



Viola Frey. *Houseful of Figurines* (untitled D 1995 version).

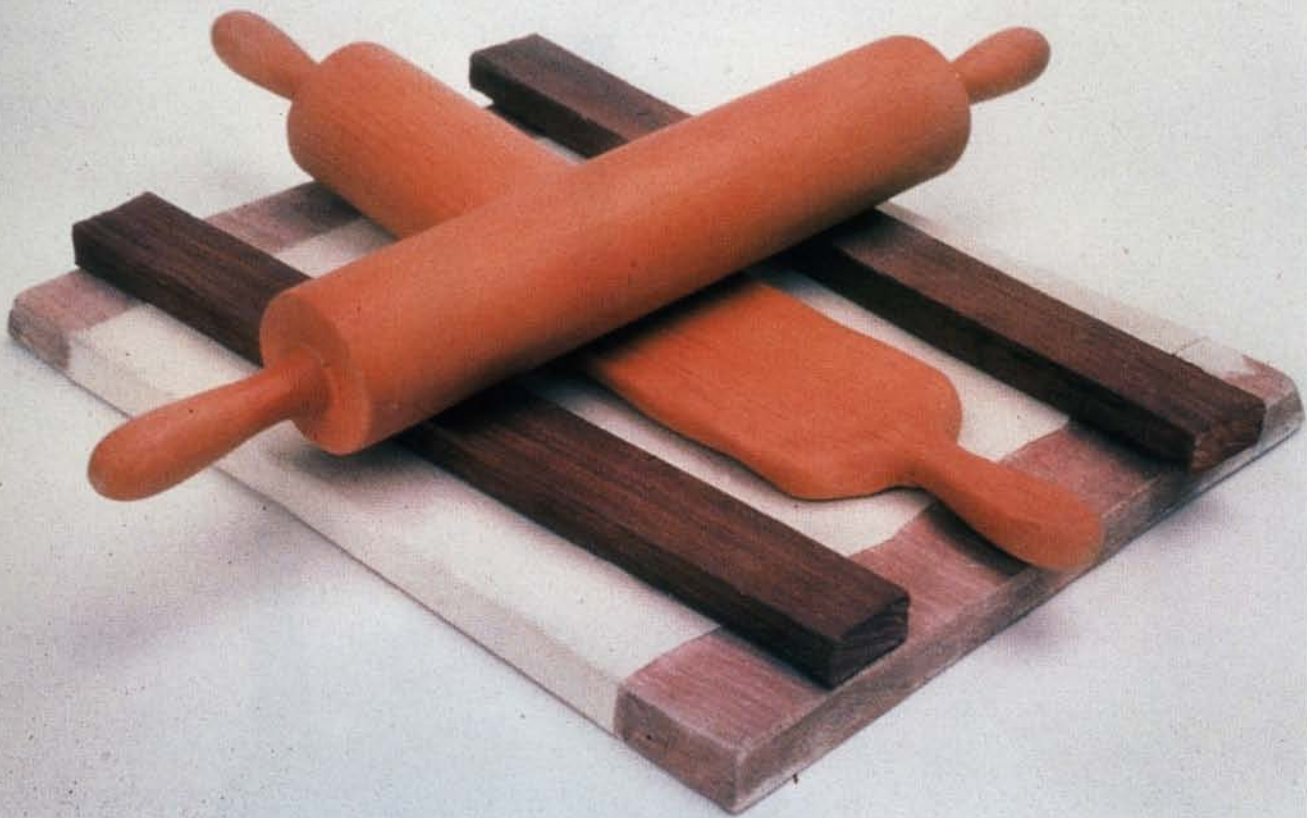
Ceramic Still Life The Common Object

Article by Elaine Levin

THE STILL LIFE COMPOSITION OF CONTEMPORARY objects on exhibit at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California, from September 10th to December 13, 1997, allowed the ceramist to incorporate a variety of ideas and concerns. Some artists working in this mode group together what appears to be functional tableware, while others use replicas of books, bottles, fruit, cloth

and writing implements combined in settings that include a table or a shelf.

