable, home-grown, and idiosyncratic crafts tradition in place, it tended to be localized and without wider impact. By contrast, reception of ceramic objects made after the war was unique and widely recognized. Peterson’s television series is just a single example of the interest in and appreciation of handmade or beautifully designed ceramic objects. Collectors and the general public were sensitive to new forms of art because modernism so permeated Southern Californian culture. A number of European architects made Los Angeles home and exerted an enormous stylistic influence. The growing aerospace industry brought an enormous sense of expanding horizons. Charles and Ray Eames, Eva Zeisel, Sam Maloof, and other influential designers created an aesthetic that complemented and supported the work artists were making. The postwar economic upsurge made the acquisition of ceramic objects affordable. Many ceramic artists lent their skills to the design industry so their work became widely accessible.

The Pacific Standard Time (aka PST) exhibitions focus on art created in the Los Angeles area during the postwar years. PST involved the participation of over 60 museums and galleries between Santa Barbara and San Diego and was the result of ten years of research

initiated by the Getty Institute. The Getty Foundation committed over \$10 million to the project, making it possible to archive four decades of material and help scholars and curators to produce and present exhibitions, catalogs, and videos.

The majority of the PST shows emphasize a Southern Californian zeitgeist expressed in a number of styles, mediums, and ideas. Feminism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, politics, and new technologies such as video were strong vectors for creativity. Some of the artworks on display are inseparable from Southern California and completely local in origin; the California Finish Fetish, surf art, and the Light and Space movements. Southern Californian artists saw themselves as the cutting edge for a new 20th-century aesthetic.

Nine PST venues included or focused on the ceramic arts. Each of these exhibitions placed a different focus on the place occupied by

many pots, including a beautiful Gertrude and Otto Natzler bowl. The Huntington Library (San Marino) exhibit, "The House That Sam Built: Sam Maloof and Art in the Pomona Valley, 1945–1985," used objects from Maloof's personal collection to show the diverse nature of crafts in the region. Maloof's elegantly crafted wood furniture was presented with a piece by Paul Soldner, groups of Natzler and Ward Youry vessels, a Harrison McIntosh vase, and a small Betty Ford sculpture of ferrets.

The Mingei Museum in San Diego and the Craft and Folk Art Museum in LA also had survey exhibitions of Southern Californian craft artists. The Mingei Museum presented "San Diego's Craft Revolution—From Post-War Modern to California Design." The show featured a particularly striking, Pop-influenced teapot from the 1970s by Ron Carlson and a Malcolm McClain slab-built pot



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1 John Mason's *Red X*, 4 ft. 11½ in. (1.5 m) in length, stoneware, 1966. Gift of the Kleiner Foundation. Digital image copyright 2009, Museum Associates / LACMA / Art Resource. 2 Peter Voukos' *Snake River*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1 m) in height, stoneware, iron slip, sgraffito, clear glaze, 1959. Copyright schopplein.com. 1–2 are on view in "Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voukos, 1956–1968" at the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College in Claremont. 3 Beatrice Wood's *Chocolate and Young Men*, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, earthenware, 1990/1993. On view in "Beatrice Wood: Career Woman—Drawings, Paintings, Vessels, and Objects" at the Santa Monica Museum of Contemporary Art. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. William P. Klein, Photo: Tony Cunha. Copyright Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts/Happy Valley Foundation. 4 Ken Price's *BG Red*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, fired clay with acrylic and lacquer on wooden base, 1963. Copyright: courtesy Ken Price Studio. Object Credit: Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips. Photo: Taylor Sherill. 5 Henry Takemoto's *Untitled*, 27¼ in. (70.5 cm) in diameter, stoneware with iron and cobalt brushwork, 1959. Copyright Henry Takemoto. Object Credit: Pier Voukos. Photo: Joe Schopplein. 4–5 are on view in "Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture 1950–1970" at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

ceramics. Some presented ceramics as a sculptural medium, others considered the intersection of ceramics and design in collaboration with industry, one exhibit stressed the importance of studio pottery and influential artists.

Two of the museum exhibitions, including the Getty's "Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970" and the Santa Barbara Museum's "Pasadena to Santa Barbara: A Selected History of Art in Southern California, 1951–1969" presented broad surveys of the art made during those decades. The Getty showed a magnificent John Mason wall piece, a large, earthenware sphere with an octopus motif by Henry Takemoto, a very Picassoid Peter Voukos, and a mid-career Pop art piece by Ken Price. Santa Barbara included the work of the omnipresent Beatrice Wood.

