

New York Clay

by Judith Schwartz

New York City is the quintessential urban environment. No other city can boast such a mixture of culture, food, music, theater, dance, street life, museums, galleries, architecture and energy. Reactions to New York are never neutral. Everything commingles to add to the revitalization and regeneration of the city's dynamism. New York is money, power, people—and with that, fortunately, taste, culture and the arts.

In the arts, New York has always acted as a magnet, drawing the best and brightest that both this country and the world have to offer. After World War II, it became the center of the international art world. "The New York School" of painting and sculpture, beginning with abstract expression and, according to some, including color-field painting, minimalism, pop, neo-geo and graffiti art, became a breeding ground where competing ideas, aesthetics, artists and space battled it out in the cultural cutting-edge arena.

When asked by the Rogaland Art Center in Stavanger, Norway, to curate a traveling exhibition of ceramics, I chose to focus upon the dynamic developments of the artists working in and around the Big Apple. An exhibition that focused just on New York clay had never been organized, and I was anxious to get into the studios to see what could be uncovered. I was not surprised by the overwhelming amount of quality work, but given the distance and shipping charges to Norway, I was forced to limit the selection to an eclectic group of 14 young and mid-career artists who reflect the city's rich cultural mix and vibrant art making. The exhibition should, therefore, be seen as merely a sampling of a range of work of those who live, create and build their careers in this great city.

"Continental Shelf," 82 inches in length, handbuilt terra cotta on wood, by Lee Stoliar.



Untitled sculpture, 18 inches in height, handbuilt whiteware with stains, and wood, by Shida Kuo.



It is not my intention to suggest that New York ceramic art has a greater influence or is of a superior quality to that produced elsewhere. That is clearly not so, and I think that regional differences have and continue to play a significant role in shaping the look of American ceramics. But I do wish to suggest that geography can play a significant role in the practical aspects of setting up a clay studio. For example, urban settings are often impractical locations for wood, raku, salt and sometimes even gas kilns. So the ceramics artist in New York City is often willing to suffer space constrictions, zoning ordinances and other constraints as the price to pay for living and working in a city that nourishes both the mind and spirit.

Among the clay artists working here, there is a sense of community, a sort of verification of one's activity and support for it. The loneliness of working in the studio is sustained by the ability to step out of one's environment and instantly be a part of the urban excitement. There are always new exhibitions, restaurants, buildings, movies, concerts and theater productions to change a mood, create a new perspective, inspire. And there is always the competitiveness that energizes. If need be, there are also many other ways to make a living during the lean times.

It is a well-known fact that in the archives of ceramics history the look of ceramic art in America was forever changed when the young Peter Voulkos



"Untitled #3," 68 inches in length, hand-rolled coils with inlaid slips and glaze, on steel bar, by Patricia Lay.

pushed old boundaries of European and Japanese pottery aesthetics to create new and energetic forms in clay. Voulkos readily embraced the power of the abstract-expressionist philosophy when he encountered the great artists of the New York School—Esteban Vicente, Jack Tworkov and Joseph Albers, along with such notables as the architect Buckminster Fuller, the dancer Merce Cunningham and the composer John Cage. In New York, the world opened up for Voulkos because he intuitively recognized that abstract expressionism was consistent with his way of thinking.

Of course, Peter Voulkos, along with every other artist who comes to this city, applied his vision, experience and knowledge to the art he produced. It is this eclectic mix of ideas and artists, along with a freedom and diversity of expression, that facilitates the opportunity to break new ground.

Interestingly, New York has never had ceramic gurus to whom students flock, nor a dominant way of working with clay—such as the Bay Area figurative, the Pacific Northwest functional or the Los Angeles slick. New York has had no established way of doing things.



The artists who work in clay in this city have created objects appropriate to a postindustrial, postmodernist age. A confluence of powerful interactions among the fine arts, craft arts and material culture, these artists embrace painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking and the crafts media to coalesce their expressions in ceramics.

They represent a new wave of unburdened artistic expression, a redefining of the frame of reference for their craft. Their experience working with clay has freed them to explore, define and shape the material in unprecedented ways. Working in a city where ideas rule, they push clay to levels of ever greater acceptance within the high arts.

The vessel, for example, considered historically the primary form in clay, has, in the hands of James Makins, Raymon Elozua, Kathy Butterly and Matt Nolen, been reconfigured and redefined. Their works incorporate minimalist, conceptual, surrealistic and narrative approaches to effectively extend the meaning of the object while providing a more contemporary understanding and set of associations.

Marylyn Dintenfass and Patricia Lay have responded to the more formal aspects of contemporary painting and sculpture, using clay to express symbolic yet personal statements stimulated by their unique visions and the rich art resources of the city. Both artists work in ambitious scale, combining clay with steel and positioning their forms to play off the wall. While the expressive qualities of the clay are no doubt crucial to the viewers' engagement, it is the combination of the formal, technical and conceptual aspects that define and give meaning to their work.

"Pug Ugly," 33 inches in length, glazed stoneware, by Arnold Zimmerman.

Arnold Zimmerman and Sana Musasama have exploited the organic aspects of a material that can be coiled, stroked, caressed and touched in ways that exude an emotional connection. Their gutsy, massive, deeply carved surfaces intentionally show the hand of the artist, while the scale of their forms pushes the boundaries of conventional notions of ceramics.

Carole Aoki and Shida Kuo's objects are intense spiritual icons, inspired by the sensual shapes of nature—abstractions of the geological and biological worlds. Their interpretations rely on texture, shape and nuance to solve, like primitive art, symbolic needs. They are simple, soft, evocative forms that affect powerful meaning and reconnect the viewer to the natural world—an event often missing in the concrete and technological world of today.

Finally, there are those who work with clay to express intense personal experiences and associations, and either engage the figure or make reference to



"What?", 27 inches in height, low-fired stoneware with oil stick and paints, and found objects, by Melissa Stern.

the figure as recurrent themes. Lee Stoliar, Melissa Stern, Marek Cecula and Toby Buonagurio, each in their own way, reflect involvement with psychological introspection, reflections of the inner self, powerful expressionism and emotional content. Their work is often confrontational, audacious and provocative, with punky contemporary coloration, sensuously austere white slippery surfaces, or sometimes no surface color at all—just fired clay. Dream imagery, conscious and unconscious feelings, references to past lives, previous times—are all sources for their work. These artists perform their social function and reveal themselves for our enlightenment.

This, then, is the diversity that is New York City. I think the first curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Henry Geldzahler, best summed it up when he stated: "New York stands for a style of life to the artist, a reference point, and a base of operations...I have found that nothing can replace the first-hand knowledge of the great works on view in New York's museums, and the turmoil that follows the exhibition of new work by contemporaries and older colleagues." While it was not my intention to necessarily create turmoil, I hope this exhibition shed insight and perspective on the expressive clay objects made in New York.

The author Judith Schwartz is associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Art and Art Professions at New York University.



"Painted Teapot," 22 inches in height, terra cotta on steel, by Raymon Elozua.