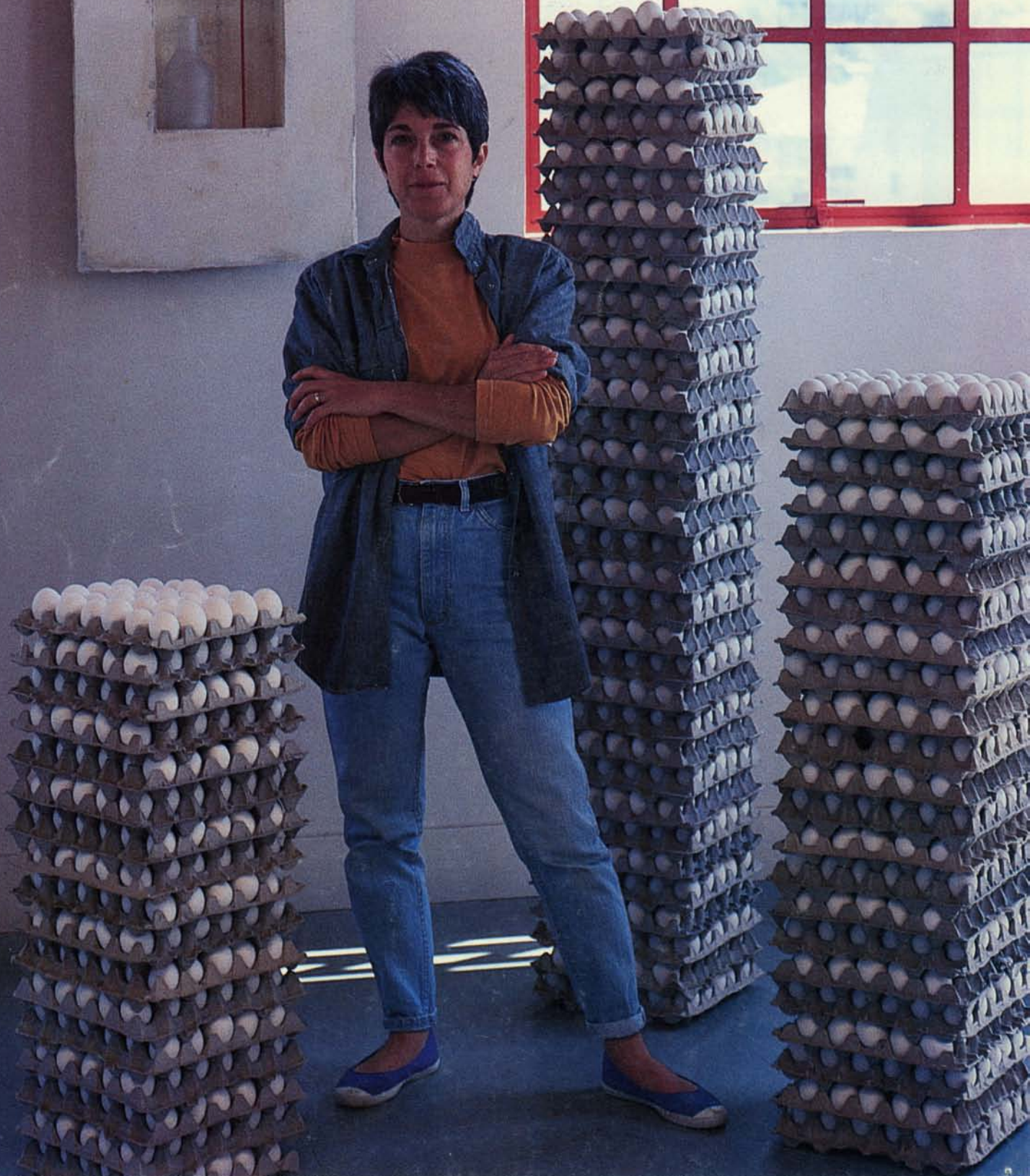
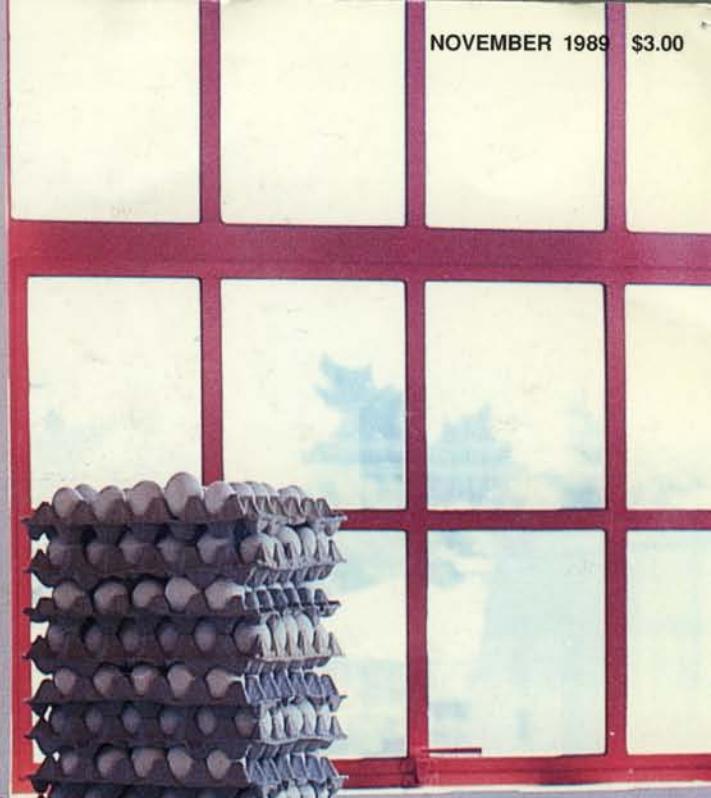