Household objects have fascinated artists for many centuries; they are accessible and familiar. The forms, when grouped together, often enlarged our perception or infused the objects with meaning beyond use and familiarity. Historically, in painting, the still life composition consisted of a number of household



David Furman. *The Irresistible Force vs The Immovable Object*.

objects usually arranged on a desk or table, depicted with trompe l'oeil accuracy. One 17th century Dutch painting showed the remnants of a meal. Left in disarray, the setting implies a narrative — either that the diners had to suddenly depart or the artist was suggesting rampant wastefulness. Later European painters emphasised life's fleeting nature by placing a human skull among scattered books and perhaps a globe. A late 19th century American painting by John Frederick Peto is autobiographical in its replication of mail and memorabilia on a bulletin board.

One of the earliest ceramists to see the potential in a still life arrangement was a Frenchman, Bernard Palissy. His late 16th century platters supporting a bas relief of marine life surrounding a sensuously coiled snake were made for display, not use. The concept appears again in an 18th century French plate featuring a salamander whose scales add a tactile quality; later in a 19th century Danish version the curvaceous, fluted and spiny marine life fit the definition of the Art Nouveau style. Well into the 20th century, the plate remained the platform for a still life expression. Viktor Schreckengost's *Still Life Plate* (1932) is a drawing, a cubist-influenced composition

of fruit, a jug and the zigzag lines of the Art Deco style. Pablo Picasso's plate, *Black Pudding and Eggs* (1951) reveals his sense of humour and seems to anticipate the Pop Art period of the 1960s.

Contemporary ceramic still life tableaux have taken inspiration from the past while at the same time transforming an assemblage of objects into something meaningful for the present or significant for the artist's life.

When functional ware or vessels are the dominant image, use is negated. Pitchers, cups, plates and vases are transformed, sometimes through colour or a shape that is an abstraction of the original. The ware may be realistic and normal size but its relationship to accompanying objects projects an ambience that may be unfamiliar, surrealistic or startlingly patterned.

Ideas and concerns expressed through an assemblage of objects owe a debt to the advent of Pop Art. We can mark the contemporary period as beginning around 1965, visible first in the work of Roy Lichtenstein. His small towers of common hotel china cups and saucers decorated with enlarged Ben Day dots appear stacked for dish washing. Through the dots, the artist links the realistic columns of ordinary dishware

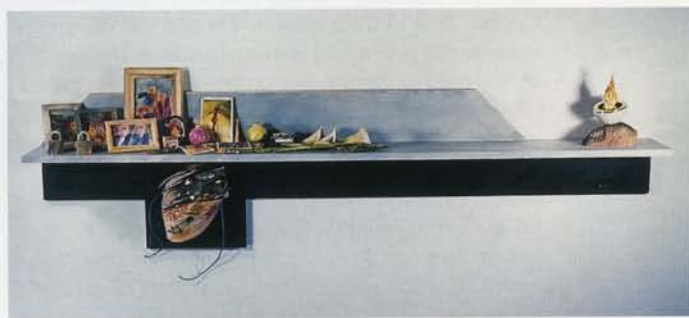


Joanne Hayakawa. *Confused Polarity*. (Detail.)

to the prevalence of mass production, the importance of the mass media in the post World War II period, and also to the influence of the comic strip.

About five years later, Robert Arneson's series of *Dirty Dishes* appeared. Like the earlier painting of the remnants of a meal, Arneson was chronicling meal time. In this case, however, the work was autobiographical, a record of dinner in his household of four adolescent sons with hearty appetites. Taking meal time a step further, *Smorgi Bob The Chef* (1971) is the artist's homage to the insistent display of food in American culture. Dressed as a chef, Arneson presides at the head of a three dimensional, all white, almost life size table piled high with meats, vegetables and fruits. The sculpture mocks the high colour used in magazine and television ads where food is presented in tempting colour as a luscious display offered by a proud chef.

