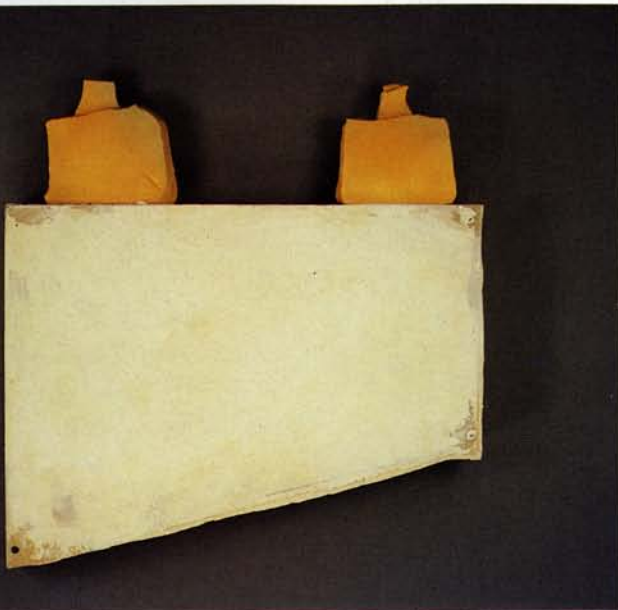


NANCY SELVIN

The Sybaris Gallery
Royal Oak, Michigan
March 27-April 25, 1992



Distressed drywall, strips of aluminum, gray-green slate and painted wood made into boxes, ledges or platforms are stage sets for Nancy Selvin's recent still lifes. Her ceramic forms are joined by forks, spoons and other elements in meticulously ordered compositions that are intimate in scale and substance but maintain a theatrical distance. Selvin is interested in linear relationships and the density of color, and she presents the products of her explorations with precision. The controlled environments remove her bottles, bowls and teapots to a perceptual sphere in which profile transcends three-dimensional form and saturated color mutes the effects of light and shadow. They are both familiar and foreign, simultaneously seducing and repelling the viewer.

This artist is bold and skillful with color. *Still Life with Two Yellow Bottles* is a simple trapezoidal drywall shelf supporting two forms glazed in a yellow as hot and sharp as bitter mustard, slightly tinged with mild pastel blue and green. The dry glaze absorbs light, pulling one's eye into the surface of the bottles. It almost hurts. In a white painted box, a silver spoon tarnished to a remarkable milky plum hue is placed above a cup of dull red clay blackened by carbon: *Still Life with Spoon*. In *Still Life with Thirteen Bottles*, deep pine green and acid teal matte glazes enliven a forest of smoky raku surfaces.

Color cannot be separated from Selvin's use of texture. Her arid glaze surfaces emphasize the edgy, ridged smoothness of the forms as well as their hue. At their best, the bottles and teapots suggest blocks of cream cheese cut with a serrated knife. Smearred with plastering compound and hints of powdery color, drywall is a perfect textural foil for these idiosyncratic pots. In two freestanding pieces Selvin also juxtaposes gold leaf, silver and raku-fired surfaces with slate to conjure arresting contrasts of glossy stone, bright metal and soft smudgy ceramic.

