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## THE VESSEL IN CERAMIC ART

BY SUSIE J. SILBERT





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For most of us, our first and maybe only experience working with clay was in elementary school. At the direction of our teachers, we squished the moist material into the semblance of a cup or a bowl and handed it over to be fired. We may have come back to glaze the piece when it came out of the kiln, but otherwise, from then on, our relationship to clay was defined by pre-made items: store-bought plates, mugs, bowls and even the porcelain of the bathroom sink and toilet. But for many artists in the United States over the past 60 years, the ceramic vessel has been a constant area of investigation. For modernists such as Peter Voulkos the vessel was something to react against. For post-modernists like Richard T. Notkin, it was rich in historical associations waiting to be mined for meaning. And for younger artists working today like Steven Young Lee and Lauren Mabry, both approaches hold appeal. What follows is a snapshot of the history of the vessel in studio ceramics.



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- 1 Steven Young Lee, *Peonies and Butterflies*, porcelain, cobalt inlay, gold luster, 12 x 26 x 13"
- 2 Detail of *Peonies and Butterflies* by Steven Young Lee.
- 3 Steven Young Lee, *Octopus*, porcelain, white slip, 14 x 13 x 18"



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Riding the wave of cultural changes sweeping the United States in the 1950s, artists like Voulkos revolutionized the role of the vessel in ceramic art. Though originally trained in traditional pottery techniques, by the mid-1950s, Voulkos had developed an approach to ceramics that moved beyond simple function and more squarely into conversation with contemporary art. Like the abstract expressionist painters he was inspired by, Voulkos sought to capture the raw physicality of material and the affective power of emotion in oversized clay works that pushed the boundaries of sculpture. He would attack the surfaces of his massive ceramic platters and stacked forms, slicing them with knives, tearing them with his hands, and puncturing them with his fingers before subjecting them to the caprices of the wood fire kiln. Bold, powerful and new, Voulkos' sculptural abstraction,



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combined with his influential role as an educator, ignited the passion of young American ceramicists and ceramics enthusiasts.

Voulkos' break with tradition would dominate ceramics for years to come, but by the 1970s a growing cadre of artists sought their inspiration in the history of ceramics rather than in breaking from it. Among the most accomplished artists to emerge in this era was Chicago-born Notkin, who would soon become known for diminutive and perfectionist teapots combining exquisitely sculpted skulls, dice, cacti and other elements drawn from popular culture. More sculpture than functional object, Notkin's teapots built on the example of *Yixing* teapots popular with the scholarly class in Ming and Qing Dynasty China

(1573-1911). Just as the original *Yixing* teapots were designed to provoke scholarly contemplation by mimicking everyday objects, Notkin used the form as a vessel for his ruminations on contemporary issues such as the meaninglessness of war and the origins of interpersonal strife.

"The vessel is the primal 'canvas' for the ceramic artist," Notkin explains in an artist statement, "and my vessel choice is the teapot, the most complex of vessels... This allows me the widest latitude in juxtaposing the many images I used to set up my narrative pieces."

Artists working in ceramics today benefit from being able to select amongst the variety of approaches set out by Voulkos, Notkin and their contemporaries. Take as an example the work of Lee, an early mid-career artist who also runs the prestigious residency program at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. The delicate—and explosive—works in his *Deconstructed* series, traditional looking vases that have cracked and sagged during firing, balance Voulkos' raw power with

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Alternative view of *Octopus* by Steven Young Lee.

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**Richard T. Notkin**, *Heart Teapot: Internal Combustion*, *Yixing* Series, stoneware, 6 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 11 x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

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**Lauren Mabry**, *Side Pipe Spill*, red earthenware, slips, glaze.

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**Lauren Mabry**, *Cylinder*, red earthenware, slips, glaze, 11 x 12 x 12"



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the studied historicity and post-modern sampling of Notkin.

Orchestrated to break, but ultimately subject to the caprices of the kiln, Lee's pieces investigate the role of the artist's intent in producing finished works. But by combining forms and ornaments selected from a broad range of ceramic cultures and historical periods, they also critique traditions of mastery and perfection. This cultural mishmash can be seen in pieces such as *Octopus*, 2013, which unites a Korean jar form from the Choson Dynasty (1523-1910) with an ancient Minoan octopus pattern from around 1500 B.C.E.

"I'm interested in the history of ceramics and how tradition exists within our field—the things that are and are not acceptable in making our work," says Lee. "We're always fighting having to master the material and the process before we can make work that is acceptable."

Just two years out of graduate school, Mabry also pushes the limits of materials and the edges of acceptability in her vibrantly glazed cylinder and pipe forms, but her interest, like Voulkos', is in pure action rather than in historical associations. For her, the vessel is a canvas for expressive abstract applications of glaze.

"I think about my work as a three-dimensional composition of glaze and the cylinder seemed to be the perfect vehicle," says Mabry, "Every other object commands too much attention. The cylinder is very quiet. It amplifies my surface rather than fights with it."

Like Voulkos, Mabry was trained from a young age as a traditional potter; it wasn't until college that she was introduced to the concept of non-functional ceramics. Abandoning function as a primary goal allowed her to focus on the surface of her pieces and, like Lee, she finds the challenge of controlling the materials to be among the most exciting parts of her work.



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"Glaze is compelling because it's what I feel is truly an abstract medium," explains Mabry. "I don't have final control over it.... I have a lot of experience directing it to do what I want it to do, but...it isn't straightforward. I love seeing how far I can push it."

Voulkos, Notkin, Lee, and Mabry represent just a small swatch of the innovative approaches to the vessel that are at the heart of ceramic practice today. Many other

artists from Kathy Butterly, Adrian Saxe, and Tony Marsh in the post-modern generation to younger artists such as Christa Assad, Del Harrow, and Brian R. Jones continue to challenge traditional vessel making. Whether eschewing the history of function in favor of pure sculpture or embracing tradition as a source of inspiration and meaning, grappling with the history of the vessel is a vital part of contemporary ceramics today. ●

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**Richard T. Notkin**, *The Last Syllable of Recorded Time*, white earthenware, glaze, watercolor and pastel, 77½ x 51½ x 2"

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**Peter Voulkos**, *Untitled Stack*, 1974, gas fired stoneware, 39½ x 12½". Artwork ©Voulkos Family Trust. Photo ©schoppleinstudio.com. Courtesy Voulkos & Co. Catalogue Project.

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