

NICHOLAS & LEE BEGOVICH GALLERY



JULIA GALLOWAY

Living



with

Clay

PATTI WARASHINA



JEROME ACKERMAN

CALIFORNIA
CERAMICS
COLLECTIONS

Rody N. Lopez

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THE UNCOMMON DENOMINATOR: CERAMICS IN THE KAMM COLLECTION

JO LAURIA

“I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.”

— Oscar Wilde

Sonny and Gloria Kamm have been collectors, sharing the excitement of the conquest, throughout the years of their married life. One imagines that their wedding vows included a clause, “to love, cherish, and uphold the institution of collecting.” The activity of collecting has incited their joint passions to pursue, possess, and document objects that have made a personal imprint on their lives, and more broadly, on art and design history. In their multilevel midcentury-modern residence in the San Fernando Valley, the Kamms live among their collections of contemporary paintings, decorative arts, and sculptural glass works. Their deepest holdings are in the decorative arts, which include significant silver collections—of antique baby cups and serving pieces—and most impressively, ceramic objects.

The totality of the Kamm ceramic collection comprises two distinct but often overlapping categories: teapots from The Kamm Teapot Collection and ceramic sculptures by contemporary studio artists. The Kamm Teapot Collection is the largest and most comprehensive collection in America, and possibly the world, devoted to the singular form of the teapot.¹ This collection features more than 18,000 teapots and objects by renowned architects, artists, designers, painters, photographers, and sculptors, including a novelty-themed section of teapots by notable manufacturers, and additionally, a comprehensive collection of tea-related paraphernalia.² These teapots showcase a multiplicity of disciplines and materials, as varied as blown and cast glass, metal (silver, aluminum, tin), carved and turned wood, and fiber (embroidery thread, knotted waxed linen). The most fantastical examples are fabricated of twigs, string, coconut shells, grapefruit peels, quail eggs, bark, beads, and carved rock salt. Ordinary by comparison is the largest grouping in the collection, representing teapots made of fired clay: earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain.

Living with Clay showcases ceramic objects, in equal measure, from both categories of the Kamms’ collections—sculptural works and teapots. Because Sonny Kamm self-identifies as the “Teapot Man” and promotes this identity on his license plate, it seems appropriate to begin with a discussion of this category.



¹ Excerpted from Sonny and Gloria Kamm PowerPoint presentation delivered at Otis College of Art and Design, Fall 2015.

² Garth Clark, *The Artful Teapot* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications), 8.



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 3

Ceramic Teapots in the Kamm Teapot Collection

As a subset, the ceramic teapots are international in scope and span many strata, bridging time periods and art movements. Their forms and decorative motifs represent world cultures, and they come in every imaginable size. At one end of the spectrum is the British exemplar, “The Largest Teapot in the World,” claiming to hold 1,024 cups of tea. At the other end, a Japanese porcelain miniature tea/coffee set, wherein the teapot holds only a thimbleful of liquid (*See Figure 1*). Although the common denominator of the teapot form is body, spout, handle, and lid in balanced proportions, the Kamm collection contains many examples of uncommon forms; its uniqueness is partially defined by its oversized and miniature teapots portraying multiple stylistic allegiances, manipulations, and exaggerations (*See Figure 2, page 86-87*). A select grouping of the antique diminutive pots on view in the exhibition presents an illustrative sampling (*See Figure 3*).

The earliest of the ceramic teapots dates to the beginning of the 1700s and the most recent is from 2015. This latest addition to the collection holds a prized place: this common sized and shaped teapot is given uncommon status, as Sonny Kamm personally decorated it. Given a teapot “blank,” Sonny chose to glaze it with a meandering abstract pattern of vibrant colors (*See Figure 4*). Therefore, the breadth and depth of the collection can be evaluated over the span of three hundred years. Chronologically, the historical teapots of centuries past are representations of the form’s evolution, marking the beginning of the teapot’s journey from a functional object to one of aesthetic expression. The expanse in between is rich and sublime, highlighting inventive iterations that stretch the definition, perception, and purpose of the form.

