

CLAY MATTERS

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IN CERAMIC ANNUAL 2000 Guest Curator and artist David Furman features works by twelve artists—Robert Brady, Mark Burns, Syd Carpenter, Harris Deller, Christine Federighi, Joanne Hayakawa, Tony Hepburn, Richard Notkin, Adrian Saxe, Nancy Selvin, Richard Shaw, and Victor Spinski—who transform clay into powerfully expressive objects. Furman, whose ceramic works create illusions that fool the eye, is drawn to artists who also explore clay's uncanny ability to mimic other materials. For example, Spinski conjures paper and wood, Carpenter bronze and copper, and Federighi vines and leaves. In all these works one also sees the artists' shared meditation on a few basic forms with long histories in ceramics—the body and the vessel—and a preoccupation with making objects that traverse these categories to create unfamiliar hybrids of old forms and new objects of compelling poetry.

The human body is central to the work of Brady, Burns, Federighi, Notkin, and Shaw. Brady's interest in expressing the physical and spiritual aspects of the human form has multiple sources. In the late 1960s, he learned to appreciate tribal ceramics and Zen philosophy through his study with Hal Riegger, with whom he studied at California College of Arts and Crafts. Brady also was impressed by the expressive freedom he saw in Voulkos's work in "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics" mounted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1967. During his subsequent study at a satellite CCAC campus in Mexico, he also was drawn to pre-Columbian art, which he admired for the way it invests objects with a sense of spiritual power. He was struck in 1973 by Isamu Noguchi's figural works, and began making primitive body sculptures. In the mid-1970s, when Brady studied for his master's degree at University of California, Davis, initially his work was both geometric and figural, but later he abandoned the former to focus on the latter. As a young adult, Brady suffered from Reiter's Syndrome, a periodic inflammation of his joints that made movement painful, and this experience may have affected his art. In many of his works, Brady shows the body bending, often in extreme positions. Brady also shows the body as trapped; for example, *Quest* looks like a shrouded mummy struggling to move. In addition to the full figure, Brady considers its fragments, especially the head. In *Trace* he melds stone and mask; and his surface marks transform inert rock into a breathing face. Brady's simple forms allude to ancient art and folk sculpture, but they are also modern in their simplicity. Brady's evocative forms suggest multiple things, such as stone or a head, reminding us of the human compulsion to transform nature into our own image.

For Mark Burns, the body isn't found in nature's forms but in man-made signs that dot the landscape. In *Driving the Sensory Highway* (1997), he creates faces on signs that bombard the traveler along the open road. Burns, who lives in Nevada and who refers to himself in his e-mail address as "Kingkitsch," revels in popular culture and works in a style that evokes America in the fifties. As an undergraduate at the School of the Dayton Art Institute, Burns studied both ceramics and illustration; in his works he brings together a sophisticated knowledge of both clay and drawing. His ceramic tableaux echo the serial signs that used to clutter rural byways and backwaters, but Burn's work has a high-octane energy that conveys a sense of the speed of life today. Burns is a caricaturist

who skewers America's infatuation with drive-by advertising and the hard sales pitch.

While Burns marries ceramics and illustrations, Christine Federighi melds ceramics and painting, which she studied as an undergraduate at Cleveland Institute of Art and as a graduate at Alfred University College. Federighi paints her carved ceramics figures, whose elongated trunks are reminiscent of trees. Wrapped in twisting vines and tendrils, her tall, simplified figures recall ancient glyphs and goddesses. Indeed, Federighi feels a connection to prehistoric artists who also fashioned clay and understands clay as a link to earth's history: "Clay also talks to our connection to the earth because of its chemical composition: alumina and silica and other oxides. It is transformed by water into a pliable material and then hardened by fire to last another thousand years." Federighi also notes that we often describe the vessel with bodily terms, as in the belly, shoulder, and lip of a vase. Similarly, she interprets the body as a vessel, yet she makes her coiled and carved figures closed, not open. She decorates them with organic images that have both personal and universal meanings. Among her images are lush, curving leaves and blue, swirling currents that link the body with its environment of land and water. Federighi also alludes to the body in a sphere that symbolizes the basic component of life, the single cell. In *Cellular House Four* (1998), the structure around the sphere refers to the body that houses life.

