

Dynamic Still Lives



by Susan H. Peterson

Reaching across my desk and around my typing and editing terminal, I picked up the phone and dialed the number I had been given for Nancy Selvin's studio in Berkeley, California. I waited expectantly for someone to answer the phone so I could make arrangements to interview Nancy for *Airbrush Digest*.

On the fourth ring, a voice came on the line and stated the number I had just dialed. With this greeting I realized that I had reached an answer-

ing machine rather than an actual person, and I experienced a twinge of annoyance. "Speak!" the voice continued. I opened my mouth to leave a message, but before I could say anything I heard a dog growl and then bark in obedience to the command. I listened intently, not sure what to expect next. "Now it's your turn," the voice instructed me. I smiled, my annoyance with answering machines allayed. I left my name, phone number, and a message and then hung up.

When I finally got to meet Nancy Selvin a few weeks later, she greeted me warmly at the door of her studio and immediately started showing me around. She talked enthusiastically about her work, her five-foot frame full of energy.

"I've been slipcasting all my new pieces," Nancy explained, speaking rapidly. She pointed to some plaster molds which were coated on the inside with clay slip (a liquefied clay suspension) and turned upside down

Of Form and Beauty



over pans to drain. "There was no way of hand-building that form, with all those tiny little facets. So these are all slipcast. And then I vary the castings a little so each one has its own kind of uniqueness."

I was still unwinding from having threaded my way through Berkeley, following the directions Nancy had given me. I had missed a turn and had almost found myself heading over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco but had managed to get turned around just in

time. Once I had found the right street, I had driven past Nancy's studio three times, looking in vain for the proper number on the door. I had finally decided that the studio *had* to be somewhere in the building I was next to, so I had parked the car and had started looking on foot. Someone in a neighboring studio had finally directed me around to the back of the building, through a corrugated metal door, and into a courtyard, where a faded sign on the door of an outbuild-

ing had assured me that I was in the right place.

In a few moments I had caught up with Nancy, both physically and psychologically, as she showed me how a three-part mold could be taken apart after the slip inside had set up, leaving an angular, multi-faceted bowl about five inches in diameter. She carefully scraped the surface of one of her pieces, demonstrating how she obliterates the seam lines created by the mold. She also showed me some

larger pieces that she intends to use as patterns for molds in the future so that she can work on a larger scale.

A number of various-sized vertical objects resembling angular bottles caught my eye. Nancy explained that they were other new forms which she is in the process of working into some still life compositions. Several such still life arrangements, including both miniature and full-size settings, were evident. In addition, a number of watercolor sketches of still lifes were taped to the wall, and more lay on the table. Curious, I asked, "What are those sketches for?"

"I guess you could call them exercises in loosening up," Nancy responded. "When I paint on clay, there's a commitment to the piece, because I've already created it and have put a lot of energy and thought into making that form—so I don't want to screw it up. But when I'm just dealing with paper, I can wad it up and throw it out. There isn't any commitment, and I can really loosen up and *think* about what I want to do with clay."

"What kind of clay do you use?" I inquired, peering into a bucket of gray clay slip.

"It's commercial. It's half ball and half talc commercial low-fire earthenware body. I just buy it locally," Nancy replied, firing her answer in her customary short bursts, like the dots and dashes of a telegraph message.

"Have you ever tried porcelain?"

"I've done a few of my pieces in porcelain, but I've never seen any reason to do more because the end result is the same. It's all white clay. And technically it's a little more difficult to use porcelain because there's more cracking and greater shrinkage. And it uses a lot more electricity. I tried using porcelain just to make sure that there wasn't any reason to."

After we had finished looking around the studio, Nancy offered to take me to her home, where we could sit down and talk more comfortably. She unlocked the left door of her 1967 Morris Minor, which she and her husband Steve had imported after a visit to England last year. I automatically moved around to the other side of the car to get in, but Nancy stopped me. "You'll have to get in on this side," she grinned. It was then that I noticed that the steering wheel was on the right rather than the left.

I slid into the passenger seat and looked unsuccessfully for a seatbelt to

make myself feel more secure. "Don't you have trouble seeing around trucks in front of you?" I asked a little nervously as we started out.

"No, this car's so little that that's never a problem," Nancy reassured me. "I just try to avoid the really steep hills around here because the car is getting too old to handle those."

I settled back to enjoy the ride, wondering just what "really steep hills" Nancy was referring to, since the route we were taking seemed plenty steep to me. "How did you get interested in ceramics?" I asked, changing the subject. The Morris Minor's engine had the roar of a World War II fighter plane, and I had to speak loudly to make myself heard.

