



Nancy Selvin's
Abstracted Forms

Article by David M. Brin



From the Studio.



Corner with Notebook.

IN THE WORK OF NANCY SELVIN, FUNCTION IS AN ILLUSION. The careful observer discovers that Selvin's ceramic vessels can't hold water. In fact, they may be glued to the surface they are sitting on, making it impossible to pick them up.

Selvin uses the ceramic tradition of utilitarian form as a starting place. But by removing function from her work, she branches off in a different direction. Her pieces are abstractions that represent familiar things,

such as bottles and books. "I try to pare every object down to the basic form," she says. "How much can I remove and still have a pot there?" she asks, summing up her aesthetic concerns. By stripping her pieces of all the extras, what remains is the essence of familiar objects. The contours of her objects stand out as they would in a sketch, a painting, or a photograph. In fact, the artist herself emphasised the relation of her ceramics to graphic art by framing a series of vessels she created in 1992.

Selvin enjoys playing with illusion and reality. "My pots are abstractions of the reality of a pot," she says. Petite and energetic, she was never interested in making functional ceramics, even in her student years under Peter Voulkos at the University of California, Berkeley. Her earliest pots were created with form and colour in mind, not function.

From a distance, one of her creations, *From the Studio*, looks like an open book on a table. As the viewer approaches, it becomes clear that the 'book' is actually made of ceramic, has no pages, and cannot be read.

On one page, the viewer can see a replica of a drawing by Giorgio Morandi, the Italian artist whose paintings of ceramic vessels were an important influence on Selvin. There is also a sketch of two of her own pots, and a partially readable glaze recipe from her student days. Two test tiles with sample glazes are arranged on the book itself.

In *Corner with Notebook*, an open book sits upright on a shelf that Selvin designed to look like a corner. On one page is a test tile and on the other a drawing of a tea bowl similar to some Selvin has created. "I wanted to reference how you put things in corners, but

I didn't want to put it in a corner. So I just created a corner," Selvin explains.

The corner itself is also a simple shape, pared down to its essential form, and thus integrated into the work as a whole. Both the book and the shelf it is on work as equal components in the design.

Selvin is interested not only in reducing a vessel to its essence, but in arranging that vessel in a context, whether that means along a ledge with other vessels or by itself on a support. "I think human beings arrange things, wherever they are. Even if you live in a tent, you arrange things," she comments.

