

The Locus of a Disseminated Style

Bay Area Ceramic Sculptors — Second Generation
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The term “second generation” — the subtitle of the Daum Museum of Art’s current show of ceramic sculpture — might well raise eyebrows in certain circles were it applied to an exhibition of contemporary painting. The implications of lineage — as much a part of the logic of the avant-garde as the concept of negation — tend not to sit as well with painters today as when the appellation “second generation” was applied to the formalists of the New York School in the 1960s. Since the pluralistic 1970s, the art world in general has avoided the kind of rationalist, progressive theories of art that would make membership in a second generation anything, but oppressive. Interestingly, however, this tends not to be the case in contemporary ceramics, an observation that underscores the distinctions between its discourse and that of contemporary art. It is not merely the fact that apprenticeship is still espoused in ceramics both within and outside of academia that makes the generational metaphor relevant. More important is the powerful role of tradition in determining the consciousness of contemporary ceramics as a field. It is perfectly reasonable to speak of a second generation of Bay Area ceramic sculptors, and even to believe that the designation provides more than a convenient temporal and geographical categorization.

At the same time, there is something curious about the idea of a second generation of Bay Area ceramic sculptors, an irony that the Daum Museum’s exhibition nicely reveals. To recognize it, however, one must first invoke the absent: the group of ceramists implicitly suggested in the exhibition’s title, but present in the show only as traces, perceived as influences over the work that one is actually encountering. This “first generation” of Bay Area ceramic sculptors — as Douglass Freed, director of the Daum, indicates in his introduction to the exhibition’s catalogue — includes some of the foremost names in the recent history of American ceramics: Paul Soldner, Ron Nagle, Robert Arneson, Richard Shaw, and of course Peter Voulkos. (Appropriately, three works by Voulkos are currently on display with the Daum’s permanent collection.) Implicitly, the four sculptors represented in the *Bay Area Ceramic Sculptors* show — Arthur González, Annabeth Rosen, Nancy Selvin, and Stan Welsh — have inherited the mantle of these illustrious predecessors. One approaches the exhibition primed both to perceive a familial resemblance and to note those areas where genetic information may have died out in the family line.

Both can be done. The irony, however, is that the legacy is not specific to the Bay Area. González, Rosen, Selvin, and Welsh may well be the heirs of Soldner, Nagle, Shaw, Arneson, and Voulkos, but their portions of the legacy are no greater than those of any number of contemporary American ceramic sculptors. California ceramics once meant something quite distinct from the ceramics of New England, Ohio, or the South. It was, for example, extolled in magazines of the 1950s as a consequence of a certain lifestyle that combined bold simplicity with a casual comfort free from the kinds of restraints imposed by old money, blue blood, and Puritan heritage. Emerging from a crossroads of cultural influences, California style in ceramics was said to have blended the entrepreneurial spirit of the pioneer with the exuberant color of Mexican folk pottery and the loose but decisive lines of Zen calligraphy. The early stoneware vessels of Peter Voulkos, which established his national reputation before he ever attempted sculpture, seemed to exemplify the existing California style. The raw shapes and bright colors that emerged in his sculptures in the 1960s defined new parameters for it.

Rawness of form in the California style was matched in the 1960s by rawness of content in the figural ceramic sculptures of Robert Arneson, whose irritation with the coolly detached art of New York Pop and the supercilious attitudes of East Coast dealers, curators, and critics toward anything “regional” aligned him with the sarcastically rebellious artists of the Bay Area Funk Art movement. By the late 1960s, California ceramics in general had created for itself a reputation that fit with the spirit of protest in the country at large, firing the imagination of potters and sculptors in all regions. Today, it is common to describe the works of Voulkos, Arneson, and their circles as the sparks for a revolution in American ceramics, a major transformation in which California led the way, but which ultimately would carry the entire country in its momentum. The triumph of the California style, as a consequence, was simultaneously its dissolution. Encountered everywhere, it ceased to have a meaningful locus. Like Paris, which gave birth to Modernism as an international movement that became just that, the Bay Area has an illustrious heritage but no longer any claim to a special status in contemporary ceramics.

That said, there is no question that the ceramic sculptors in the Daum exhibition are among the best of Americans working in that medium today. They are demonstrably part of a second generation that draws its impetus largely from the breakthrough sculptures of earlier Bay Area ceramists, but this is not the source of distinction in their work. They do not, in other words, depend upon associations with the region for the reputations that they have acquired. The Daum exhibition asks that we consider them specifically in light of the heritage of the Bay Area, which is in many ways illuminating, but at the same time one should not read too much significance into their place of residence. The exhibition itself confirms that there is no stylistic basis for describing them as part of a school, nor does the content of their work suggest that they have a great deal in common conceptually. They are Bay Area ceramic sculptors in the sense that most contemporary American ceramic sculptors are. They build upon the lessons of the 1950s and 1960s, carving out possibilities for clay that were never dreamed of in an earlier age.