"Well, Steve was in graduate school in Iowa. We had just gotten married, and here I was in Iowa. In the dead of winter. And I didn't have anything to do," Nancy reminisced. "I saw an ad in the paper that said, 'Five ceramic lessons for \$3.00.' So we drove out in the snow and found this woman who had a greenware business in her basement, where she sold greenware and taught you how to do underglazing on it. And you did this five times for \$3.00, and you were hooked. After five lessons I realized I wanted to do more of this. When we came back to California in 1966, I found out you could go to the University of California and do ceramics. And that's just what I did. From then on I've never done anything else."

Intrigued, I inquired further. "When did you start using an airbrush in your work?"

Nancy replied, "When I was in school there was an airbrush around. It was just one of the studio tools. Ron Nagle—he was one of my teachers—he always used an airbrush, and he showed us how to use one. But of course the one in the classroom never worked, and parts were always missing. So I wanted my own airbrush. I applied for a \$50 student grant and got it, and I went rushing down to the ceramics supply store and bought a Paasche airbrush. And I still have it."

"What role does the airbrush play in your work today?" I wanted to know.

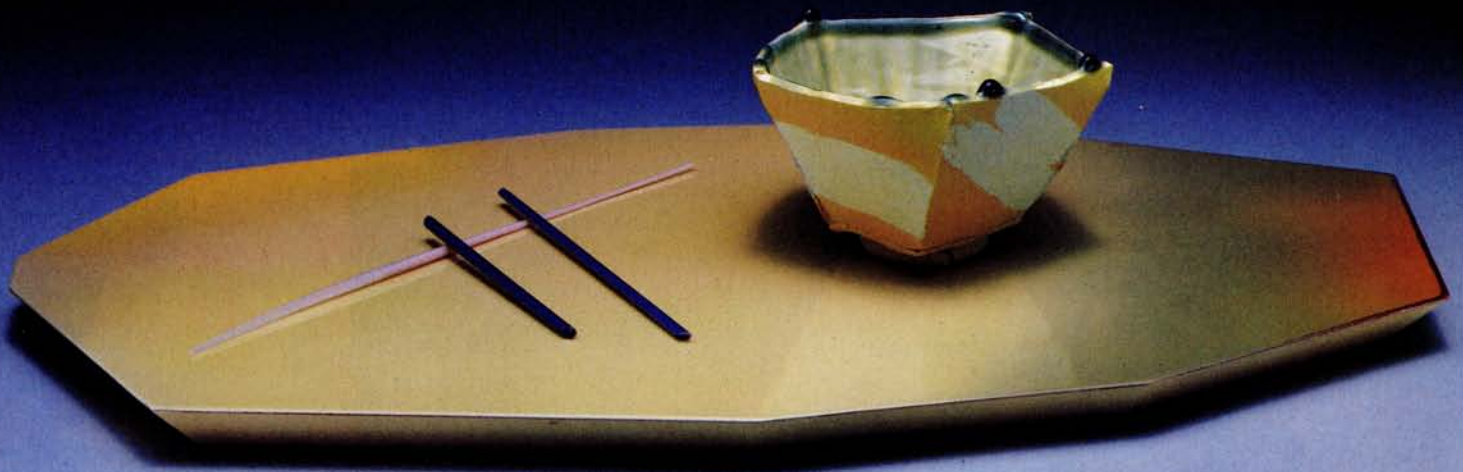
"It's what I paint with," Nancy said without hesitation. "It's my brush. I mean, there's the clay, the form, which is one of the most important aspects of my work. That's why I work in ceramics, so I can have my own form. Then there's the color. And the airbrush is how I handle color. I can't

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Airbrushed earthenware teabowl and colored glass rod on lacquered wood tray, 1982. 17" x 9" x 6."

Airbrushed earthenware teabowl and colored glass rods on lacquered wood tray, 1982. 15" x 12" x 5."

Airbrushed earthenware teabowl and colored glass rods on lacquered wood tray, 1981. 15" x 9" x 5."







1. Mixing clay slip.



2. Pouring slip into plaster mold.



3. Draining excess slip from mold.



4. Preparing to remove cast piece.



5. Trimming off excess clay.



6. Preparing mold to pour again.



7. Preparing mold.



8. Spraying underglaze.



9. Peeling off latex masking material.



10. Loading kiln.



11. Unloading teabowls after firing.



12. Holding unglazed teabowls.

imagine putting it on any other way.

