Nancy Selvin

An Interview by David Linger

***Sandu**. 2008.*

OUTSIDE AN AIRY STUDIO IN WEST BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, birds twitter, trains rumble by.

NS: Are you going to stick to the questions you said you were going to ask me, or trick me with all new stuff?

DL: We'll see what happens.

NS: Good, I like improvisation.

DL: Let's start with Berkeley. In the 1960s you studied with Peter Voulkos when he was changing the face of ceramics. Do you think it was the ferment at Berkeley that pushed him, or would he have accomplished what he did regardless of time and place?

NS: It's hard to separate those things. The medium would have changed regardless, just not in this wonderful environment. Voulkos became the point person the way Jackson Pollock became the point person for abstract expressionism but I don't want to isolate him in ceramics. He was part of what Berkeley is about. I have strong feelings about the university and what was going on back then on the faculties of chemistry, history, physics. I think that's why Voulkos was invited to be there: he had been at Otis before but was asked to leave because he was too radical. He had the personality, the outgoing quality and the desire to bring people around him. Voulkos came of age as an artist when society was in a huge shuffle. Transformation was everywhere, in music, writing, the civil rights and women's movements, the birth control pill. Women said, hey, this is crazy, why do we have to wear gloves, why do our purses and our shoes have to match? We were saying, you have to let go of rules that send people to the back of the bus. It had all started earlier, but the anti-war movement carried it over the top. In the 1960s there was a fantasy that we could get rid of bad rules. A certain amount of that has happened.

DL: Voulkos's classes were unconventional; sometimes he would come to class late or not at all, or look around, see who was there, leave and never return.

NS: And at night we would go to his studio. He was doing a lot of bronze casting then. There was a guy, an anthropologist or historian – this went on way long after I graduated – who used to dress up in costume to illustrate the topic he was talking about. If he was discussing the Middle Ages he dressed up like he was a character from Chaucer or whatever. Berkeley has always been unorthodox in the way that they allow the faculty to teach – more then than now.

DL: How did that affect you? What put you on a road to a career in ceramic art?

NS: I want to back up. I actually started doing art at the University of California at Riverside where I met my husband, Steve. Steve went to grad school at Iowa State, so when we got married I ended up in Iowa. I discovered that outside Ames in Mrs. Massey's basement you could have five ceramic lessons for $3 USD. It was basically paint-your-own, using greenware and underglazes, the same ones I use now.

I had done a lot of painting and drawing at Riverside, so art was percolating. While I worked in Mrs. Massey's basement I did research on aboriginal art. Clay was a new

Left: ***Cupboard, El Monte.***
Right: ***Is Less More?*** *#0904.*

canvas for me and I started taking a pointillist approach to the surface, using very dark backgrounds like bark. My first show was at the Story County Fair; my work looked really peculiar among all those little blue forget-me-nots and roses and green vines around the edges of white plates.

DL: Did you know you had something special that you needed to say?

NS: I knew that painting had not captivated me in the same way and I wanted to pursue the process of working in clay. My pursuit of a career was very unstructured: things befell me and I went along if they were good; if they weren't, I let them go. I never tried in a high-powered way to make things happen.

DL: You have described yourself as undisciplined, but I see piles of work and giant projects in progress.

NS: I am not the kind of person who plans something and then executes it. I try something and think, oh, this is right, this is what I wanted to happen. Or, hmm, this isn't looking so hot and it will go into the dumpster. At Berkeley I was encouraged to be spontaneous and improvisational. Patrick Siler, the studio tech, made tons of clay and was always there. You would cut off all this clay and go to work. Nobody was saying, oh, you need to do this before you do that; it was, go in there and work.

There were 50-gallon vats of beautiful Voulkos' black and Siler's gray and gold, so you didn't have to test glazes. It was all about struggling with ideas. Somebody would always help you make the work. The only criticism was, what do you have to show for all your time in here?

I try to teach my intro class that way. I am more present physically but I don't want to see myself in their work. It is a fine line. I say, this will help, or, it will crack or discolour if you do x-y-z. I hope they have the ability to take it in. Some of them are fantastic at bringing information into the work and continuing on. I try to look past the awkwardness and get to the core of what they are doing. Sometimes their awkwardness is wonderful; if they lose it, they have lost something important.

I always plead with students to make more work. Don't make one, keep going. Every time you take the next step and work on the issue again, it becomes more of what you are trying to say, easier to get to your ideas. I try not to burden them with a lot of how to do things. Anything you want to do, I can help you. Sometimes I get fabulous results.

DL: When you say 'ideas', are you talking about content? Is content important in ceramic art?

