

HULA-HOOPS, CERAMIC TRASH AND JOHN CAGE – CERAMICS AND PRINT, A PERSONAL VIEW FROM THE USA

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IT IS NO SURPRISE to see graphic images and/or text on clay, whether in the glaze or imprinted in the surface as a texture. Certainly the technical know-how as well as the appeal for this has existed for hundreds of years. The technique was nevertheless inaccessible to most individual artists in North America until thirty to forty years ago. Many of those who have used ceramic and print since then have *as a group* established certain points of reference in the field of ceramic sculpture in America which stick with me.

The USA is a vast wilderness dotted with isolated and relatively new settlements. It is the land of the fad, the 'hit' and the hula-hoop. Newness and novelty count. Shock and *schlock* amuse. A daily supply of hypnotic images is delivered both in and outside of the home. No wonder the attention span of the average person is so short. Who has the time for the genuine article if the picture will do? For the most part this quick and dirty looky-looky and peek-a-boo is friendly, jocular, lighthearted and naïve, whether its at art or a line-up of magazines on the newsstand.

The shadow side of this entertainment bears notice too. The book *Subliminal Seduction*, published in the late 1960s, argued that the average viewer is easily vulnerable to titillation beyond the edge of awareness at a billboard scale of reality. For example, the book suggested that shadows copulate within the shadows on retouched photographs of ice cubes seen in liquor advertisements. Wanted or not, visual messages like these (or worse) will be, the book warns, instantly lodged somewhere in the mental/emotional/psychic record. What responsibility do I have as maker if this is the case?

Much as people complain about the media culture, the instant images

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OPPOSITE

Reliquary for Virgin Mary,
Peter Lenzo, USA, 1995
Mixed media with low-fire
photograph silkscreen decals on
porcelain
120cm x 90cm x 35cm

they see are generally too seductive to ignore, either in content, colour or cleverness. Some say these images are borrowed and stolen, but I suspect its more like a contagious disease and almost everyone's got a case, including the art community. I note that the more successful clay work, like any other message, usually translates instantly into a graphic image with as much punch as possible. No matter what the original size, clay works will so often compete in the visual marketplace in the form of a miniature 2"x2" photo slide. In this sense, ceramics and print media are already inseparable.

Print and all things visual affected me early on. By the time I came of age in the late 1960s, I and many of my generation were disgusted with a media-driven, commodity-fetishist culture and values. If this was modernity then I wanted out. It wasn't just the US involvement in the Vietnam War that wasn't OK. A myriad of social ills were visible from beneath the glitz.

I was first attracted to pottery as a form of cultural protest even if the discipline, *per se*, was a post-industrial anachronism. Classic pottery forms provide a peaceful sanctuary for my eyes in a visually busy world. Certainly pottery seemed to be polar opposite to the visually intense Lichtenstein, Oldenberg, Warhol, Lipschitz *et al* of the era that I was familiar with and grew up in. Although the art community for the most part passed ceramics by, there would still be the substantial esoteric and mystical history of the vessel form to reckon with. Clay would demand direct tactile – active, not passive – involvement in the elements: earth, water, fire, air. The fired result was alchemy: an extraordinary man-made rock that was permanent compared with canvas, paper or celluloid. And clay mimics almost any other material: metal, wood, leather, fabric, paper, glass, etc. Clay is difficult to master because the colours one applies to the clay before the fire will look completely different after. Losses during the making process were also common. Conventional clay can crack, warp and break easily while drying and in firing. Patience and persistence would be required.

The potters I studied with initially in Colorado (Betty Woodman and Larry Clark) guided me to classic books like Leach and Cardew. Leach had looked to the East, Cardew to Africa. In Japan, a potter could even be promoted from low-caste village labourer to reach the social status and recognition of 'national treasure'. The life of a studio potter seemed a



Chilean Rowboat, Rosette Gault,
1977
Photograph emulsion on ceramic
D. 30cm

domain of pure form, simplicity, service to others. How romantic it all seemed.

It was only a matter of time until a restlessness set in. Where's the juice? Where's the politics? Where's the protest? Where's the fun? Busy mind wanted something to nibble on intellectually, a visual appetiser, maybe even something spicy and *risqué* and naughty. I wasn't alone. Fortunately, there was plenty to see in ceramic sculpture and a lot of it used ceramics and print.