"I never see my work just as clay," she continued. "It's clay with color. And the color is a painted color. It's not the color that comes from the ceramic process of dipping something in glaze and getting it out of the kiln and having this *ceramic* color. It's color that I have put in place. There isn't any element of chance in it. So in a sense, I see myself as a painter rather than as just a ceramist."

After about 10 minutes of very circuitous driving, we arrived at the Selvin residence. I was glad Nancy hadn't asked me to meet her at the house, because I doubted if I would ever have found the place on my own. As we walked in the door, the Selvins' two dogs, Sera and Mo, heralded our entrance with a lusty duet of howls and barks. Mo, I learned, was the one who had spoken to me earlier on the telephone, although Nancy said that she intended to get Sera's coonhound bay on tape too in the near future.

After exchanging pleasantries with the dogs, Nancy took me on a quick tour before we settled down. A number of her ceramic pieces were displayed on shelves in the living room, along with other memorabilia. Knickknack shelves in the hall and a pigeonholed cup rack in the dining room boasted an intriguing array of wares. "I love to collect junk," Nancy said almost apologetically as I paused to look. A plate rack mounted around the edge of the dining room was filled with a collection of airbrushed dinnerware formerly used in restaurants. The image on each plate had been masked using a lead foil masking technique common in California in the early '40s, Nancy explained. Numerous gray metal graniteware teakettles, the products of visits to second-hand stores, were positioned on top of the kitchen cabinets.

From the deck out back I could see just how steep a hill the house was on. We had entered on the second floor level after walking *down* a flight of steps from the street, but the back yard was still a good 20 feet below us. Spread out before us was the San Francisco Bay, and the Golden Gate Bridge was clearly visible in the distance. Although the sun was shining, the breeze was chilly, so we retreated to the dining room to continue our conversation.

"You showed me some of your new pieces in the studio," I remarked, while munching on a huge strawberry

from a bowl that Nancy had set between us. "What about your teabowls and lacquer trays with glass rods on them that you've done over the last few years? How do you make those?" I had seen photos of several of Nancy's Japanese-type teabowl/tray/glass rod pieces and had been captivated by the beauty of the arrangements.

Relaxed and comfortable in her home environment, Nancy brought three of her teabowls in from the living room to help her explain her techniques. "I make a whole body of forms in clay," she began. "I roll out thin slabs and cut the clay forms using a paper pattern and use a little slip to stick them together. Then that gets stiff, and I put the foot on. Then I pour slip around on the inside to give them a smooth inner lining. It takes a number of days to do those.

"I wanted a random quality and a looseness to the work, and I think that's why I moved towards doing five-sided shapes, where it's a very nonspecific shape but it's very much there. It's very much itself, and it's very much mine. But you don't say, 'Oh, that's a square.' Or, 'That's a triangle.' It isn't that kind of shape with a geometric identity.

"I start out with the constructed piece and I bisque fire it, just so I can handle it. Then I spray a ground color on it and fire that. And then I go back and mask patterns and spray additional color, firing between applications. All my colors are commercial Duncan underglaze. Duncan has a huge array of colors, and I just blend them with the airbrush as I work. For instance, it takes three or four different blues and two or three different greens to get the blue that you actually see. I never mix my pigments in the jars. I just mix them as I spray. I spray one color after another and let the colors interact on the piece. Mixing them the way I do, I can get really vivid colors. They start to really come alive. You can't get that richness with a brush. I use the airbrush for the layering of the color and for the control."

"What masking procedures do you use?" I inquired.

"The brush stroke forms that you see are all created using a latex masking material. It's called Mask 'N' Peel, made by Duncan. And I dribble it on or brush it on to give me a loose flowing image. I spray more underglaze color around or over the latex pattern, then peel away the latex, leaving the brush stroke form of the color be-

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Below: Watercolor and pencil sketch on paper.
Bottom: Faceted teabowl, 1984.



neath. Then I fire the piece again to fix the color.

"I mask the more angular areas with different widths of masking tape. Then sometimes I hold a piece of paper a little distance away from the piece and spray over that to get a real loose but a sprayed edge."

"Then how do you glaze your pieces?" I asked, trying to get a feel for the whole ceramic process.

"The color on the outside is unglazed. It's just fired underglaze color. The glaze is on the inside. And my glazing technique depends on the particular piece," Nancy explained. "On this piece," she continued, showing me one of her new multi-faceted bowls where the glaze was totally confined to the inside, "I just do the glazing last. But on this other piece," she noted, picking up a teabowl on which the glaze ran over the lip of the vessel like froth, "the glaze is done on the bisque piece, but it's left white. I don't put color on top of the glaze until I've finished with the color on the piece, because the color that I use for the glaze has to do with what I've done on the piece. So I mask out all the glaze with latex until I've finished with the color on the outside of the piece. I fire the underglaze color. Then I go back and mask out the body of the work, and then I spray underglaze color on the glaze and fire that for the final time. The temperature for firing the final glaze can vary from cone 015 to cone 012 depending on the type of glaze surface I want—matte, dry, or satin."