# Ceramics

MONTHLY





EACH of my still lifes is an unknown, a first down on a field of indeterminate length, in a game played with no rules. My ideas come from sources as diverse as Walker Evans, Man Ray, Japanese pottery, enameled graniteware and Joan Didion, to the architecture and industrial landscape of Oakland, California.

I build slowly, working simultaneously on 10 to 12 pieces in various stages of completion. Struggling with form and its relationship to space, I follow my intuition, trying to let ideas flow through that "unconscious hand." As the slip-cast units pile up, I start assembling architectural spaces, and the work begins to come together. Sometimes it's the other way around. Recently I've been exploring room-size, site-specific, installation sculpture. Although these pieces are more personal, more narrative, the focus is on distilling domestic interiors.

Carefully structured cast forms (from five- or six-piece molds) are airbrushed with underglazes, detailed with brushwork and reairbrushed. The architectural remnants, three-dimensional sketches that give context to the ceramic compositions, are made of ordinary building supplies: dry-wall, wood, mudding compound, chinks, paints and Varathane. I have a good time at the building suppliers where the "guys," intrigued by my odd list of materials, invariably ask "What are you planning to build?" My usual response is: "Don't ask; you don't want to know."

Retaining only the bare essentials, I use clay to abstract traditional form. Every stroke counts. Context is pared to the essence, process reveals and the material has a voice. Recently, I returned to raku for some of the pieces, allowing the randomness of color and surface to capture the ease of the unfinished. Often the residue of process directs how you experience the work. Rather than make decisions, I look for answers to try, as Didion says, "to make the invisible visible."

I stepped into the clay world during the winter of 1966. A supermarket circular thrown on the doorstep of our over-the-garage apartment in Ames, Iowa, announced five

ceramics lessons for \$3. Despite my husband's disbelief at five anything for \$3, two days later, across town in Mrs. Massey's basement, I began brushing underglaze on pre-cast wares. It worried the women painting pink roses and nodding daffodils to see me brush my low-fire dinnerware walnut brown as the background for dotted imagery based on Australian aboriginal drawings. At the Storey County Fair, in Mrs. Massey's booth next to the model steam engines, my row of darkly painted plates stood out.