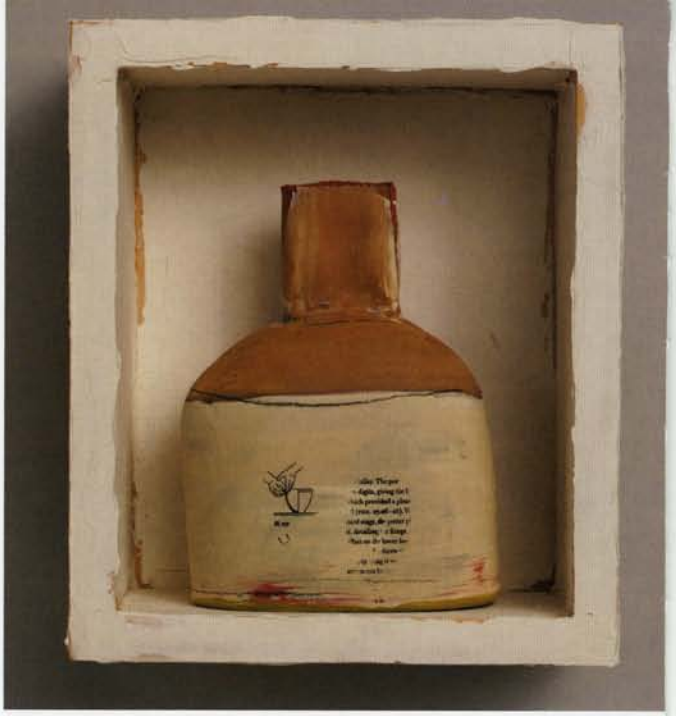
NS: It totally depends on the context and who is looking. There are intelligent people who can evaluate the work, see what the artist intends and bring the ceramic-ness into their view of it. It is really, what is your intention here and did you pull it off? It is not always about the material. A lot of it is out of your control no matter what medium you use. Some art captures people's imaginations and some does not. I don't worry about it; I just work. You have your vision and you try to do your best, using what you have inside.

Just executing the work is so time consuming. The best part of being an artist is working in the studio; that is where I try to spend all of my time. Of course I have to do other things. But in the studio I try to focus and not get bogged down in all this other stuff.

DL: So, how has the role of the artist changed since you started working in the 1960s?

NS: Since the 1960s, what art is in the everyday mind has shifted. The globalization of our existence has

Is Less More? #0510.



Is Less More? #0410.

affected how much attention we can pay to any one thing. Artists are part of this huge, new milieu that has changed what art is. In this country before the 1960s, movies were billed as entertainment. In Europe you had all of the Italians and the foreign art film pushed popular film to have more content, to see itself as something beyond entertainment.

Design has changed dramatically. Now you have Ikea and Target and they are aware of good design. Their design does not always work but it has become part of mass thinking. Design and art used to belong to small communities.

DL: Before, artists could be poor, live in a garret. They would sell something for $200USD and then blow it all on taking everybody out to dinner. Today everything has gone up so steeply. How does an artist function in this new world?

NS: Duchamp didn't work, he had a source of income. Now, the California way of supporting yourself as an artist is to teach. A lot of artists do construction jobs, graphic design. Artists have always had to find a way to support their art, and it is harder now. There are probably 5000 artists between Richmond and the end of Alameda County.

DL: How many support themselves with art?

NS: Ten? I am making that number up. But the rest of these artists exhibit and participate in the larger art scene. Difficulties with money are not new: artists used to belong to whoever would pay: the Medici, the Church. What is novel is the artist as independent contractor. I think a lot about artists' and writers' lives. I like to read writers' memoirs to see how they approach their craft.

DL: Are we going to have a conversation about craft?

NS: I don't know what craft is. I don't know what art is. Does anybody? No. People make up answers depending on what is fashionable. Writers talk about how to craft a sentence or how to craft a paragraph. I love that. They are talking about handiwork – mental handiwork, because they are writers. They string the words together to fit their style, whether they are parsimonious like Joan Didion or wordy and extravagant like Kate Braverman. Craft is how they write things. Craft is about working and how you approach what you do.

DL: In the West, craft fluctuates between being honoured and reviled, whereas in Asia, it has never gone through those kinds of cycles. Craft in the East has always had a psychological and a spiritual component.

NS: Right, but it doesn't mean that it is art. It means. . . it is revered. In the East, reverence for the old, for grandparents, is internalized. It is a cultural background that everybody is born into. Here, we don't have that. People adopt a philosophy and impose it on objects. The arts and crafts movement and art nouveau were philosophical movements about a utopian idea beyond just stuff. The stuff embodied the ideal. Now, craft work does not carry a utopian world-changing concept. Potters here don't have a mission to change the world. They just make stuff like the rest of us.

DL: So where is craft going in the 21st century?

NS: Time will tell. A lot of objects don't hold up over time but some people are now using techniques imparted over time to make stunning work. In another 50 years this work will end up in museums because it is good. Of course a lot of it won't hold up and will be consigned to the basement.

DL: Is the good stuff getting enough attention?

NS: I don't think anybody thinks they get enough attention.

DL: Art seems to come out of a collision between intention and accident. Ceramists never really know how anything is going to turn out; they put something white into the fire that they hope will turn blue.

NS: That might be why I don't glaze. I like the act of

Is Less More? #0902.

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painting, so I use underglaze but I don't glaze. People use regular paint on clay but I don't like that quality of surface. There's a certain quality you get in fired work.

DL: With underglaze, when you put your work into the kiln, you pretty much know what it is going to look like afterward.