The individually glazed teapot by Sonny would qualify as utilitarian, i.e., able to contain and pour hot tea. However, this example is an anomaly, as the majority of the teapots in the collection made after 1980 would be considered “concept” teapots; they reference utility but aren’t truly functional. The Kamms estimate they proudly own thousands of “delightfully useless” ceramic teapots made by studio artists, each one a unique interpretation of the most enduring symbol of home, hearth, and hospitality.

From 2002 to 2006, a selection of 250 artfully nonfunctional Kamm teapots, in all media, were assembled as a museum exhibition that toured nine venues in North America. The book *The Artful Teapot*, authored by the show’s curator and noted ceramics scholar and historian, Garth Clark, accompanied the exhibition. Clark credits the genesis of the “concept” category to Kasimir Malevich, legendary Russian artist and founder of the Suprematism art movement. Malevich, responding to criticism that his *Suprematist Teapot* did not pour well, offered this explanation: “. . .it is not a teapot, but the idea of a teapot”³ (*See Figure 5*). Thus began the era of possibilities, where a teapot could be a straightforward container to simmer tea leaves in hot water, or an icon of aesthetic virtue stripped of its



FIGURE 4
At a fundraiser for the ceramics studio at California State University, Long Beach, Sonny was provided a “blank” teapot on which he brushed colorful glazes, creating a lively abstract pattern.



FIGURE 5

³ Ibid., 201.





FIGURE 2
This miniature porcelain Japanese Coffee/Tea Set, replete with cups and saucers, is a service for twelve and was sold in a custom box for its storage and transport.



FIGURE 7



utility. The former would be kitchen item; the latter, art object. The Kamms view their collection of teapots as objets d'art, sculptures of varying sizes that function as containers of ideas rather than vessels to receive and pour liquid.

A Few Futile Teapots

Perhaps the most blatant demonstration of teapot futility is Tony Marsh's *Perforated Teapot* (1999). (See Figure 6) Composed of equal amounts of air and matter, this piece is a parody of containment—the light passing through the open spaces of the perforations makes it seem barely there; its airiness contradicts its material presence. Structurally, the positive connections around the negative holes have sufficient substance to outline the body, spout, handle, and lid of the teapot. However, Marsh intends to stretch our perceptions of physical mass, weight, and volume with his masterfully crafted illusion of a teapot. The contemplation of what is and what is not there (presence versus absence) provides the pleasurable sensation of a magic trick, well performed and appreciated for its precision and sleight of hand.

Viola Frey's *Venus and the Rooster* teapot (1975-1976) celebrates its freedom from convention and utility with aplomb. An assemblage of human and animal figurines creates a playful puzzle that obfuscates any relationship to a pouring vessel (See Figure 7). Using remade flea market castoffs, Frey combined unrelated ceramic components to delineate the teapot form: figurines of classical goddess and carousel-swan overlap to shape the handle; a rooster's open beak serves as a spout; a young boy on a tree stump, face-to-face with a red robin, contours the lid and finial; and various statuettes appearing to emerge from frothy waves delimit the base. This idea of a teapot belongs to the series of Frey's signature bric-a-brac compositions, where all elements are arranged with scant regard to scale or comprehensible narrative. But all is not chaos with this lidded and spouted pot: Frey has perfect pitch for the rhythmic procession of forms—how their interplay locates the vessel in space—and 20/20 vision for color associations—how color catches and leads the eye and defines the essential structure.

Untitled teapot is one of two Viola Frey pieces the Kamms own and display in their home. The other is an untitled two-part sculpture from 1978-1982, which functions as a set of ceramic bookends. Each is in the shape of an upright book (presumably an art book) with broken crockery spilling over the pages and tumbling downward into a wrecked heap. These bookends serve to contain a small fraction of the hundreds of books the Kamms have acquired. Sonny and Gloria use their expansive library as an educational resource to guide them in their art education and collecting pursuits.

