

SCULPTURAL
VESSELS



BILL KRÉMER

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Design and Photography by Eric Nisly

University of Notre Dame




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Introduction

The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, takes great pleasure in displaying Prof. William Kremer's ceramic sculptural vessels. I invited Bill to exhibit his sculptures because of my great admiration both for his work and for the very ambitious way that he has advanced the creation and collection of ceramics at the University of Notre Dame.

Most notable was his construction of the ND *anagama* wood-fire kiln in 1998 and 1999. The kiln was the catalyst for a number of important developments, the principal one being Peter Voukos's 2001 residency at ND, during which he created a number of ceramic sculptures that were subsequently fired in the *anagama* kiln. The major work created during that visit, *Notre Dame, 2001*, was acquired by the Snite Museum of Art through the generosity of ND alum Mr. John C. Rudolf '70 and is proudly displayed in the Museum. Voukos first threw traditional ceramic forms, such as plates and bowls, on a potter's wheel, then took these vessels apart and reassembled them. In doing so, he challenged the traditional belief that ceramic objects should have a function, such as food storage or service, and that they should fulfill this function with highly decorated, refined forms. Voukos's interest in revealing the artist's labor is made evident by the impressions left by his hands and fingertips. The sculpture also shows the chemical transformation that occurred during its firing in the ND *anagama* wood kiln. Ash carried by the draft of the fire landed on the surface, where it melted to form the glaze—greenish where the ash settled most heavily, reddish where it did not alight. The Museum also acquired two Voukos platters created during his ND sojourn—one by purchase, the second as a gift of the artist.

Similarly, Paul Soldner and Don Reitz also created artworks that were fired in the *anagama* kiln during ND residencies, some of which were added to the permanent collection of the Snite Museum of Art.

It should be noted that firing the ND *anagama* kiln requires constant, round-the-clock attention for a number of grueling days—five days to fire plus seven days to cool. Thus, the firings become events in themselves; “happenings” that provide invaluable opportunities for students to learn the art and science of wood-fired ceramics, as well as invaluable opportunities for them to socialize with artists, faculty and other students.

In addition to this engagement with national peers and students, Bill steadfastly continues to make pots, to explore wheel-thrown sculptural vessels, to compose and perform music and to very successfully race sailboats. In these many ways, Bill fully embraces and models the life of an artist inspired by nature. I thank him for the many ways in which he has advanced the creation, display and study of ceramics through these labors, beginning with establishing the ceramics program at Notre Dame, initially in the old Field House.

I am most grateful for the friendship that he has extended to the Museum and to me.

I also thank Snite Museum of Art Photographer and Digital Archivist Eric Nisly not only for preparing the photographs utilized in this catalog, but also for making its design an assignment for his independent study in graphic design class here at the University of Notre Dame. Similarly, the Museum's exhibition team oversaw all installation logistics: Associate Director Ann Knoll, Preparator Greg Denby, Exhibition Designer John Phegley, and Exhibition Coordinator Ramiro Rodriguez.

The exhibition and catalog are generously funded, in part, by the Humana Foundation Endowment for American Art.

Charles R. Loving
Director and Curator, George Rickey Sculpture Archive





Contributing

I have long admired the ceramic work of Prof. William Kremer and the excellent ceramics program that he has built at the University of Notre Dame. Professor Kremer's Exhibition is an outstanding body of work highlighting both his mastery of the material and his understanding of form. His sculptures, often reminiscent of classical vessels and the human figure, possess a graceful elegance and nobility of presence. Kremer's wide range of personal interests, such as art, music, teaching and sailing, all seem to be the impetus for these pieces. His approach to the clay is direct, knowledgeable and passionate. Of particular note is his ability to embody his sculptural vessels with a painterly quality, emphasizing grace and fluidity of line that only comes with years of experience and hard work. The Vessels are both Sculpture and Painting, each working to support the other. This powerful exhibition is a fitting testimony to his life and work, contributing a mature offering to the contemporary Ceramic Art movement.

Randall Schmidt
Professor Emeritus
School of Art
Herberger College of Fine Art
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

Professor Schmidt taught ceramics at Arizona State University for 38 years, where he, along with his colleagues, built a nationally recognized ceramics graduate program.

SCULPTURAL
BILL KREMER VESSELS





ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I describe my work as sculptural ceramic vessels. The forms relate to abstractions of both traditional pottery and the human figure. The scale of the individual pieces coincides with human scale and relates to the character and posture of a standing figure. Because of the common scale to a viewer, an interactive perception of the work takes place. Pottery is described in terms that correspond to the human figure, such as lip, neck, shoulder, belly, waist and foot, which are used to define the parts of a vase.