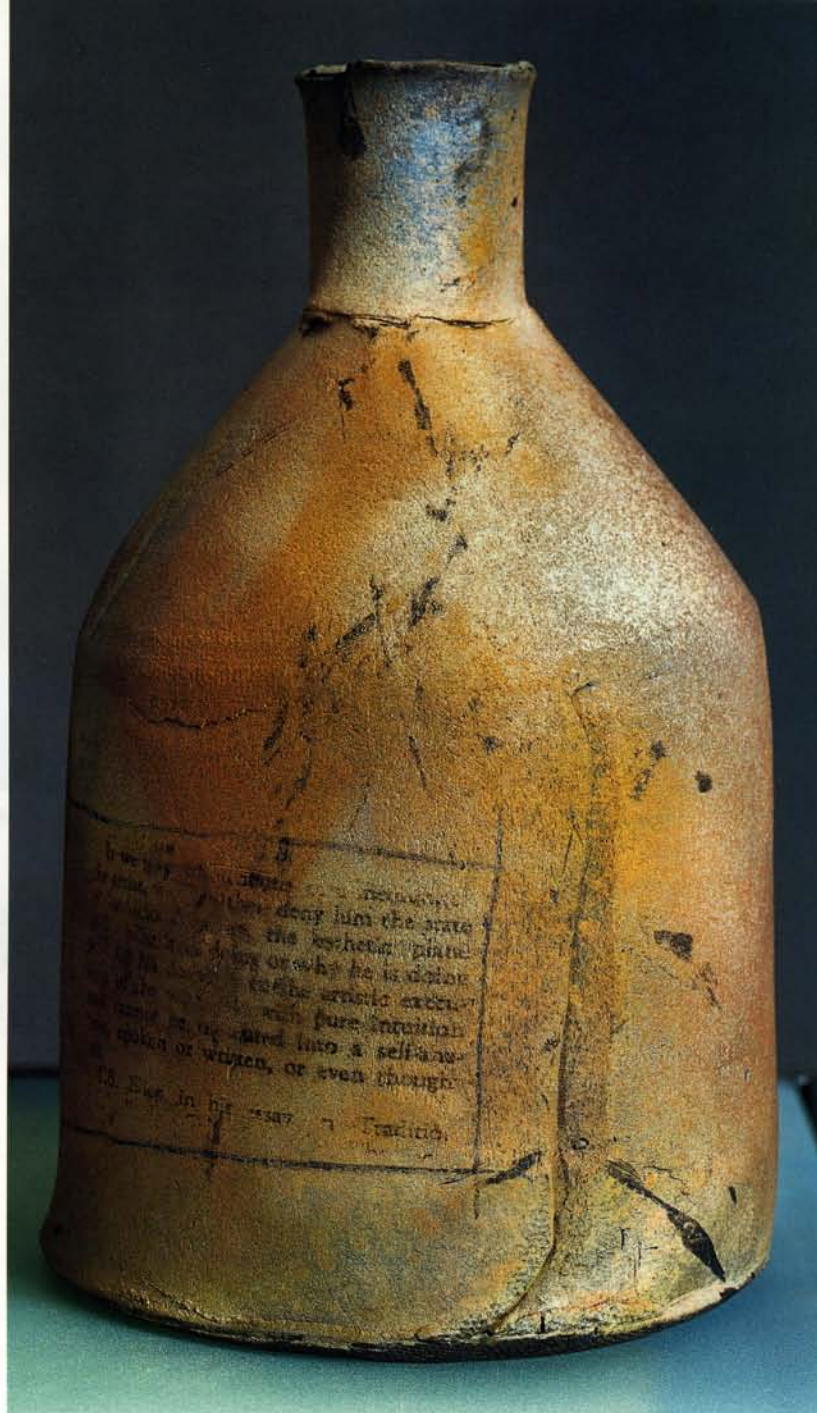
Selvin's ceramics rest on supports that she designs herself. The various supports can be ledges, corners, or tables, all 'real' objects that serve to display the ceramics that Selvin places on them. Like the pieces they hold, the supports are so minimal that they have practically been reduced to abstractions. "I think of them as line drawings," Selvin says of her tables. "I use as little material as I can and still have enough to hold my pieces up." In their sketch-like simplicity, the tables and ledges complement the ceramics they support.

Selvin likes to incorporate words and text into her pieces. She extracts and selects most of the texts from her notebooks. However, she doesn't use text in the functional sense, that is to say, one cannot make sense out of the texts. Seldom are more than two or three words readable before they fade into obscurity. "The text is not there to be read in the literary sense," Selvin explains. The viewer seems called to view words and letters as patterns, although the occasionally readable words and fragments give rise to thoughts and may give the viewer clues about the piece. For example, a ceramist might be able to read enough information to recognise some of the texts as glaze recipes or instructions on how to make a ceramic pot.

From a distance, Selvin's ceramic books tempt the observer with the promise of behaving like a book. With a closer look, they reveal themselves as ceramic sculpture. The functionality of the books is stripped away, as it is in her pots. The book has become an abstraction.

Selvin often uses text on her ceramic bottles. In *Still Life with Essay*, the bottles contain text that she describes as "an abstraction of a label." The six bottles arranged on a table are shaped like oil cans. They are raku-fired with copper patinas, emphasising the metallic tradition that oil cans come from. "I like the subtlety of the dark colours," says Selvin, whose earlier work sometimes utilised intensely bright colours. The text or 'labels' in this piece are parts of an essay about the viewer and the artist.

Selvin approaches the relationship between the viewer and the artist in a number of ways. Spurred on by fragments of text chosen by the artist, the viewer might consider the difference between a metal can that holds oil and a pottery one that can't. It seems we are



Still Life with Essay (detail).

being invited to leave the utilitarian world and partake of the world of ideas from which the artist creates. This journey away from the ordinary brings a new way of looking at things. Surprisingly, upon return to the practical world, nothing looks the same.

David M. Brin is a cellist and composer. He has contributed articles to a number of journals including *Strings*, *Classic Notes*, *the Bay Guardian* and *Ceramics Monthly*. Caption title page: *Still Life with Essay*. Photographs by Charles Frizzell.