Another artist in the collection who has a great sensibility to color and form is Ralph Bacerra. Having studied graphic design in his early college years at Chouinard Art Institute (Los Angeles), Bacerra learned how to adapt the two-



FIGURE 6



FIGURE 8

opposite page, top:
FIGURE 7,

Viola Frey

Venus and the Rooster, 1975-1976
Earthenware, glazes, and china paint
ALF no. VF-3093CS

Art © Artists' Legacy Foundation/Licensed
by VAGA, New York

opposite page, bottom:

Viola Frey

Untitled, 1978-1982

Ceramic and glazes

Art © Artists' Legacy Foundation/Licensed
by VAGA, New York



FIGURE 9



dimensional optical dynamism of repeating patterns and bold color juxtapositions to three-dimensional space. In *Teapot* (c. 2001), the exuberant patterns of birds in flight against a backdrop of stripes, dots, dashes, and checkerboards are rendered in Bacerra's characteristic vibrant glazes and metallic lusters. (See Figure 8) The encircling design activates the surface and defines the volume, shape, and silhouette. Although this lidded container purports to be a teapot, this is to be understood more as presentation than performance, more as implication than literal model: the elongated body, narrow curving handle, squiggly slender spout, and undulating base are sculptural inventions of conventional parts that imply their purpose. Bacerra is one of several artists the Kamms have acquired in depth since they began collecting ceramics in the early 1980s. They have obtained Bacerra teapots from various series dating to the start of their collecting years, and all have been highly decorative, imaginative translations of the genres that represent significant high points in Bacerra's career.



FIGURE 10

The individual who holds the honored position of having the most ceramic pieces in the Kamm collection is Los Angeles-based artist Peter Shire, who studied ceramics as a student of Bacerra at Chouinard Art Institute. The Kamms own Shire teapots in both ceramic and metal, some of which are closely aligned with the category and others more aptly described as nonvessel sculptures with structural references to the form. The Kamms took a tumble down Alice's rabbit hole when they commissioned Shire to make an outsized mailbox that would identify their home. The result is an extravagant stainless steel, ceramic, and enamel sculpture in a teapot shape; its radiating spires and "raised antenna" point outward and upward, making it appear as an alien landing ship from a faraway galaxy. Standing more than ten feet tall at curbside, this teapot monument, Sonny and Gloria assure, is surprisingly functional as a mailbox: a hinged door conceals a built-in compartment, designed at appropriate height, for carriers to deposit and retrieve mail. The imaginative teapot mailbox, titled *Air Mail* (2002-2003), has become a well-known feature in the neighborhood, and its glamor mugshot is on view at the local post office (See Figure 9). Sonny cites Shire's *Air Mail* as exemplary of what makes their collection "different and special, like no other," as the many commissioned works are exclusive to the Kamm Teapot Collection.

Although the Kamms may have a penchant for teapots that are aesthetically pleasing, witty, and whimsical, their collection also includes examples that provoke serious thought. A case in point is the gravitas of Richard Notkin's *Pyramidal Skull Teapot* (1981) fabricated in the tradition of Chinese Yixing Ware, of which Notkin is a master (See Figure 10). As the title implies, the body of the teapot is in the shape of a pyramid and the features of a skull are sculpted into the pyramid's ascending "walls." The hollowed-out eyes and nostrils, and the exaggerated grimacing mouth of the skull, mock viewers: this is Notkin's clarion call to stop political aggression, death, and destruction in the Middle East. Each teapot in this Notkin series is a commentary on a specific evil committed by man's hand that threatens



the annihilation of civilization. By using the symbolic form of the teapot, Notkin is promising a sensation of sweetness and comfort, but instead delivers the biting taste of weighty, mortal concerns. This bitter tea is best served when accompanied by self-reflection, and this is precisely the experience that Notkin intends to evoke.

Ceramic Sculptures in the Kamm Collection

The Kamms have assembled their collection of ceramic sculpture using the same guiding principles they developed for the teapot collection, but with one important exception. Sonny and Gloria have exercised a deeper restraint in regard to acquisitions due to the inherent limitations of living with sculptural objects in a residential space. (Primarily, the Kamms addressed this issue with the Teapot Collection by storing it off site in a dedicated facility, and in additional spaces that include the homes of their children.) The ceramic sculptures are intermixed with other media and genres, tastefully accommodated on custom glass shelving, kitchen and bathroom counters, tabletops, platforms, and pedestals, and some spill over onto the walls while others are contained in curio cabinets. The vastness, variety, and significance of the Kamm Collection has made their home a destination for art groups, museum curators, and educators; Gloria estimates that since the start of the collection thirty-plus years ago, some of their objects have always been on loan to various museums.