Unlike Federighi, who presents the body as a whole, Notkin parses it into fragments. In *Offering* (1996–97) he makes the hand not only a sign of the artist's creativity, but also a universal symbol of humanity. The metal-plated hand evokes medieval armor and man's violent history, while the heart it holds embodies life's fragility. This work fits into the context of Notkin's larger preoccupation with the human will to destruction, which appears in such other works as teapots with lids that look like mushroom clouds. After studying ceramics at Kansas City Art Institute and University of California, Davis, Notkin developed a virtuoso command of the ceramic medium, which he focused on the teapot. These works combine old and new traditions, from Chinese Yixing pottery to American social protest. In the same spirit, Notkin's sculpted hands and hearts unite ancient and contemporary human experience.

Like Notkin, Richard Shaw also conveys a sense of the vulnerability of life. In *As Is* (1998), he splices the body together out of what look to be found objects—the neck and torso are a violin and the waist is a book. Yet Shaw fabricates the entire work out of slipcast high-fire porcelain, which he shapes with molds and paints with air-brushed china paint and decal overglazes. His striding stick man is made of the things the artist loves—art and music—and his foundation is his artist's palette. Shaw's clay man, part of a larger series of walking figures made of spliced parts, at once pays homage to Picasso's assemblage and pokes fun at it. Shaw developed an interest in assemblage while he studied at San Francisco Art Institute, where he worked with sculptors Robert Hudson, Jim Melchert, and Ron Nagle, and painter Manuel Neri. Shaw brought his training in clay and paint together to become one of the leaders of a trompe l'oeil illusionist style in ceramics that emerged in the early 1970s in the Bay area. Since then Shaw has devoted himself to creating still lifes of everyday objects that he renders with an uncommon fidelity. His technical perfection is seductive, but he deliberately lavishes it on broken and

discarded things. Shaw delights in tricking the eye, or at least in making it question what is real and what is not. For example, in *Two Bites* (1999) he has porcelain do a convincing imitation of books, letters, crayons, and cups—things so humble they seem unworthy of attention. But ultimately, Shaw's tour de force in clay makes us question the reliability of perception and the faith we put into illusion as proof of reality.

In addition to the body, the vessel is another recurring theme in this exhibition, and artists interpret this form in a variety of ways: as a container, a tool, or a structure. For Saxe, the vessel holds mysterious powers. Saxe became fascinated with the vessel while first learning ceramics at Franklin High School. There he studied with an inspirational teacher Frances Beatty, who took him to Otis Art Institute in 1955–56, to meet Peter Voulkos, who was transforming vessels into sculpture. In the early 1960s Saxe continued to study ceramics in Hawaii, where with a dual major in art and chemistry, he acquired a solid technical training in ceramics. After returning from Hawaii in 1962, Saxe set up his own studio; then in 1969, he studied at Chouinard Art Institute with Ralph Bacerra. Saxe's *Magic Lamp* series has its roots in that experience. One of the class projects was making lamps, but instead of producing the garden light that Bacerra expected, Saxe created an Aladdin's Lamp. Saxe recalls that he was not interested in a functional lamp that radiated light but a sculptural object that cast shadows to animate its surroundings. Saxe also likes the way the lamp temporarily disappears when burning incense envelops it. In these works, Saxe alludes to an old tradition of objects that embody enigma, while he gives them a new visual energy with unexpected juxtapositions of refined and rough forms. Indeed, Saxe's lamps speak to the artist's power to conjure different forms in clay, which, in *Hi-Fibre-Chicken-in-Every-Pot Magic Lamp* (1997), range from finely wrought elegant vessels to crudely made scatological bases. Central to Saxe's aesthetic is the visual transition from the real to the bizarre. He traces his interest in this theme to his early work as an attendant at Barnsdall Gallery in Los Angeles. "I learned to get people interested in contemporary art," he recalls, "by first finding familiar points of reference. Then I would present the aspects that were off-putting." Saxe employs a similar strategy in his works: "I like to get people engaged," he explains, "usually with familiar forms (for example, they know a teapot) then I pull the rug out from underneath them."

Saxe creates surprising fusions of contrasting elements—Middle Eastern, European, Japanese—that have no simple identity. What unites these elements is the presence of incense, which many cultures use in ritual. For example, in *Bungee de Compostela* (1995) Saxe alludes to his experience in Galicia, Spain, where he saw a monumental incense burner in a ceremony to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Incense relates not only to Catholic ritual but also to the psychedelic sixties. Indeed, Saxe feels an equally strong connection to the art of that decade in Los Angeles, especially the work of Kenneth Price and John McCracken that brought seductive metallic colors from automotive lacquers into fine art. Finally, in his art Saxe melds the immaterial and the material; although the smoke that trails from his lamps leads back to their mysterious contents, like the genie in the bottle, it is ultimately elusive.