Several museums concentrated on mid-century Californian design. The Los Angeles County Art Museum in its "California Design, 1930–1965—Living in a Modern Way," featured a great

from the late 1950s. The Craft and Folk Art Museum presented "Golden State of Craft: California 1960–1985," with works by many ceramists, including Dora De Larios and Marguerite Wildenhain.

Three institutions presented in-depth exhibitions focused solely on the ceramic object. All three assembled shows that are notable for their exhibition design, curatorial brilliance, and scholarship. They have also produced stunning catalogs with contributors such as Peter Plagens, Suzanne Muchnic, and Jo Lauria.

The Santa Monica Museum of Contemporary Art presented "Beatrice Wood: Career Woman—Drawings, Paintings, Vessels, and Objects." Wood was a vital contributor to the Southern Californian art scene for decades. The exhibition features her major work in ceramics from the 1940s until her death in 1998. Wood's functional work with lusters is well known and well represented in the exhibition. Lesser known are some of her larger sculptural works such as *Chocolate and Young Men*, a large painted earthenware piece that depicts a seated



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6 Otto and Vivika Heino's plate, 15 in. in diameter, 1956. *Collection of the Long Beach Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift.* 7 From left to right: Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman's blue and white decanter, female figure mishima decoration, 14¾ in. (37 cm) in height, 1952–1956. *Collection of Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman.* Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman's blue and white decanter, 14½ in. (37 cm) in height, 1952–1956. *Collection of Laura Ackerman Shaw.* Jerome Ackerman's blue and black striped decanter, 14¾ in. (37 cm) in height, 1952–1956. *Collection of Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman.* Photos: Gene Sasse. 6–7 are on view in "Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California 1945–1975" at the American Museum of Ceramic Arts.

woman (Wood) with a group of small male figures seated on each knee. This piece and several others typify her wit and faux naïf style.

"Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, 1956–1968" is at the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, in Claremont. The show dramatically illustrates how the works of Mason, Price, and Voulkos became the basis of a major new movement in abstract ceramic sculpture. The exhibition represents a pivotal moment when clay began its move into the mainstream of sculptural practice. The three produced objects that are iconic and inextricably linked to them. They were all influenced by the predominant aesthetic of the time; Abstract Expressionism. Their work could not have been made in any other medium; in their hands, clay is more than the mere vehicle for form, it's the propellant for their ideas. Although all the work has kept its original punch, the most iconic object in the show is John Mason's *Red X* from 1966.

The extraordinary American Museum of Ceramic Arts (AMOCA) in Pomona presented "Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California 1945–1975." Curator Christy Johnson chose a diverse selection of work made by potters who had some relationship with the influential teacher, artist, and designer Millard Sheets. There are over 300 objects made by 53 artists working in studios, classrooms, and in industry. Common Ground tells the history of mid-century Southern Californian ceramic arts by organizing the exhibition into groupings; studio work, commercial work, and work produced in coordination with industry. The show demonstrates how potters influenced each other as well as how they were able to sustain themselves financially. The majority of potters in the exhibition are well known nationally and internationally. Common Ground shows prime examples of all their work, including an extremely elegant Helen Watson covered bowl (see CM March 2012, p. 22) and a vase-like sculpture by Henry Takemoto.

The major point Common Ground makes is that the history of Southern Californian ceramics is synergistic; the right people (artists, teachers, mentors, personalities) came together in the right place at the right time. The economy was burgeoning, a cultural shift was in progress and, in combination with the freewheeling, self-inventing nature of the Los Angeles area, the total package created an aesthetic tipping point, a strong "tectonic shift." The personalities of artists like the Natzlers and the Heinos, Millard Sheets, and Susan Peterson led the charge into new aesthetic territories. This is the most encyclopedic and eclectic of the shows; the works on exhibit create a context and demonstrate the diversity and explosive creativity that defined the era.

All these exhibitions establish Southern California as an influential creative center for ceramic art. Jo Lauria, curator of the Golden State of Craft exhibition and contributor to another, stated that their goal was, "to tell the unsung story of the contributions made by ceramic artists to culture overall—to the economy, to the art community and to academia."

Although the boundaries between *function* and *art*, and *ceramic art* and *art*, remain tricky and contested territories, the Pacific Standard Time exhibitions, with their inclusion of functional and sculptural ceramics, accomplish a great deal; they've succeeded in positioning the ceramic arts where they've always belonged, in the midst of the contemporary American art dialog.

the author Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor residing in Los Angeles. She is also the author of numerous catalogs and has written extensively about ceramic sculpture for a number of publications including *Sculpture Magazine*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, and *CM*. In 2000, she moderated a panel "The Body in Ceramic Sculpture" at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts conference.