That spring, my husband and I returned to the West Coast. After a year in adult education ceramics classes, going three evenings a week, I enrolled in a design program at the University of California, Berkeley. Coming of age artistically, I was on kind of a tailspin from the effects of abstract expressionism. The energy of Peter Voulkos, Jim Melchert, Ron Nagle and Patrick Siler electrified the "pot shop," where unrestricted hours and unlimited clay further charged us. Upstairs, John Lewis, Dick Marquis and other now renowned glassblowers were "all nighters" in Marvin Lipofsky's glass shop. Above them, on the third floor, Gyongy Laky and Nance O'Banion worked with Ed Rossbach to revolutionize fiber art. A pretty heady atmosphere for the brutal architecture of U.C.'s new Wurster Hall. I was weaned on the subtle shows of Harold Paris's cast silicon "Soul Series" at Quay Gallery and Nagle's cups in vacuum formed cases at the Dilexi.

After completing graduate school, we moved to upstate New York and, while living in an 18th-century farmhouse, experienced a winter no Californian has ever dreamed about: 111 inches of snow complemented by 3-foot icicles hanging from the upstairs window ledges. Teaching in the art department at the State University of New York, Albany, brought about severe culture shock. My West Coast preference for asymmetry and "thick is better" appalled faculty and students raised on perfectly centered, thin, stoneware cylinders. This was confounded by my refusal to spend much time in the glaze room, preferring "bought" jars of glazes, colorants and stains. From my per-

