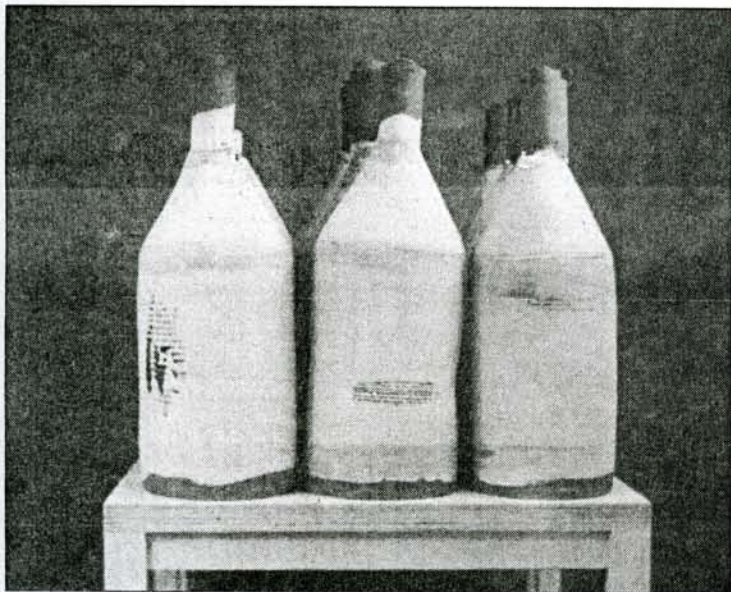


Great Bowls of Fire

By Scott Dickensheets

September 9 - 15, 1999 /

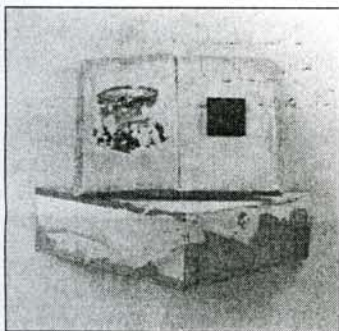
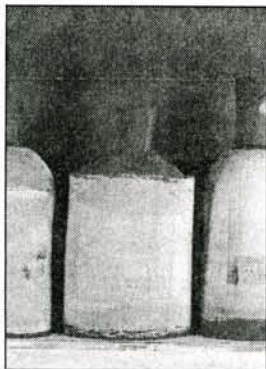


Ceramic Arts by Nancy Selvin

Charleston Heights Arts Center

Opening reception: Sept. 9, 6-8 p.m.

The gallery is located at 800 S. Brush St. 702/229-6383.



Imagine for a moment you are a bowl. (Oh, come on, loosen up.) A standard cereal bowl, or, if you're feeling particularly good about yourself, a very nice gravy boat. You are solidly ceramic and functional. People put you to good use, and you like that; it's the best thing about being a bowl.

In fact, come to think of it, that's pretty much the *only* thing about being a bowl (ditto for you gravy boats). In fact, come to think of it, your very usefulness defines you utterly, eliminating every other potential. No one will ever think of you as more than a bowl, more than a very nice gravy boat. No one will ever behold you as an object of visual delight. No one will ever look at you and say to someone nearby, "Why, by golly, that bowl is a metaphor for the mystery inherent in everyday objects, as well as a pretty sharp commentary on the practice of contemporary art and ceramics!"

In fact, come to think of it, being a bowl pretty much sucks. (Ditto for you gravy boats).

How much better, then, to be a ceramic art bowl from the hand and kiln of Berkeley, Calif. artist Nancy Selvin.

Her ceramic objects, which go on dis-

play Thursday in the Charleston Heights Arts Center through Nov. 7, are purposely not utilitarian, at least in the bowl and gravy boat sense.

The bowls are irregular; some have charred glaze inside, on the surface that would contain the Wheaties. You can't imagine eating out of them. Her bottles and jugs don't hold water.

"When you make things functional," she says by phone from her mother-in-law's house in the Bay Area, "you put tremendous limitations on them, so I never make things functional." She says this not with the brainy chill you might expect from someone who disdains mere usefulness on intellectual grounds, but rather with the earthy laughter of someone whose chosen material, for all its acutely arty ends, is really just fancy dirt.

"There are plenty of functional items out there, plenty of potters making bowls," she adds. "I don't need to make those kinds of things."

And so, in their impracticality, her out-of-the-ordinary ordinary objects—"items you'd find in still lifes, forms you'd find in paintings," she notes—take on a loftier significance. Consider the dual uselessness of one of Selvin's "books." Being made of fired clay, it's clearly of no value as a book; being shaped like a book, it defies the discipline's long history of concentrating largely on functional items. All that's left for this baby is to attempt intellectual stimulation.

It is, in fact, urging you to ponder the possible differences between what something appears to be and what it actually is—reminding you, in other words, not to judge a book etc., etc. At the same time, it tries to invest these ideas in the stuff of everyday life. Sometimes Selvin adds patches of smeary text to books, bottles and other

pieces. The words approximate labels that tease away into unreadability.

"I like the pieces to have a little mystery," Selvin says. "The labels add an element that there's an idea contained in the forms, but it's not that legible." The words often have a quasi-private meaning: "They come out of my own notebooks. It might be a notation for a glaze recipe, or notes, or a piece of an essay. I don't try to make them legible."

Viewers don't need a crash course in ceramics history to get Selvin's work (she hopes). When someone looks at, say, a ceramic book, she's counting on an intimate personal connection. "I hope they think they're like journals or notebooks, some kind of personal texts they might have," she explains. "Like something you have sitting around."

Similarly, groupings of her ceramic containers are meant to resonate with, oh, your medicine chest or something. Any cluster of personal items arranged according to an innate design sense, "I believe people compose their lives," she says. "They arrange things on their dressers, they arrange things on their shelves or their counters."

Selvin, a longtime Northern Californian with an exhibit history going back to 1970, describes her work as "very Berkeley. The pieces are minimal. You have to make a leap; they don't tell you everything."

That will put them at certain aesthetic odds with their host city, as Las Vegas is wildly maximal, tells you everything, is relentlessly functional. It doesn't want you to question the difference between something's form and its use, just pour money into it. In such an environment, will Selvin's work get bowled over or will it stack up? **lvw**