NS: Unless something happens like the huge crack that appeared in the piece I fired the other day. The whole back just split open. You think, oh my God, this is going to be nice and it comes out with a big crack down the back. Horrible things can befall your work.

DL: Since a painter doesn't walk into the studio the next day and find a cracked canvas, do they have an advantage?

NS: The disasters are just part of doing the business of working in clay. You get a huge crack and you know you can never count on anything. Maybe that is why I have this midrange firing. That eliminates a certain amount of risk. I have developed techniques over the years that have minimized accidents. It is part of the mastery; people deal with this in various ways. When I am painting and drawing I can put all of my time into execution but with ceramics, it is different: I have to put a lot of technical expertise into getting it to come together. You have your ideas and you have technical issues and a lot of knowledge in your fingertips to pull it off. It may be what gives clay a certain character.

I was trained that you don't worry, you just find the path and the right material that suits your needs and go for it. You have to know what your process requires but you will switch clay bodies rather than allow the clay to dictate too much. Of course if you want to work in porcelain you have to deal with the issues that porcelain brings up.

DL: So what cone do you usually fire to?

NS: Cone 1. I use terracotta because it gives me the richest colour. Above cone 1 the terracotta is too dark and when you fire too low it is really pale. For me it is a matter of colour.

DL: Let's go back to glazes for a minute, since you mentioned you don't use them.

NS: Is this like the lawyer bringing something into evidence? I rarely use glaze. Glaze sits on top of the clay and I can't separate form from colour. I like being able to brush on and develop layers and layers of colour as part of the surface of the clay, creating a strong bond between the clay and the colour. That's what I love about the way I work. I don't like the shininess of glaze, the fact that it coats the surface, but I teach glazing because I want to give students the option.

DL: Often you use some form of a classic vessel, then transform it by elaborating the surface and adding text.

NS: I like to see a piece as having a certain amount of poetry. The colour is luscious but it is very spare in its impact. Except for this one (gesturing toward a large, bright red vessel).

DL: That doesn't look too spare.

NS: No. But I am usually parsimonious about the surface. When I started using text I was telling a story but not a literal one. The text hints at the content of the work. Text was such a magical thing with my bottles because it related to the idea of a label. It is not intended to be understood literally. My work is not meant to be understood literally.

DL: Why vessels?

NS: I have always approached my work from a domestic perspective. My early works were cups and teapots and I still have that relationship to functional form. Implied use is part of the meaning, though the work has never been functional. In these larger pieces I have returned to the idea of the metaphor implied with function. It is important to me to keep that thread of history running through the work. Voulkos always showed Japanese

Mojave. 2008.

ceramics and made water jugs, things that referenced the past. Functional form as jumping-off point was one of the historical views that permeated ceramics when I was at Berkeley: Form as content, use as content. I never set out to cast history off and ignore it.

DL: Is lack of use content?

NS: Well, mine of course is lack of use. When you remove ceramics from comfortable-in-your-hand and make it not useful, it becomes a metaphor.

DL: The work in this room has a quality of moving in and out of perception: colour, lack of insistent colour, fragmented text.

NS: When you put your work out there, people bring to it whatever baggage they carry. What you are describing is poetry and I always think of my work as having a certain quality of poetry. It comes and goes, it is fragmented and open to interpretation. What a reader sees in a line of poetry has a lot to do with where he or she is coming from, whereas in a novel you get the picture because the picture is spelled out for you.

I never intend to present anything in a literal, novelistic kind of way but more in a metaphorical and poetic sense. That has been one of my goals with paintings as well: the space should not be defined. A bowl is there but the space is not defined. So I paint this cabinet as a flat thing in space. You might not read it as a cabinet and the plane certainly does not address cabinet issues. I think of objects as having a nebulous relationship to who we are.

DL. Is the viewer also a voyeur, looking into who you are?

NS: Well, voyeur has a negative sexual quality in contemporary language but art is voyeuristic. When you paint, when you draw or write, when you do ceramics or sculpture, you are offering up something internal for other people to peek at. Viewers are spying on you in a certain sense. While I appear very outgoing, friendly and social, I think a voyeur looking at my work would see my alter ego.

DL: Not so perky.

NS: It depends on who is looking. My work is definitely not perky. I like spending the time alone in my studio; the work comes from the act of quiet looking and shaping. It represents that other side of my personality. Hopefully people see the tactile quality, the joy of putting those things together. I don't like to use the word joy.

DL: Do you want people to see who is really there?

NS: I would hope so. Any artist would want that. The imagery and the quality of line, the text if you can read it, are all very personal, drawn out of my experience. They are not random and my work is not like pop art: I don't get things out of the public realm and use them. I appropriate but from my personal interests.

DL: Based on what you have observed over a career spanning four decades. . .

NS: I know, it's so long.

DL: . . . how would you counsel young people pursuing a career in ceramic art?

NS: Get up every morning and work your butt off. There is no other way. You have to work.

Nancy Selvin in her Studio.

David Linger is an artist and writer living in San Francisco, California. He teaches ceramic sculpture at the University of California, Berkeley and Mills College, where he earned his BA and MFA, respectively. His works in porcelain have been exhibited extensively.