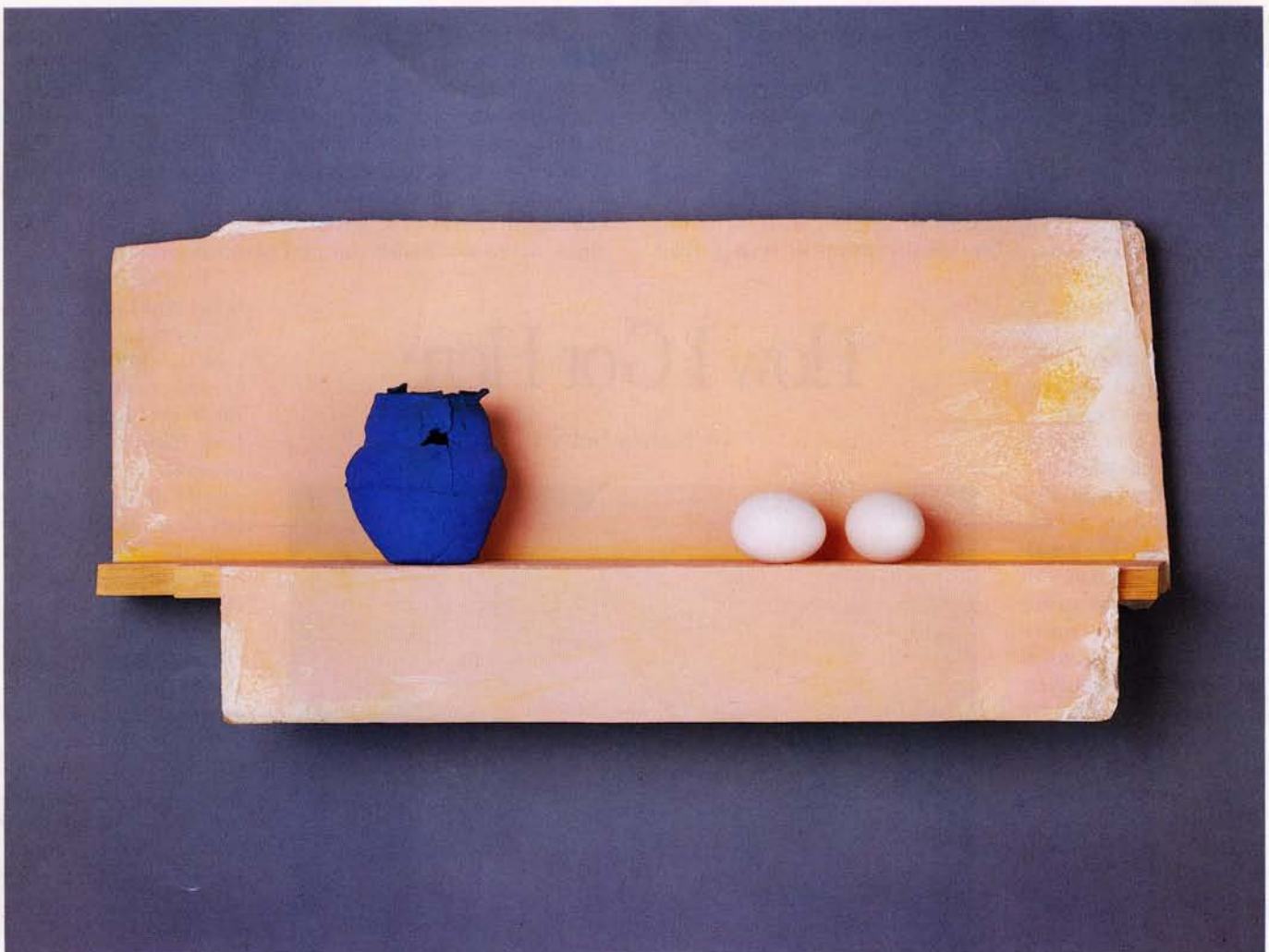
## How I Got Here

by Nancy Selvin



*Nancy Selvin outside her corrugated "warehouse" (constructed from a mixture of new and salvaged building materials)—now a model for inexpensive studio space in West Berkeley, California.*





*"Still Life with Blue Pot," approximately 2 feet in length, slip-cast, air-brushed vessel and cast ceramic eggs, on mixed-media shelf.*

spective, spoiled by the stockpile at a Berkeley ceramics supplier, the East Coast experience meant scrounging through "greenware" shops collecting tiny vials of china paint and ordering clay from the West Coast.

Never relinquishing this off-center approach to my teaching, I nevertheless developed a warm mentor relationship with the late Fran Simches. To emphasize our differences, we had East/West throw offs. My casual attitude prompted Fran into a series of demos where she pulled enormous, meticulously centered cylinders; then with a flourish, rolled up her sleeves and punched out the clay with her fist.

In 1973, I was back in Berkeley teaching at nearby Laney Community College. Raw, cold warehouses and rising rents forced numerous studio changes. Friends and I stacked doors on uncountable numbers of downdraft kilns and carted around loads of shelving and old fume hoods. My work continued to focus on low-fire form and color,

and I cast a series of delicate, papery wall sketches, which were perceived as more trompe l'oeil than was my intent.

Decisions to buy a house, adopt numerous dogs and cats, collect hundreds of pieces of restaurant china are all sidebars to the main event in 1977, the birth of my daughter Liz. Trying to mix parenting with studio and teaching responsibilities is hectic. Today, as Liz approaches junior high, my life moves more toward 75% work and 25% parenting, rather than vice versa. As long as I avoid cooking, cleaning or laundry, everything is possible. It wasn't until two years after Liz's arrival and a month's stay in Japan that I was able to sort out what I wanted from my work. While handbuilding a series of earthenware teabowls, I tried to develop the formal, contextual relationships that surround this symbolic ceramic form.

By 1980 I had begun the first in a series of teabowls on lacquered trays, breaking through to the concept of still life: assembling my work in com-

position to capture a sense of place. These attenuated elements, abstractions of ceramics and culture, are annotated by brushstroke and seemingly casual color approach. The spare compositions of line, volume and plane established the poetic relationship I had been looking for. The clay object was no longer paramount; material, context and structure emerged. This way of working, combining elements to build a "picture," put me back in touch with painting and photography.

The still-life constructions were also a first step into mixed media. Working with lacquer on wood required research and tests, and I encountered new health risks. Although I rarely do rigorous testing, I keep a log, a written record of process, details and color mix.

Composing in this manner, combining clay with other materials, abandoning the isolated vessel form, opened new pathways. Each arrangement was a step, no matter how small, in a new direction. This work convinced



RIGHT Nancy Selvin in her studio; all of the clay elements for her "still life" sculptures are cast, airbrushed with underglazes, then low-fired in oxidation or raku. She works simultaneously on 10 to 12 pieces in various stages of completion.

FAR RIGHT "Still Life with Three Green Bottles," approximately 3 feet in height, mixed-media shelf with airbrushed "bottles."

BELOW "Still Life with Three Raku Bottles," approximately 3 feet in height.



PHOTOS: CHARLES FRIZZELL, STEVE SELVIN





me that how I got there was just as important as what I had when I arrived. It is not the product which sustains me, but the act of working. The process educates, gives insight and creates vision. I was just beginning to move away from the horizontal plane—to build some still lifes on the wall, to bring a greater sense of immediacy to the work—when we decided to spend a year in England.