One of the sculptures in this exhibit consists of functional ware that represents a culture. Ken Price's proliferation of cups titled *Happy's Curios* (1977-78) took inspiration from the anonymous Mexican folk potter whose work the artist had admired on his frequent trips to the border town of Tijuana, Mexico. Hanging



Joanne Hayakawa. *Confused Polarity*.

these colourful cups on strings as they were displayed in shops or placing them in special cabinets, as in *Unit 3* (1972-77), Price paid homage to this folk pottery tradition and its nameless prolific artists.

Richard Shaw presents some crossover objects. His late 1970s series of stacks of two and three books (*Stack of Books Jar #2*, 1978) topped by playing cards and letters are hollow. Their ability to become a vessel, however, is not apparent until the



Karen Koblitz. *Orvieto Red Rooster Lunette*.

objects lying on the books' top surface are lifted. Like Peto's realistic painting of scattered memorabilia, Shaw has also assembled trompe l'oeil cigarette packages, baskets, biscuits and fruit in groups that appear to have been hastily left askew by absent owners.

Because of his obsessive attention to detail that made the work super realistic, Shaw's sculptures of the 1970s and early '80s reflected an unease in American life. Due to the Vietnam War and the Watergate episode, the public had begun to question the validity of statements by the government and the media. Objects appearing so faithfully to the real thing jolted perception and the sense's ability to comprehend reality. In this respect, the purposeful confusion caused by Shaw's sculptures of that period reflected the anxiety in American society.

Tom Rippon takes the still life into an expression of a personal nature. In *Personal Letter to a Friend* (1979), paper, writing implements and a vase of flowers form a tableau on a table whose skinny, attenuated legs allude to an unstable situation. Here the context for the objects contributes to a tension perhaps reflected in the content of the letter.

Viola Frey's assemblage of all-white bric-a-brac is autobiographical in the sense that it reflects her California grape ranch family's accumulation of knick knacks, junked cars and farm equipment. Her own attraction to the ambience of flea markets and her obsession for kitsch figurines she admires as survivors from earlier decades, became an underlying theme in *Houseful of Figurines* (1976). A woman's personal objects found on a dresser or a bathroom shelf,

their forms often reflected in a background mirror-like surface, are the subject of Joanne Hayakawa's sculptures. Resting on simple shelves, the objects hint at femininity and an intimacy that books and other functional ware do not project. The influence of the feminist movement that appeared in post 1960s art had an impact on her choice of objects. The autobiographical nature of *Confused Polarity* (1987) is as incisive as a portrait head.

Karen Koblitz has honoured another area of ceramic tradition. Her combinations of pitchers, cups and plates, sometimes accompanied by fruit, as in *Still Life with Red Saucer* (1984), rest on colourful squares of patterned ceramic cloth. Koblitz has taken inspiration from Paul Cezanne's paintings such as *Still Life with Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (late 19th century) in which his objects rest on brightly decorated table cloths.

After working for several summers in a ceramic factory in Italy, Koblitz's tableaux of a variety of ware captured the spirit of 15th century Italian della Robbia altar pieces framed in an arch. Koblitz's pedestal and wall sculptures of luscious fruits accompanied by wine bottles and goblets speak to an agricultural society's abundant harvest. The bright colours and complex patterns change our associations for these objects. In *Orvieto Red Rooster Lunette* (1994) references to Italy (Orvieto is a hill town in Umbria) continue with a pattern of grape vines and tile colours that relate her work to a Mediterranean ceramics tradition that California, her home base, has often adopted.



Nancy Selvin. *Still Life Bottle Collection*.