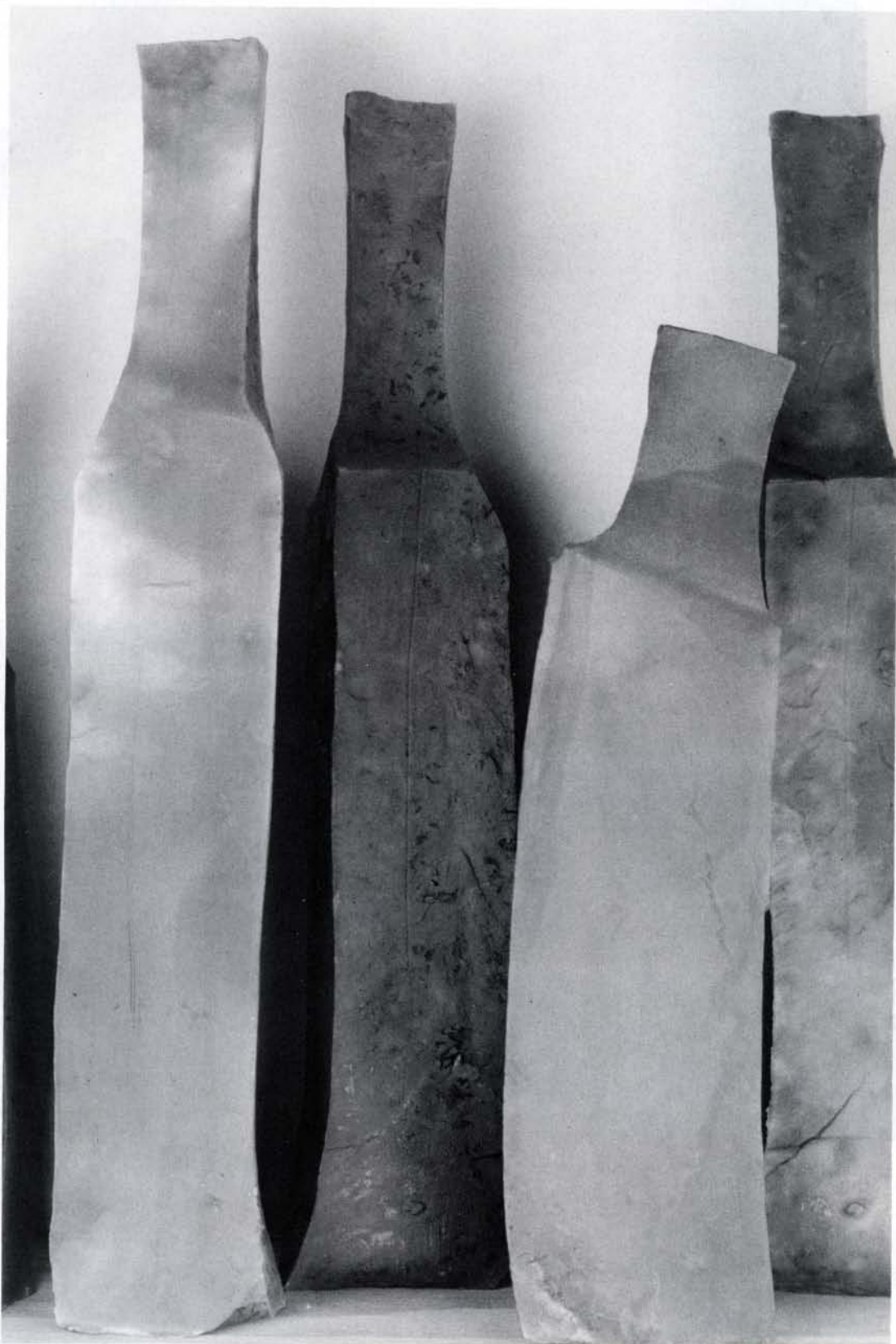
Selvin's pots, most of which are slip cast from complex molds, have a stylized irregularity. The bottles lean a little, posturing, like store mannequins. They twist gracefully at the neck, tilt shoulders and hips, bend to accommodate a neighbor. It is the silhouette of their bodies that is important rather than their volume; they are, in fact, almost like templates for pots. This is particularly true of the squat, nearly black teapots, which are placed in strict profile against backdrops of white drywall. Because of this it is difficult to imagine Selvin's pots in real space. They are dependent upon the context she creates for them.

Certain of Selvin's decisions seem mannered when seen repeated throughout the exhibition, particularly her reliance on 30-degree angles. The apparently arbitrary inclusion of stamped metal letters in two works is also distracting. *Still Life with Teapot* is dominated by a large E, like those available singly at hardware stores, and *Still Life with Three Teabowls* is strewn with an L, an S and an A. The letters are too cryptic to suggest much more than "Sesame Street" jingles, and too overt to remain purely formal elements. The dissonance between physicality and the abstract, symbolic realm of language remains unresolved in these pieces.

Selvin has written that she wishes to "capture the ease of the unfinished" ("How I Got Here," *Ceramics Monthly*, November 1989), which is evident in her rough plasters and uneven edges. Yet all still life implies contrivance, and her marvelously finicky surfaces and compositions attest to detailed work and the extreme self-consciousness required to locate the stopping point. Indeed, Nancy Selvin cultivates a studied distance almost to the point of preciousness, a stance that can undermine the emotional impact of her pieces. The strengths of her work are its precise rich surfaces and formal restraint.

—JODY CLOWES

Jody Clowes is director of exhibitions at Pewabic Pottery in Detroit.



RIGHT: *Still Life with Thirteen Bottles*, 1992, detail, raku and mixed media, 18" x 36" x 6".
 OPPOSITE PAGE: *Still Life with Two Yellow Bottles*, 1990, raku and mixed media, 20" x 19½" x 3".