Covering our urban California style with heavy woolens, we spent the year in the New Forest, ancient hunting ground of British royalty. It took only the sight of a pony halfway inside a bakery reaching for a scone to convince us we had found a new life. Our daily routine took us down a narrow lane to the fishmongers and across the “splash” carrying a string bag to the greengrocers. Donkeys shared the village common, waiting near the schoolyard for handouts, while we established ourselves at the Red Lion and the Rose and Crown. British rail was a great way to get around. We researched a hand-made brick factory in Sudbury, and photographed the tin mines and clay deposits of Cornwall. The stone shafts of abandoned mines seem to punctu-

ate the landscape like wine bottles on a tabletop. Wandering among the unused bottle kilns of Stoke-on-Trent, I felt like Alice in a giant still life.

Back at my Berkeley studio, I began to translate these images. A year later, I was still struggling with form, working with wood, Plexiglas and paint, but there were major hurdles I couldn't quite jump. As I continued to experiment with materials, most of the work went into the dumpster. Meanwhile, the industrial neighborhood around my studio became a retail development. I had to relocate.

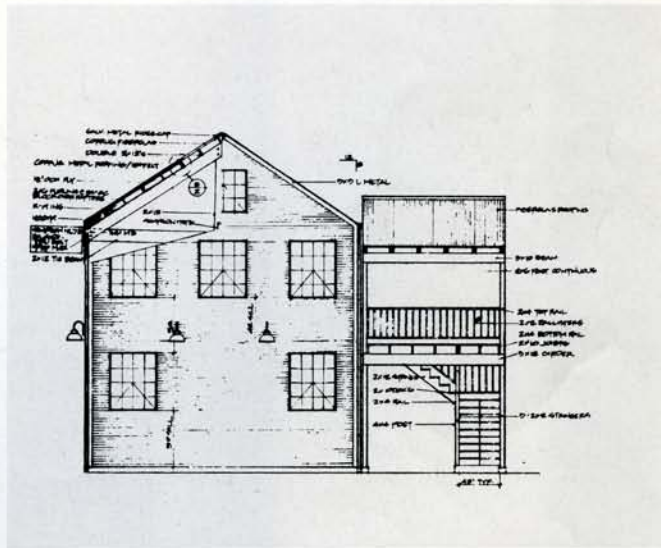
I decided to build my own place on a small lot in West Berkeley, an undertaking which brought together a lot of old friends in a year-long architectural collaboration. Streamers trailing from the studio banner highlight this collective effort. Each ribbon bears the signature of a collaborator whose time, effort and energy went into the project, even down to the paw print of my black-and-tan hound dog.

Limited only by cost and zoning regulations, the 30×24-foot studio of 2×4s, corrugated metal, electrical wiring, aluminum sash and tons of drywall took on a life of its own. As build-

ing progressed, I continued my ceramic constructions, completing a composition with cobalt blue-green bottles on a red window. When the time came to select the real enameled windows for the new building, “Red Window” became an appropriate prototype.

Finished, the corrugated “warehouse” with rose red windows is an unintentional public art work. Artists, architects and builders visit constantly. Larger, more ambitious knockoffs are going up around me. The understated, carefully crafted, bare bones approach to design and materials became a community model for inexpensive studio construction.

Unloading and unpacking years of accumulated plaster molds, boxes of decals and mountains of underglaze materials, I felt I had achieved a degree of freedom, a place to work, to explore unhindered by pressure from the outside world. The construction process, the collaboration, generates new work, new scale. Again, the process educates, gives direction. I am now beginning to make models and sketch proposals for room-size installations, still lifes involving full-scale spaces, conceptualizations of places “once known.” ▲



*Schematic of 1500-square-foot studio, built from 2x4s, salvaged beams and exterior lighting fixtures, corrugated metal, aluminum sash and tons of drywall.*

*LEFT “Teapot with Corner Space,” low-fire clay with mixed media, approximately 3 feet in height, by Nancy Selvin, Berkeley, California. Working a full-time studio career isn’t easy, but “my life moves more toward 75% work and 25% parenting, rather than vice versa.”*