With 47 artists in this exhibit, numerous themes are presented. Some similarities among the diversity can be observed. Hayakawa, Price and Koblitz have given their groups of objects a sense of place. In each case, shelves consistent with or complimentary to the objects are a meaningful part of the composition. Surroundings that add to the objects' presence are part of the landscape-references in Paula Winokur's *Mesa 111*. An oversize platter supports Clayton Bailey's jugs and jars. The forms recall early New England earthenware but the strange noises produced by *Laboratory Still Life* (1990-95) reflect Bailey's consistent additions of unexpected sensory elements to his work. Two colourful super realistic birds perched on tree stumps in Annette Corcoran's *Redstart Pair* (1997) look as though they should chirp.

The presentation choice for Jutta Savage and James Shrobbree is a 1 m. (3 ft) high table with thin legs of wood or metal. Like Tom Rippon's shaky table, these pedestals seem less than sturdy which sets up a tension between objects and their support. More stable in appearance is the table in Helaine Melville's life-size *A Slice of Life - Mom's Kitchen* (1986-88). Surrounded by kitchen implements, the all-white work is a ghost-like environment, perhaps a memory of a special place in her past.

Two ceramists in the exhibit return to the plate tradition for their platform. Like an advertisement for a restaurant's menu, a few fruits with wine and a goblet decorate Linda FitzGibbon's *Let's Face It* (1996) plate while Betty Spindler's *Still Life Fish Platter* (1997) serves up a bright-eyed fish lounging among tasty



Nancy Selvin. *Still Life Bottle Collection*. (Detail.)

vegetables, in the tradition of 19th century Italian fish plates and Picasso's 1950s plates of fish skeletons. Instead of the plate as the receptacle, Peter Vandenberg's *Vegetable Basket* (1997) is an assortment of appetising vegetables piled high in a box as though just picked from the farm. Victor Spinski's box, *Snake with Apples* (1997) has biblical connotations. In contrast to a realistic depiction of edibles, the forms of an assortment of fruits and vegetables appear familiar in Karen Massero's *Wavy Melon Fruit Cluster #1* (1995), but their odd colours and patterns suggest the strange and exotic.



Linda FitzGibbon. *Let's Face It.*

The concern for form is evident in Elsa Rady's and Nancy Selvin's interest in bottles. Selvin's early 1990s cluster of bottles relate to Giorgio Morandi's 1916 paintings of bottles and to Hayakawa's assemblage of bottles and jars, along with the minimalistic simplicity of Elsa Rady's *Still Life #52* (1995). In Selvin's *Still Life* (1991), her generic bottles are placed as we might view them silhouetted on a window sill. Selvin's experience living briefly in Japan contributed to her sensitivity to form, colour and simplicity. *Still Life: Bottle Collection* (1997) in this show continues in that direction while at the same time teasing our understanding of her work by printing messages on some of the bottles. The type that is not blurred refers to truth and reality, a concept Richard Shaw has also investigated but in a super realistic mode. Selvin's use of print may have evolved from a series of *Journals* (1996), in that they have autobiographical implications. The work alludes to the ceramist's glaze formula notebooks complete with fading notations.

Like Selvin's notebooks, David Furman chose objects important to his work. The rolling pin and boards in *The Irresistible Force vs The Immovable Object* (1976) are essential equipment for producing slab

based ceramics. At the same time, Furman has injected a humorous surrealist element into the sculpture. Like objects in a dream where the laws of physics are relaxed, the bottom rolling pin is flattened by its partner.

The common object in a non-functional but referential setting calls attention to the many familiar objects that surround our lives but are often ignored or not seen as being special. Beyond making the viewer re-evaluate the everyday object, the still life in clay adds a dimension and a tactile quality not part of still life in painting. What the artist chooses to represent can heighten our perception of the functional domestic and inanimate in our everyday life. Then too, these objects, when seen in a different context, help us realise that they often define our culture, our society's values and ourselves in our environment, while they nourish us spiritually.

Elaine Levin is a writer on the arts and an author of a number of books. She lives in California.