

# Ceramic Metaphors

Los Angeles / Elaine Levin

Nancy Selvin's ceramic tea bowls at Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery sit serenely on chest-high pedestals, at a height that negates function and presents them to the viewer as objects for quiet contemplation. Some rest on long, lacquered, seven-sided forms which can be read as trays or long shadows of the bowls, giving the groupings the appearance of still life arrangements. Contributing to this feeling are one or several glass rods lying casually on each tray. By their placement, these attenuated, linear forms direct our attention immediately to the bowl, reiterate an angle of the tray or project the sense of chopsticks at rest.

In contrast to the mirrorlike plane of the trays, the exterior surfaces of the angular, five-sided, earthenware bowls have mat textures, layered with color. Selvin uses underglazes in pastel colors, air brushed or splattered over and under areas that are masked by a variety of materials. This painterly approach is echoed by the interior surface, which supports a runny, glossy glaze that exhibits these qualities, unexpectedly, on the top edge of the rim instead of down the exterior walls. Like punctuation marks, these drops of glaze tell us

that the pot was fired upside down. But more importantly, by their random position and by the way that they catch the light, they contribute to and enhance the Zen spirit of the vessels.

Interacting with the bowls on trays are three- and four-sided tea bowls, variations of this theme, some in more intense colors. The squared tea bowl became a presence in Selvin's work after a trip to Japan in 1979. Prior to that, the teapot was the vehicle she favored. Like the tea bowl, her teapots are weighted with cultural, social and feminine associations, expressed by surfaces that appear quilted and are decorated with china paints and decals. As she discarded associations with aspects of function, the teapot form became more purely a metaphor. An incised line sufficed for lid; a high, squared handle recalled the look of bamboo and nineteenth-century Chinese I-hsing ware.

Like her teapots, Selvin's tea bowls, whether presented individually or in a special environment on a tray, explore a rich vein within ceramic tradition, directing attention to the essence of form, to surface enrichment subtleties and nuances which delight the eye and refresh the spirit. □

Nancy Selvin, "Untitled," 1981, ceramic and lacquered wood, at Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles.