The novelty of home-made photo images on studio-made ceramic glazes had swept through the USA in the late sixties on the wings of *Ceramics Monthly* articles. As often as not, Victor Spinski's realistic ceramic trash (Ameri-)cans were full to the brim with photoceramic effluvia. Arneson made 'bricks' and 'graffiti extraordinaire'. Robert Engle permanently exposed Jean Harlow to a white-hot fire glazed to a stoneware 'jug'. For others, like Erik Gronborg, starchy imprinted text(ure) on soft clay slabs frozen in time became a sensuous and colourful surface to fold into shapes. In the hands of Les Lawrence, ultra-thin porcelain, silkscreened with black and white collage, is a translucent vessel in space. These are but a few of the many who have made contributions. I also see ideas in clay which refer to print media, even if the 'technique' has not literally been used.

Some of the work in ceramic and print is not fun. Like an undertow, the bellicose, nasty and rude aspect is clear. Compare an adolescent rape of the clay by Voulkos with the cut and snip violence of Kottler. Kottler's victim was artistic masterpieces trivialised as ceramic decals. This work was both protest, social comment, sneer and brutal burial all rolled into one, with humour as the sauce over the top.

Unfortunately, cruelty has proved to be a popular subject, then as now. Since 1992, Charles Krafft has been memorialising public tragedies, floods, fires and conflagrations on what he calls 'Disasterware'. The shadows of Krafft's criminals/victims are haunting. These are formal, dour and humourless documentaries, not without value. Surely there is a better way for Americans to get attention in art history than to profit from human suffering. So many can't resist the temptation, since after all the televisions here do it every-day.

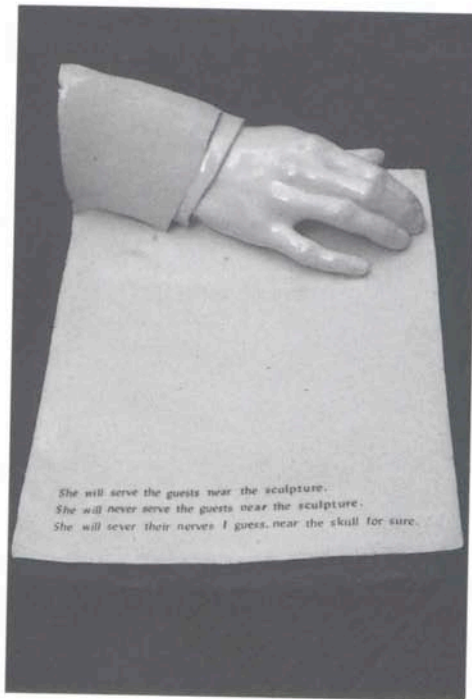
In art, I prefer a journey to somewhere intellectually exotic, where the time frame is different, and more subtle levels of possibility, intrigue, and



'Disasterware', *Darkness in Delft*,
Charles Krafft, USA, 1993
Transfer print and drawing on
porcelain

human struggle are made visible. In clay and print, an example would be work like Jim Melchert's surrealist *Slab with Hand of Statue* (1968), and the more recent title and text *Homage to John Cage* triptych (1992). Is there such a thing as visual silence? What a question.

Those artists who take the ceramics and print up today will find that the formerly impossible is possible. Computer scanners, CD Roms and software can 'morph', distort, invent and print surfaces/images and text like never before. Paper-clay technology makes the sculpting of clay surfaces infinite and solves many problems. My mind boggles with the possibilities for artists.



Slab with Hand of Statue,
Jim Melchert, USA, 1968
Ceramic with decals
Photography courtesy of Gallery
Revolution, Ferndale, MI, USA

Rosette Gault MFA is author of the book *Paper Clay for Ceramic Sculptors* and has contributed to journals and periodicals including *Ceramics Monthly*, *Ceramics Art and Perception* and *Ceramic Review*. She has over twenty-five years experience in the field of studio ceramics. Her award-winning work has been exhibited widely and is included in public and private collections in the USA and abroad.