

Curators Statement

Ceramic Design: Manufactured Brilliance and Beauty in Daily Life

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Guest Curator, Bobby Silverman

My professional interest in ceramics began in 1978 when, as a student at the Kansas City Art Institute, my studies were influenced by the Studio Pottery movement and the work of Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and others who set the standards and ideals for those wanting to make handmade objects as a counter-cultural reaction.

Now, over 30 years later, the opportunity to curate this show represents a 180 degree evolution in my development as an artist, designer and educator that began in 1998 when I was a participant at the European Ceramic Work Center in the Netherlands. The Center was, and is, much like a think tank for ceramicists. They study the material and process thoroughly and employ state of the art technologies confidently so that artists and designers whose ideas are not constrained by experience or knowledge with ceramics can make their sophisticated ideas possible.

It was an amazing experience. Working for the first time with 3D modeling, computerized kilns and all kinds of commercial clays, glazes and industrial techniques, I began to see the enormous possibilities of working in an environment that was more like ceramic industry than an art studio. Coupled with living in Holland, a country like many in Europe that has had a long and thoughtful relationship with ideas about design, I began to reevaluate many of my long held beliefs about ceramics and its relationship to contemporary culture.

Functional pottery as it is taught and practiced today by legions of potters around the country is an incestuous anachronism. For too long our clays, glazes, firing choices and forms have been too narrow as we have relied on a familiar vocabulary that has changed little over the last 50 to 60 years. As our culture becomes increasingly urban in orientation, it seems that our academic programs are continuing a model that is based more on a lifestyle that is increasingly irrelevant to our current cultural zeitgeist and barely sustainable as a business model. It is clear that, with the dependence on a shrinking academic job market and changes in the way craft has historically been received, we must find a different professional paradigm by which those interested in working with utilitarian objects in clay can make a viable living.

This does not mean we give up the importance of the hand or the handmade or a deep appreciation and understanding of material and process. It means we go deeper as we take this information and expand upon it. This knowledge base can now be used in combination with opportunities developed by industry's new technologies and processes. Such a partnership permits high quality work to be produced and, if truly interested in being viable economically, at the lowest price for distribution to the widest number of people. From individuals around the world to large corporations like Target and Ikea, this model has begun to impact societies as the original intent of the Studio Pottery movement imagined but never realized.

Paolo Antonelli has said that "good design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something the world didn't know it was missing." The Apple Computer company and its array of products understands this better than anyone but it seems utilitarian clay objects are perfectly poised to do this as well.

Masahiro Mori's cups, Kahla's flocked covered pieces and Stephen Reed's Radiator Mugs are wonderful and easily affordable examples of which Antonelli speaks. With his Fancy Cups, Mori, one of Japan's leading designers from the 1950's until his death in 1999, reveals a clear understanding of one of the most mundane gestures -- picking up and holding a cup. The grooves cut into the clay and the appendages appear as though they are purely decorative solutions at first glance. The brilliance of this work, however, is that these designs are the result of an intense investigation into the relationship of the hand and how the object is used and feels when it is held. As Josef Albers said, "In design sometimes one plus one equals three." It is subtle, sensuous and thoughtful work that speaks of his culture as well as a larger understanding of the human condition.

Kahla's "Touch" series is another brilliant example of articulating the sense of touch through the process of combining flocking and ceramics. With an intimate and advanced understanding of materials, they have created cups, bowls, etc that are able to withstand the rigors of daily use and cleaning, are beautiful to look at and, most importantly, reveal the truly sensual pleasures of touching and holding an object we often take for granted. Like Mori's, these works are not some casual solution. They are born of thorough research and a peripheral vision that leads beyond the familiar solutions of the past.

Stephen Reed's Radiator Mugs offer insight into how a wide eye can find an elegant and innovative solution to the seemingly simple problem of picking up a hot cup without a handle. This work is the first of its kind to explore a traditional material such as bone china juxtaposed with a design component usually associated with computers; cooling fins. As Reed explains, "The fin structures put distance between the hot liquid and the held surface, allowing for a natural grip as heat is dispersed to gently warm the hands."

Much can be said about the other works included in this show including the conceptual foundation of the works by Sherman, Kosuth and Flavin or the eclectic variety of dinnerware designs by Rosenthal. However, my intent in choosing these works is that they are all in their own right a technical tour de force, they are contemporary, beautiful and, most importantly, truly functional. It is with much careful thought and consideration that I present these works that challenge basic assumptions and long held beliefs that many of us associated with the Ceramic Research Center have held.

Acknowledgments:

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