Form, Content, and Context

In keeping with their collection philosophy, the Kamms began by acquiring ceramic sculptures created by artists they believed possessed an authentic voice and emphatic imprint, and further, the potential to reach the top-of-the-charts in the ceramics field. Through strategic acquisitions, the Kamms acquired early, midcareer, and late works by several established artists whose careers they followed and supported. A few of the artists who are broadly represented in the Kamm Collection are featured in this exhibition, among them Ralph Bacerra, Beverly Mayeri, Adrian Saxe, Peter Shire, and Akio Takamori. (See section on Kamm Teapot Collection for a discussion of Ralph Bacerra and Peter Shire.)

Akio Takamori and Beverly Mayeri have two objects each in the exhibition, selected from their multiple works in the collection. For both artists, the pieces are drawn from different decades and series, and demonstrate, for Takamori, a profound change in direction, and for Mayeri, a deep penetration into the psyche that extends from the personal to the political.

One could consider the arc of Takamori's career as being narrated by the two sculptures in the exhibition: *Bust of a Modern Woman* (1990), an "envelope" vessel inscribed on the interior and exterior with various female portraits and nude figures; and *School Boy* (2005), a freestanding, smaller than life-size figure of a Japanese student dressed in traditional uniform (See Figure 11 & 12). By

opposite page:
FIGURE 11



FIGURE 12



viewing the two pieces together, the viewer can observe Takamori pivoting from the support and containment of the vessel to the self-supported figure. Takamori had devoted years to the manipulation and expansion of the vessel concept, but by the mid-1990s he reached the point in his work where he felt the limitations of the vessel form,⁴ conceding that the visual power was inevitably anchored to its structural walls. In the new series of fully actualized figures, Takamori found the power to shape space; using the figure extended the visual experience beyond its framework into the environment.

What followed were tableaux of standing, sitting, and reclining figures representing the common Japanese villagers of Takamori's youth. This series has been well received and critically reviewed. It is thrilling to witness flashpoints in an artist's career, such as Takamori's shift in direction. It is commendable that the Kamms have this vision and a sustained commitment to the mission of collecting important works from important artists in various stages of their careers in order to document these meaningful connections.

The two sculptures by Beverly Mayeri tell a different story, no less profound. Mayeri has been investigating the expressive possibilities of figurative sculpture for forty years, and her work focuses on the ambiguous nature of existence, interpersonal relationships between humans, and mankind's impact on the environment. A close view of *Divided Minds* (1984) and *California Marriage* (1990) shows the artist moving from internal exploration to external observation (See *Figure 13 & 14*). *Divided Minds* is a character study infused with psychological drama; this sculptural portrait graphically depicts an unresolved internal struggle that results in physical fracture, mirroring the implosion of the psyche.

The leitmotif of *California Marriage* is the uncertainty of the wedded union, humorously foregrounded by the crossed fingers. Upon close scrutiny of the two figures sculpted into the crossed digits—Gloria Kamm pointed out the long, strong chins—one realizes that the marriage is between two men. Here, Mayeri is challenging the viewer to look outward from the personal to probe the political. The now-happy but possibly doomed couple presents the issue of gay marriage. If one Mayeri sculpture can provoke thought, then two are more than twice as powerful. Cleverly laying bare the inner workings of the mind, the artist delivers her messages with whiplash acuity.