The ceramic and mixed-media sculptures of Arthur González generally incorporate the human figure, but in a rough, incomplete, and evolving state that suggests an existential rather than essential definition. Human nature is not characterized in his work as something fixed, a quality to be abstracted from the messy milieu of actual lived experience and presented in its purity within the work of art. Rather, González's figures are as conceptually tentative as they are formally hesitant, emerging from grounds only partly formed and with the sense that they might easily fall back into obscurity. The character Pinocchio is a recurring element in his compositions, but it carries with it nothing of the lighthearted humor of the Disney interpretation. González takes the story of a wooden boy who desires to be human and makes of it an epic of despair, suffering, courage, and ultimately a weary enlightenment. Although he received his MFA at the University of California at Davis under the tutelage of Arneson, González seems to have responded less to the sarcastic wit of the latter's early work than to the blackly contemplative mood that invaded Arneson's sculptures prior to his death. As a result, González does not provide any pat conclusions in his narratives, and his forms recall the sense of struggle for answers that Voukos epitomized for expressive work in clay.

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Though in most respects quite distinct from González's figural sculptures, the abstract works of Annabeth Rosen share something of their sense of struggle and, certainly, of their emphasis on transformation. Rosen's organically oriented abstractions have sophisticated connections with a tendency in ceramic sculpture that is most pronounced in European work, but the general legacy of Voukos' sculptures of the 1950s is easy enough to demonstrate as well. One of the key factors that made Voukos' work acceptable within the art world at the time was its rupturing of mass and incorporation of space; necessary consequences of working with clay on a large scale but also fortuitous links to the open works of modern sculptors such as Henry Moore. Rosen's distinctive conglomerates of pipes — compact masses yet as aeriferous as snarls of bronchial tubes — could be compared to Voukos' famous *Stacks*, massive vessel-like forms composed of units that retained their hollowness yet surrendered their potential for utility to an onslaught of rips, slashes, and punctures. Rosen's works are less anguished than Voukos' however, and the processes that they suggest are far less violent. The method through which her compositions evolve — a building up and breaking down that involves incorporation of previously fired fragments — imparts to her work a sense of alternating accretion and recession, a slow cycle of growth, retraction, and renewed growth that reflects larger patterns in nature.

Nancy Selvin's distinctive arrays of bottle forms — finished, like Rosen's sculptures, with ghostly layers of unevenly applied white matt underglaze — seem similarly to vacillate between completion and dissolution. The chalky surfaced wooden shelves on which they rest suggest sheet rock structures covered with drywall compound that has yet to be sanded smooth. Pencil lines on these forms add to the feeling of sites under construction. At the same time, the fragments of text printed or written incompletely on the bottle forms imply labels worn through use. The underglaze, as a consequence, evokes time in the index of a layer of dust that has settled heavily over the inert forms. The temporal ambivalence of a simultaneous evolution and decay imparts to the works the strangely transfixed intensity of things manifestly ordinary that have been extracted from their mundane context and suspended in a featureless space. Although the generational metaphor doesn't quite work, Selvin's sculptures share with those of Bay Area ceramic sculptor Ron Nagle a tendency to treat the vessel not only as a site for painting but as an object with a definite front and back. By aligning her bottles along shelves and stretching them into wide and shallow forms, Selvin produces relief sculptures rather than objects to be viewed in the round.

Stan Welsh, whose massive terra-cotta heads are subtly satirical, perhaps comes the closest of any of the artists in the exhibition to reflecting the influence of "first generation" Bay Area ceramic sculpture. Reminiscent of the famous portrait busts of Arneson, Welsh's heads grimace in squint-eyed apoplexy or wrinkle their brows in astonishment like caricatures of human emotional flaws. The comparison to Arneson is of limited value, however. In fact, the roughness of the raw clay surfaces and the monumentality of Welsh's forms might be said to have more in common with the signature works of Voukos, who raised ceramic sculpture from the pedestal that it had inhabited through the 1940s and permitted it space in which to expand like the massive canvases of the Abstract Expressionists. This kind of amplified scale is crucial, since Welsh's sculptures derive a significant degree of their impact from the curious contrast between their imposing bulk and the fallibility betrayed by their contorted expressions and puppet-like articulated jaws. There is an element of giant killing in this deliberate contrast — something like the deflation of a parade balloon of a cartoon villain. Without explicit reference to particular individuals or institutions, Welsh undermines the awesome appearance of tyranny, hubris, callousness, and any number of other blemishes on human nature.

While the Daum exhibition provides an important opportunity to view some of the best examples of contemporary American ceramic sculpture, one of its most interesting features is the inclusion of two-dimensional work by the same artists. Selvin's colossal gouache and pencil drawings of bottles reinforce the sense of simultaneous simplicity and monumentality characterizing her sculptures; Welsh's pastel and clay-dust studies, on the contrary, are an intimate counterpart to his imposing three-dimensional works. González carries the narratives of his ceramic compositions, including the Pinocchio imagery, onto paper, and Rosen's small paint and ink works, one of which incorporates the appropriated image of Bruce Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, indicate the degree to which her sculptures are oriented to the context of contemporary art as well as the tradition of 20th century ceramics. This is, of course, true of the work of the others in the exhibition as well. In fact, what makes the concept of a second generation of Bay Area sculptors truly relevant is ultimately not a matter of region, style, or technique, but rather of the ability to walk the line — like Voukos, Arneson, Nagle, Shaw, and Soldner — between the discourses of contemporary ceramics and contemporary art. The Daum exhibition provides some excellent examples of just how this can be done today.