I probed further. "What kind of glaze do you use?"

"On some of my pieces I use a thick white glaze that I've developed myself, either a majolica glaze for good bright surface colors or what I call a lithium raku glaze, which can be used in both raku and other kinds of firings. These glazes run without thinning. I build up a real thick layer around the edge, and then I fire the piece to cone 04 so that the form of the glaze becomes a fixed thing.

"If I want a watercolor look—where the glaze thins out as it runs—I use a combination of commercial glazes and then fire the piece upside down so that the glaze forms little droplets on the rim. I just like that contrast. Historically, glazes always run towards the foot. This way the piece has its own punctuation."

"Do you always make your own glazes?" I inquired.

Nancy paused a moment to pick up one of her four cats, which had jumped up onto the table to check out the strawberries. "I make some of my glazes myself," she said with a smile, gently putting her pet back down on the floor, "or sometimes I take commercial glazes and mix them together until I get the results that I want. Commercial glazes straight from the jar have sort of a predictable quality that's not too interesting to me, so I don't deal with them that much. But this majolica glaze, for instance, is real nice because it picks up color so well. I make it up with a lot of tin—eight percent tin—so it is rich and thick and really picks up the color. That's why I like it."

"Why did you decide to put your teabowls on a tray?" I asked.

"I began using the trays because I wanted more of a still life," Nancy said. "I wanted more of a composition, where I would have the vertical ceramic piece, a horizontal element, and the colored plane of the tray."

"How do you make the trays?" I wanted to know.

"I start by making a whole body of forms, the way I do with the teabowls," Nancy explained. "Right now I'm making them out of Masonite, although I've used wood in the past. I make the patterns, and then a friend with a table saw cuts them out for me. Then I fill the trays with Du Pont Lacquer Putty and then a lacquer sealer so it's really not wood anymore. It's totally sealed up. I don't want the trays to look like clay. I want that highly lacquered surface. So I use wood rather than clay to make them.

"For lacquering I use an old Model 15 Binks spraygun. An airbrush is impractical here because of the size of the trays. And technically too, the lacquer dries very quickly, so you need to make big sweeping motions and get a lot of lacquer down fast. The little airbrush just isn't practical."

"What kind of lacquer do you use?"

"I use clear Maclac nitrocellulose lacquer from R.J. McGlennon Company in San Francisco and add my own pigments to it. The pigments come in squeeze tubes and are called E-Z Universal Tinting Colors, made by Artcraft Manufacturing in Cleveland, Ohio. They come in a real exciting range of colors, and then I can mix them all too. I build up seven to

10 layers of lacquer to create the final effect that you see."

"What made you think about using glass rods with your teabowls and trays?" I inquired.

"I wanted a strong linear element, and I needed something with good color," Nancy replied. "I didn't want wood. And a clay object that long is too fragile. Glass is fairly strong that way, and some of my neighbors are glassblowers, so I just started going through their scrap and found what I wanted."

Interested in the evolution of Nancy's work, I asked, "Why have you changed now to making these multi-faceted slipcast teabowls?"

"The facet was just a nice move away from a footed bowl and yet still gives a piece that's sitting upright. It says that it's a bowl form, but it doesn't have the foot, and I don't have to deal with it being always in one position.

"I think all my still lifes are like this," Nancy stated reflectively, turning a piece in her hand. "They're not fixed in space. You can move them any way you want. And when you move the pieces the colors change, the light changes, the direction of the shadow changes. That *interplay* is part of the piece."

The afternoon sun was starting to descend over the Bay, and I prepared to leave. Nancy drove me back to where I had parked my car, stopping on the way to pick up her six-year-old daughter Liz at a friend's house. When we reached the studio, I said goodbye and promised to try to come back for another visit the next time I was in the area. As I drove off, I could see Liz demonstrating a new jump rope routine for her mother on the sidewalk.

It was rush hour, and as I inched out into the inevitable traffic jam on the freeway, I reflected on the afternoon with pleasure. Nancy Selvin's life, I thought, was very much like her ceramic still lifes. Her pieces were vibrant and dynamic, filled with form and beauty. Nancy's life too was filled with dynamism, as well as a gracious form and beauty. I was glad I'd had a chance to get to know her. ■

