

RALPH BACERRA

1938 - 2008

A REMEMBRANCE



To call Ralph Bacerra a “studio potter” is to expand the definition to include the maker of some of the most complex, opulent, and ambitious pottery ever created. His death last June from lung cancer, at home in Los Angeles, brings an end to one of the most productive lives many of us have ever witnessed.

Ralph was a very private man, not given to expansive explanation or audible conjecture. I don’t know that I ever heard him speak four consecutive sentences. And yet he was a warm, engaging, even intimate person. He achieved this by frequently addressing you by name, listening carefully, and making modest yet intense eye contact, his chin down but his eyes locked on yours. He was also a generous man – generous with his knowledge, personal influence, and treasure. He took quiet delight in giving his students a professional boost, usually claiming he did no such thing. He had a fine sense of humor and a ready laugh. And no one was quicker to pick up the check at lunch. In his own right, he was a great cook, and when the food came to the table, the pots and pans had already been done – more time for conversation.

But Ralph was not Everyman. By most standards, he had considerable wealth, but used it judiciously. He did not suffer fools. He was ferociously talented, professionally proud, and personally modest – a man of conviction bordering on stubbornness, movie-star handsome, and genetically predisposed to produce fabulous pottery at the intersection of Memphis and Imari. He had perfect recall for all things ceramic. If asked about a glaze, he would say, “Well, Don, it’s just the celadon with extra silica,” seemingly a little disappointed that he didn’t know that.

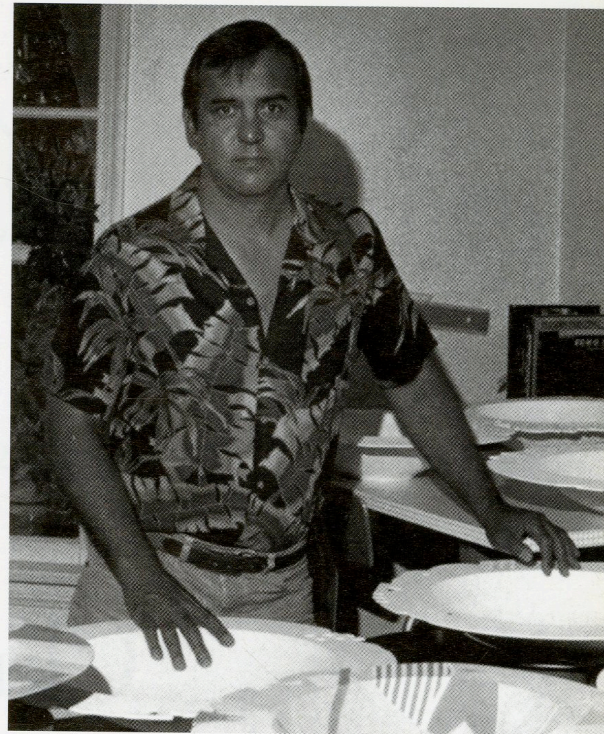
To the dismay of interviewers, he never had a great deal to say about his ceramics other than his desire for beauty. But we can surmise volumes by a careful look at the body of work he leaves behind. That potent collection illustrates Ralph’s Formalist belief that animated and colorful geometry, lyrically composed and repeated with infinite variety, would stimulate the eye, entertain the mind, and revive the spirit. Ralph made this beauty distinctive by the exponential power of his execution. His

multiple applications, whether by brush or otherwise, were lavish, not slavish. And unlike most potters of any recent generation, Ralph understood the difference between refiring to fix a problem and refiring to create an aggregate aesthetic. Seriously, who do you know that regularly fires each work a minimum of twelve times?

Of singular importance was Ralph’s genius for imaginative and expansive reciprocating composition. He was a master at the dance of two shapes, wherein each yields in turn to the necessity of the other. He intuitively knew how many *shorts* satisfied a *long*, how much *in* was required by this *out* and how much curve energized this *angle*. He was Fibonacci incarnate. Nobody could prestidigitate simple geometry with greater élan or less apparent effort. (Speaking of “apparent effort,” you shouldn’t be surprised to know that he never got clay or glaze on anything but his apron, that his working jeans always had a crease, and that he never cursed.)

So what can we take away from this man’s work? In addition to their beauty, Ralph’s pots demonstrate and even proselytize for a greater commitment to our collective art form. He found work to be life-affirming, and by Garth Clark’s account, he was finishing a few pieces just two days before he died. By Ralph’s example we are shown, if not shamed into rethinking, what is possible when we apply every gift we have with all our heart.

When I last saw him in January, we spent most of the day talking families, art, schools, and the future. He was deeply concerned that so much of the ceramic field had apparently turned its back on teaching superb hand skills and inculcating a rigorous work ethic. His question was, “Where do they think this will take them?” Where indeed.