For Nancy Selvin, like Saxe, the vessel is a recurring subject. Studying ceramics in the late sixties at the University of California at Berkeley, where she worked with Peter Voukos, Ron Nagle, Jim Melchert, and Patrick Siler, Selvin developed an appreciation of the sculptural possibilities of this fundamental form. She recalled that at Berkeley “there was a tremendous sense of freedom. You were encouraged to pursue your own vision.” From this point on, Selvin made sculptures out of traditional vessel forms, beginning with small cups, then tea bowls and trays based on the Japanese tea ceremony. Selvin, who lived for a time in Japan, says, “I think of my works as spare and lean. I like their parsimonious Zen quality.” This attitude persists in her newer work that focuses on the bottle. Although the forms look utilitarian, they are not. She hand builds the bottles, but closes the form so that the bottles can’t hold liquid. “My pots are abstractions of the reality of a pot,” Selvin says. To that end, she thinks in terms of essential form. “I try to pare every object down to the basic form. How much can I remove and still have a pot there?” Selvin’s compositions feature both individual and clustered bottles, and their serene, meditative mood recalls the still-life paintings of the Italian twentieth-century painter Giorgio Morandi, whose art she admires. From her training at Berkeley she also absorbed “the abstract expressionist idea that the surface is part of the form. My surfaces are coarse and raw. I don’t go in for any refinement,” she explains. Over the terra-cotta clay she applied underglazes with a brush so that the edges of her strokes reveal the process of their making.

Selvin often places her bottles in a box, as in *Notation #3* (1998–99) or on a table *Composition #3 with Nine Bottles*. In the former, she presents the box diagonally, as if it projects from the wall; in fact, she thinks of the box as a “scrap of architecture.” Although at first the tables seem like found objects, they are actually made by Selvin out of metal or wood. At around forty inches high, they are impractical objects, with tall, spare legs. The tables have the same linear elegance as the contours of her bottles, and are indeed an integral part of the entire composition. The edges of all her sculptures are important to Selvin. “I think of them as line drawings.” Selvin’s sculptures often include books, as in *Notation #3*. While sometimes she takes the text in these pieces from her own ceramic notebooks, Selvin notes that in this work the page behind the bottle alludes to a text by Marcel Duchamp in which he discusses art as a collaboration between the artist and the viewer. “The text is not there to be read in the literary sense,” Selvin clarifies; rather the text, like the bottle, is an abstraction of experience. Selvin’s quiet, understated work encourages us to look for the visual beauty in everyday objects.

In contrast to Selvin, Carpenter, Hepburn, and Spinski think of vessels as tools. Actually, Carpenter’s sculptures look like they are made of tools—such as wheels or chains—but hers are eccentric implements that can perform no practical work. *It’s Like Trying to Pull Water II* (1998) sums up an impossible task; indeed, Carpenter recalls that when she made the piece she wanted to embody “an intractable situation.” Pithy phrases are often her point of departure for works. She grew up in western Pennsylvania, where she acquired an interest in vernacular language and folk tales. In her sketchbook she begins a body of work by jotting down words. “I think of words as shapes—round, jagged,

or ruptured—that I put together,” she explains. “Then I see if I can get an object out of them.” As a sculptor, she is fascinated with how objects move in space and how they make contact with surfaces. Carpenter also enjoys the contradiction between solid matter and suggested movement and the tension between pushing and pulling. She learned ceramics at Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, where she worked with Rudolph Staffel and Robert Winokur. What she gained from Tyler was an interdisciplinary way of thinking about her art. Although she focuses on ceramics, she began her career as a painter, and color is still an important part of her sculpture. While she is making her forms, she thinks of color in terms of light and dark, only later deciding on the exact hue.

Lake Carpenter, Hepburn makes ambiguous objects that suggest tools, yet don't function in any practical sense. Their simplified shapes evoke ancient farming implements or primitive chess pieces, but none of the pieces have any specific reference. In fact, it is their ambiguity that is the source of their expressive power. After growing up in Manchester, England, Hepburn studied art at Camberwell College of Art and London University, then began practicing his art and exploring the idea he describes as “hybridization,” that single forms can carry several meanings. His awareness of farm tools was surely strengthened by living in rural New York while he taught at Alfred University. Since 1992 he has been Head of Ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where he has made sculptural still lifes that seem at once real and simulated. During this time, Hepburn has continued to make works that imply both found and fabricated objects whose original identity remains a mystery.