The final artist belonging to this group is Adrian Saxe, an artist whose work offers a befitting end to the essay: Saxe, a Los Angeles-based artist and professor of art at UCLA since 1973, has enjoyed a longstanding friendship and collection history with the Kamms. Saxe is well represented in the collection by works from many phases of his oeuvre. In fact, as one enters the Kamms' residence, glass shelves to the right of the entry display a wondrous arrangement of four hybrid teapots/ewers from the 1980s: three are assembled from the castings of molds Saxe made of vegetables—pattypan squash, cabbage, and chili pepper; the fourth is from a



FIGURE 13

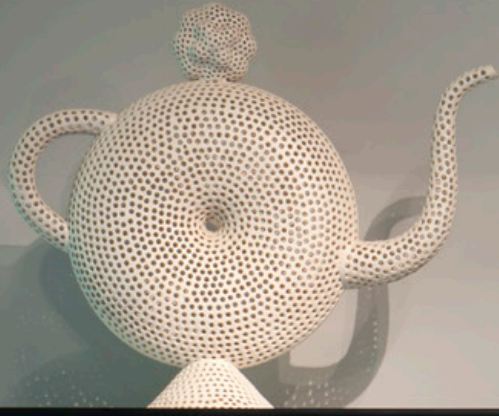
opposite page:
FIGURE 14

⁴ Garth Clark, "Memories in Lieu of an Introduction," in *Between Clouds of Memory*, ed. Peter Held (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University Art Museum, 2005), 16.

⁵ Martha Lynn, *The Art of Adrian Saxe* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993), 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷ Quotes by Sonny and Gloria Kamm drawn from personal interviews and/or emails with the author conducted during May 2018.





Joan Takayama-Ogawa studied with Ralph Bacerra during Bacerra's tenure as head of the ceramics department at Otis Art Institute (1982–1996). From her teacher, Takayama-Ogawa learned the complex technique of combining underglaze and overglaze decoration and followed, with excellent result, Bacerra's mantra: surface follows form.







FIGURE 15



FIGURE 16

limited edition in his ewerlike teapot series *La Tour Akan* (1984), made in response to Saxe's residency in France at Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres. (See Figure 15)

The piece on view in *Living With Clay* is a sculpture and not a teapot/ewer, but it has these two similarities: its form is derived from Saxe's casting of a mold of a vegetal gourd, and it carries a French title—*Dents de la mer II* (1991), the French translation of the title of the American film *Jaws*.⁵ Saxe began the gourd series in the late 1980s and selected the gourds he used to make the molds for each ceramic vessel “from several thousand examples” that he, his wife, and father-in-law grew in their gardens or purchased from growers in central California.⁶ *Dents de la mer II* exuberantly displays a clash of art- historical periods and cultural mash-ups. (See Figure 16) Its quirky (but calculated) combination of luxurious surfaces—gold lusters and antique-crackle glazes—encrusted with glass marbles mixes high and low, elitist and populist tropes to glorious effect. Sonny and Gloria break into a smile when they comment, one after the other: “His work appeals to us. It's smart art that makes us think. But also gives us pleasure.”⁷ And therein are the primary reasons the Kamms acquire specific works by the artists they admire to enter their collection.

In Summary

The works from the Kamm Collection selected for this exhibition represent multiple stylistic veins, but the artists share in common the following qualities: a command of the material; expert craftsmanship and execution; the ability to deliver highly charged content conveyed through complex constructions; and a distinctive signature and strong voice that makes itself heard in the vast, cacophonous field of ceramics. Through the assembly of this collection, the Kamms have done all the heavy lifting of gathering exceptional works that provide insight and understanding of the genre of the teapot specifically, and, more generally, of the history of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century ceramics. As collectors with a social responsibility, they are generous with sharing their collection and knowledge and are advocates of the community and matrix that support ceramic artists. The Kamms' aspiration is to transfer the entirety of their collections to a museum or art institution with a dedicated space for the viewing the works and providing educational information about them. I hope to be on the guest list for the momentous celebratory opening, when the entire Kamm Collection is transferred to an institution and made public for viewing.

[Disclaimer: A few teapots made by the author are part of the Kamm Teapot Collection.]



John Luebtow
Ode to Congress
(*Group Portrait of our Politicians*), 2003
Wheel thrown Cone 10 porcelain,
hand-made porcelain forms,
slip cast porcelain forms,
Cone 06 crackle glaze







Remember,
the reason you know,
are a nice,
normal family.









opposite page:
Peter Shire (American, b. 1947)
"CBS Sunday Morning Teapot" 2006
Glazed ceramic, mixed media
17.25"h x 15"w x 6"d
Kamm Teapot Foundation. 2006.756