BY DON PILCHER

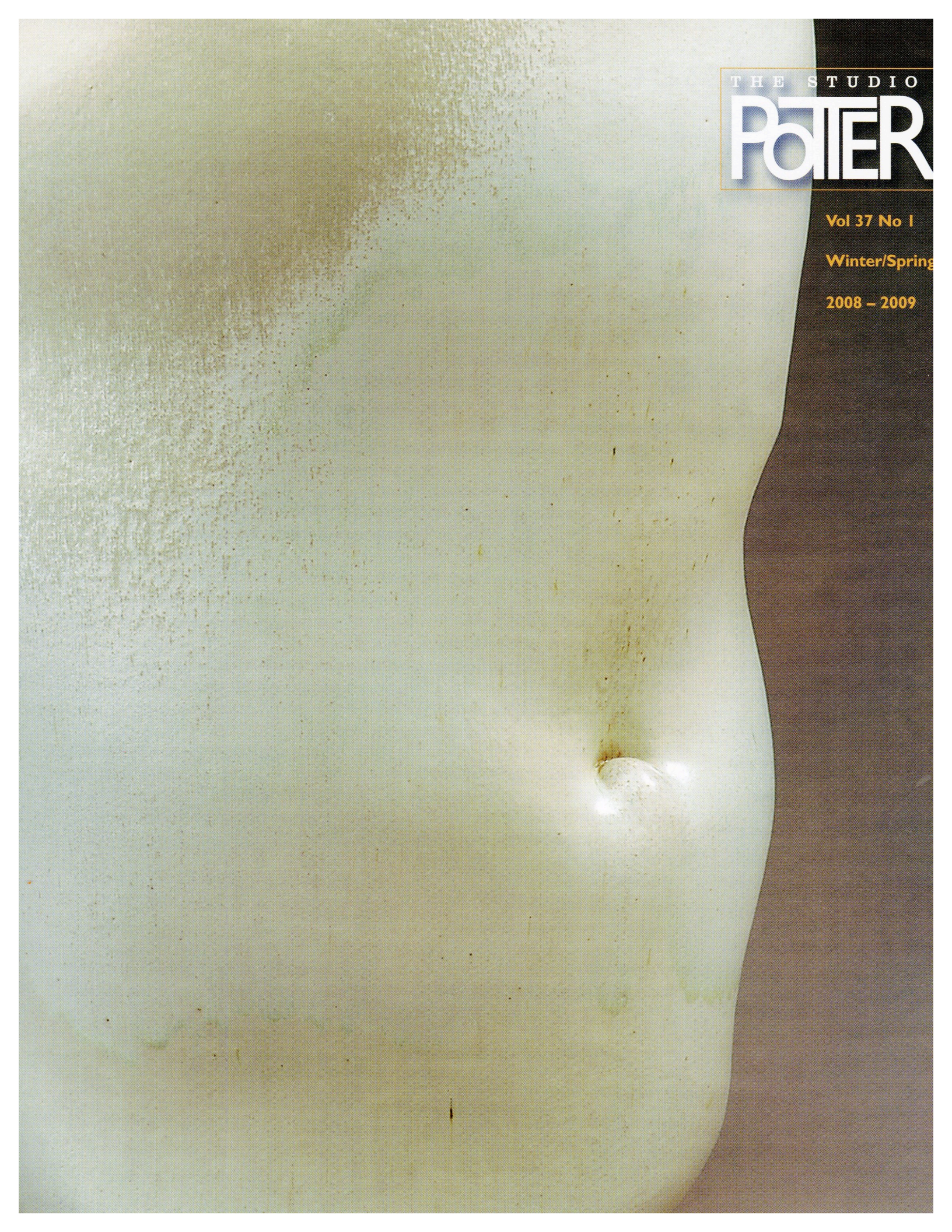
Don Pilcher was a student of Ralph Bacerra’s at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1963. Pilcher is now a studio potter and makes Rascal Ware under the name of Georgette Ore. dpilcher@juno.com

ABOVE: *Bacerra in his studio, 1986.*

OPPOSITE: *Untitled Teapot, 2001.*

Earthenware, 21 x 15 x 13 in.

Photographs by Anthony Cuñha courtesy Frank Lloyd Gallery.




THE STUDIO
POTER

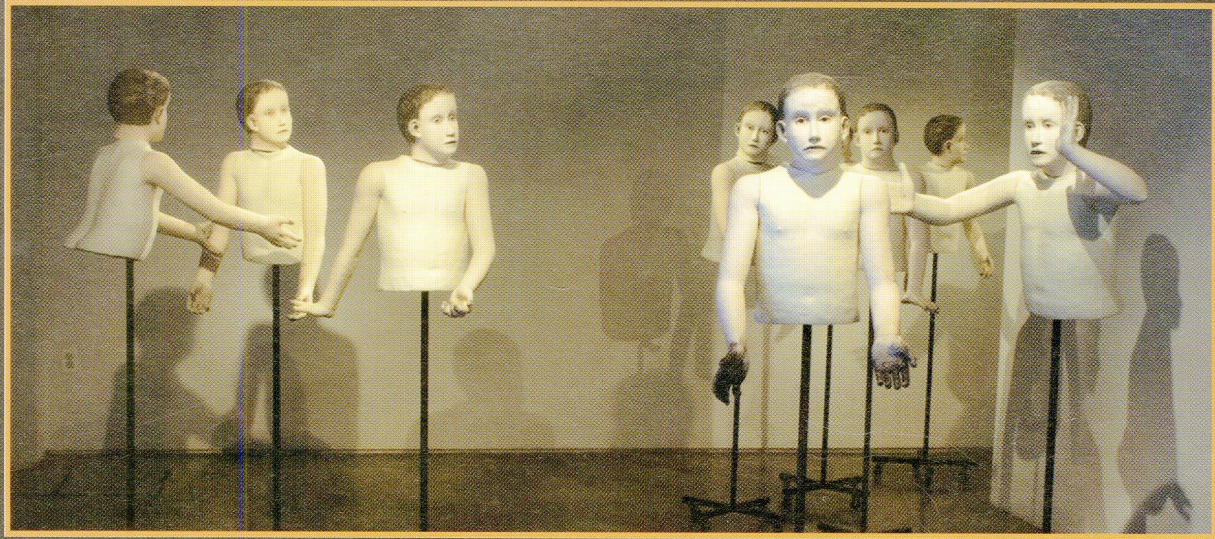
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ABOVE: *Elise Siegel, I am what is around me*

LEFT: *John Chalke, Hips and Hoar*

BACKGROUND IMAGE: *Dennise Gackstetter, Wide Open*