The sculptures are vessel forms that open to an interior space. Access into the upper form reveals the structural skin of the object. Thicker and thinner gives variation and vitality to the experience of the form. With the bowl, the inside is the primary shape—even though it is defined by the inside and outside forms, which are opposite yet parallel, when defined by line. The vase is defined by the outside form, defined by its opposite inside shape. Any variation to either line or thickness of the lip changes the experience of the vessel.

I have been working with clay since 1965, and the time is long since past to ask why. As many efforts as I have made to use materials other than clay, I have always returned to the ceramic medium, and now feel that there is a magic to the motivation. Never having been able to resolve the art/craft debate in my own mind, I have chosen to follow two paths.

One has been the art sculptural vessel, represented in this exhibition, and the other has been to continue the craft of tableware and designer wheel-thrown pottery. My wheel-thrown pots inform the sculptural vessels, and the sculpture establishes a new art form. I can recall first experiences from my interaction with pottery... it was so much more difficult than I had expected, and I took it as a challenge to learn the craft. Even though I had only beginner's results, the motivation to continue was a wonderful feeling. In my current studio work, as well as with my teaching, I have found my way back to that motivation. It is for me the meaning, the reward and the vision.

The formed stiff clay sculptural/vessel forms are painted with white and black slip. The structural material of the work is stoneware clay, ranging from a brown to gray when fired. Traditional painting techniques are used to enhance the leather-hard clay forms. First, a thick white slip covers, with the rhythm of brush strokes, the entire clay surface, activating it and giving the static, press cast surface some life. Using very large and small brushes, black slip is painted on to make linear lines and strokes that both coincide with, and counter, the sculptural form. Unlike painting on canvas, the soft clay surface allows for lines and incisions to be etched into the clay. A harmonic juxtaposition is created when the structural form is combined with linear painted brush marks.

Using colored slips on the sculptures is done with the same materials and tools used in the age-old tradition of pottery craft. The leather-hard platter is given a generous brush load of white porcelain slip to prepare the surface for a contrasting color. The texture may be circular, reflecting the wheel, or diagonal, opposing the circular perimeter. When the brush of black slip is stroked across the concave round format, the black line accents the concave surface and suggests a continuation beyond the perimeter of the platter.

In addition to the composition of my work, a unique aspect is the process that makes the work. For forty years I have experimented with various methods for casting clay into plaster molds. The molds are derived from a sketch that I feel has vitality and strength and will be a good format to pursue by enhancing the scale and fabricating a mold. I am intrigued by how all three-dimensional forms are defined by the silhouette lines that define shape. The slightest change in a defining contour line will change the character of the form. The definitive lines that will define

a form are transformed into a plaster mold that becomes the vehicle for relatively large-scale ceramic works to be created directly. The resulting clay shapes can be aggressively altered and added to. When clay is being pressed into a mold, it relates to a canvas being stretched for a painting.

And, like pottery and painting – not just one work is being created. Numerous works stand around the studio in various states of finish, of potential, or the lack of it. What does a good one look like is always the question. One piece informs another, with all the works being interactive. Like pots in the pottery studio, a wonderful energy is felt from the numerous pots that fill the shelves, creating an environment of production. There is a sense of power in my being able to make these things (most can't), and many forms that stand out in this context represent vitality.

Attempting to isolate just one pot to represent the entire group never works, and so it is with my platoon of vessel/figures. Certainly better soldiers than a tableware pot, when given a chance to hold down a corner of a room, but still—one image can never represent the greater potential that emanates from the group in the studio setting.

I believe that this exhibition of ceramic sculptural vessels represents a unique and original contribution from a forty-year career. The work is based on a continuous evolution of process and experimentation, with influences by drawing, painting, pottery and the figure, in order to reach a solid balance between idea, material and process. One enhances the other to culminate in a vision for continued work.

Bill Kremer, Professor
Art, Art History, and Design
University of Notre Dame



In the Making: The Mold Process

1. The original thumbnail sketch depicts the shape and definition of the anticipated ceramic sculpture that will be defined by a negative plaster mold.



2. The sketch is measured for height width and defining proportions using millimeters.



3. Dimensions of the drawing are multiplied by a factor to determine the final height of the mold.



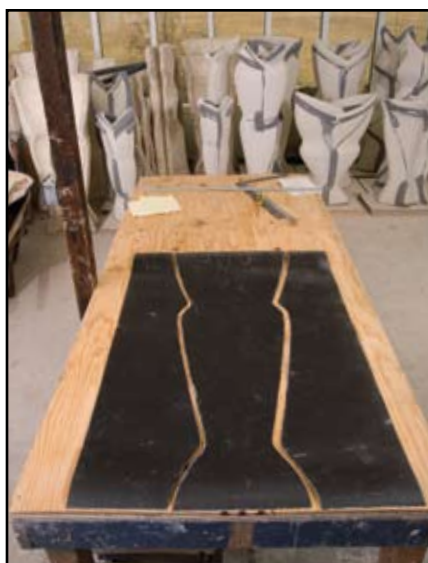
4. The multiplied measurements are plotted onto a sheet of black roofing paper.