By contrast, Victor Spinski's objects are easy to read; paint brushes, half-full cans, and paper bags sit in a wooden box. Yet Spinski doesn't find these objects; he creates them all out of clay. Like Shaw, Spinski is a consummate master of visual illusions. While studying for his MFA at University of Indiana, Bloomington, in 1968, Spinski learned the technique of low-firing from a ceramic engineer Karl Martz, which gave Spinski freedom to develop in his own way. Although Spinski became accomplished in pottery, he recalled, “my soul was in sculpture.” While he focused on ceramics, he also took courses in jewelry making and photography. From jewelry he learned an exacting discipline and precise fabrication, but he found that, as a medium, clay was more challenging. He could continually reshape metal, but with clay, he had only one chance to get the form right. From photography, which he studied with philosopher and photographer Henry Holmes Smith, he learned “how color could have different zones of intensity.” Spinski identifies with the trompe l'oeil tradition of still-life painting, especially the work of Michael William Harnett. He also admires verist surrealism, in particular the works of Salvador Dali and René Magritte. Unlike these painters, however, Spinski thinks of creating arrangements of objects in three dimensions. Although the technical perfection of a work like *Misdirected Forward Pass* (1997) suggests that Spinski preconceived it, his artistic process is more complicated. “I think of one object and that leads to others,” he explains. When he first casts pieces, they are rough, then he grinds and sands them until he reaches the desired effect. To get a specific color he often fires a piece seven or eight times, building up color in multiple layers. He is always aware that each time he fires the work, he could lose it.

"Some people climb big rocks and others dive into deep water. For me firing clay is a form of risk taking. After a while you understand the process and can predict the outcome, but you are always tempting fate."

For Harris Deller and Joanne Hayakawa the vessel is a sculptural form. Deller's vessels are vases or cups, but these forms are less objects for use than surfaces for decoration. Deller, who received his MFA in ceramics from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, also studied painting there. His love of pattern is evident in all his works, which he covers with linear networks and divides into zones of lines, some parallel and others crossing. In one work from the series *17 Variations on Steel Shelves* (1999), curving lines ripple outward like sound waves, and the cup shape cuts through space like a submarine through water. The red-topped extension also resembles a periscope poised to scan the horizon. In *Blade Shape with Crosshatch* (1997), the forms suggests a knife in the process of slicing. Deller's sharply cut edges dramatically outline their eccentric geometric shapes, conveying a taut structural energy. Yet their crisp contours and black-and-white patterns have subtle irregularities, and these create visual reverberations.

Joanne Hayakawa's works also refer to structures, but her metaphors embrace both the body and architecture. She began her interest in clay as a student at University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studied ceramics from 1968 to 1972 with Michael Arntz and Sheldon Kaganoff. In 1974 she continued to develop her skills in the MFA program at University of Washington, where she worked with Patty Warashina, Howard Kottler, and Robert Sperry. Hayakawa recalls that each professor challenged her in a different way: "Patty made me think about surface and visual illusion; Howard encouraged me to make visual choices; and Bob showed me how to balance spontaneity and control." She developed later her sculptural works that refer to the human form. In *Throat #2* (1997), her tall, rectangular form suggests a torso, the small projecting shape a neck, and the round depression below it implies the throat. She mounts this stoneware torso on a rusted steel sheet and wraps it in rose branches. In *Cage* (1995), she again fashions a small neck form, but extends the structure to imply broad shoulders. At the same time, these shoulders look like wings of a building, the central steps suggest an entrance, and the neck becomes a tower. Thus the form embodies the idea that the body is a temple.

Ultimately, the artists in *Ceramic Annual 2000* reinterpret the old ceramic forms of the body and the vessel to produce works that have arresting visual power. They work in a variety of styles, from trompe l'oeil realism in Shaw and Spinski to semi-abstract in Brady and Hayakawa. These artists also use different strategies—from specific detail to generic forms—but they have in common an intense focus on selected formal elements that they imbue with meaning. Moreover, though these artists share a fascination with the body and vessel, they see these subjects not in isolation, but in connection with each other and with other themes, from nature to architecture. Indeed, these artists often meld layers of allusion in a single image. They have in common the goal of transforming clay matter—particles of fine earth suspended in water—into poetic objects.