5. The expanded drawing is cut out of the roofing paper.



6. This image shows the final cutout representing the positive form, framed by the negative cut outs that will relate to the mold form.



7. The positive silhouette is attached upright to see what the actual perspective of the form will be from a distance. Sometimes the drawing is adjusted to accomplish a better shape.





8. The final silhouette is traced onto a plywood panel.



9. The traced line is cut with a skill saw.



10. Image shows the final silhouette juxtaposed with the original thumbnail sketch.



11. The cutout plywood, framed with the negative shapes representing the mold.



12. Plywood silhouette is attached flat to a transport board, mounted on a table, with a vertical contoured spine form attached to the half-shape of the bottom form jig assembly.



13. All parts are attached and screwed to make a rigid stable jig.

14. Image represents a vertical contour spine that coordinates with the silhouette form.



15. The bottom portion of the jig, with the addition of a concave contour draw template.



16. The top portion of the jig, with the addition of the top contour draw template.

17. Image represents five additional draw templates that are required to define the combined shape that are made with the combination line definitions, made by the silhouette form, combined with the vertical spine.



18. Plastic clay is used to make a positive image that will be articulated by the shape draws that are guided by the silhouette and spine contour jigs.





19. (A&B) Seven plywood draw templates are combined to reveal the positive form that is dictated by the jig guides.

20. A plaster mold is made to take the negative half of the final clay positive. The mold is made using Number 1 molding plaster in three layers of application. Powdered plaster is mixed with water to form a pourable liquid. Plaster forms into a hard solid within twenty minutes and goes through progressive stages of viscosity until becoming solid. The first layer of the mold defines the detail of the prototype image that is formed by the clay. A second layer is formed with burlap dipped in liquid plaster to form a structural thickness. The third layer builds up thickness to two inches on the edges, forming a frame structure with the majority of the surface area being no more than an inch $\frac{1}{2}$, to eliminate weight.



21. Image reveals the relationship of the plaster mold profile to the plywood top jig. A 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ outside dam on the left side of the image defines a consistent shape definition to the molds, insuring a uniform mating when two halves are joined. Both sides share the same profile line.

22. The negative plaster mold is taken from the clay and plywood prototype and cleaned with water and edges are smoothed and chamfered for use with clay.



23. The two halves of the mold are dampened with a wet sponge to eliminate absorption by the plaster.

24. (A & B) Stoneware clay lumps are kneaded and extended on the canvas table to form a flat rectangle.



25. A rolling pin is used to extend the rectangular clay shape into a 5/8" slab.



26. The flexible soft slabs are levitated into the open mold.





27. Slabs are slapped into the form for inch-by-inch definition with the mold

28. Additional slabs are applied with seams compressed to make a contiguous clay thickness.



29. The entire form is covered and compressed.

30. Curved rollers give a smooth finish to the interior form.



31. The bottom halves are coiled to form a bottom floor and structure.

32. Side seams are coiled on all four seams that will be mated to form the whole vessel.



33. The coils are smoothed and scored to form a joint with the second half of the form.



34. The mold has been prepared for forming a vertical connection with the second half.

35. The leather hard form that is released from the mold can be altered and expanded using a coil building method to redefine the composition. Effort is made to enhance the lip edge, bringing a resolution to the volume and wall surface of the sculpture. The skin of the form becomes a three-dimensional relief with the character of a large wet gray drawing. Every line makes a difference in a contextualized composition.





36. White porcelain slip is painted onto the damp stoneware clay, creating an active surface with energy that reflects the action of the brush strokes.

37. Black slip is used as a contrasting gestural line, contrasting against the white slip background.



38. The painted brush strokes coincide with the sculpture contour to form a gestural vitality. Both form and line combine into a singular experience.

39. After the dark slip has been applied, the piece is signed using a pencil that is pressed into the soft clay. The damp clay sculpture is then placed into a plastic drying box for eight weeks before it is dry enough to fire.



40. The artist standing with a group of dry clay sculptural vessels. Because the thirty-foot long anagama kiln has such a large volume, twenty sculptures are made in preparation for a firing.





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
50" x 23" x 14"





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
57" x 12" x 9"



Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
52" x 21" x 12"







Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
55" x 20" x 13"





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
56" x 23" x 12"



Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
54" x 12" x 8"







Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
43" x 21" x 10"





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
40" x 30" x 12"



Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
56" x 19" x 23"







Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
56" x 21" x 15"





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
49" x 14" x 12"



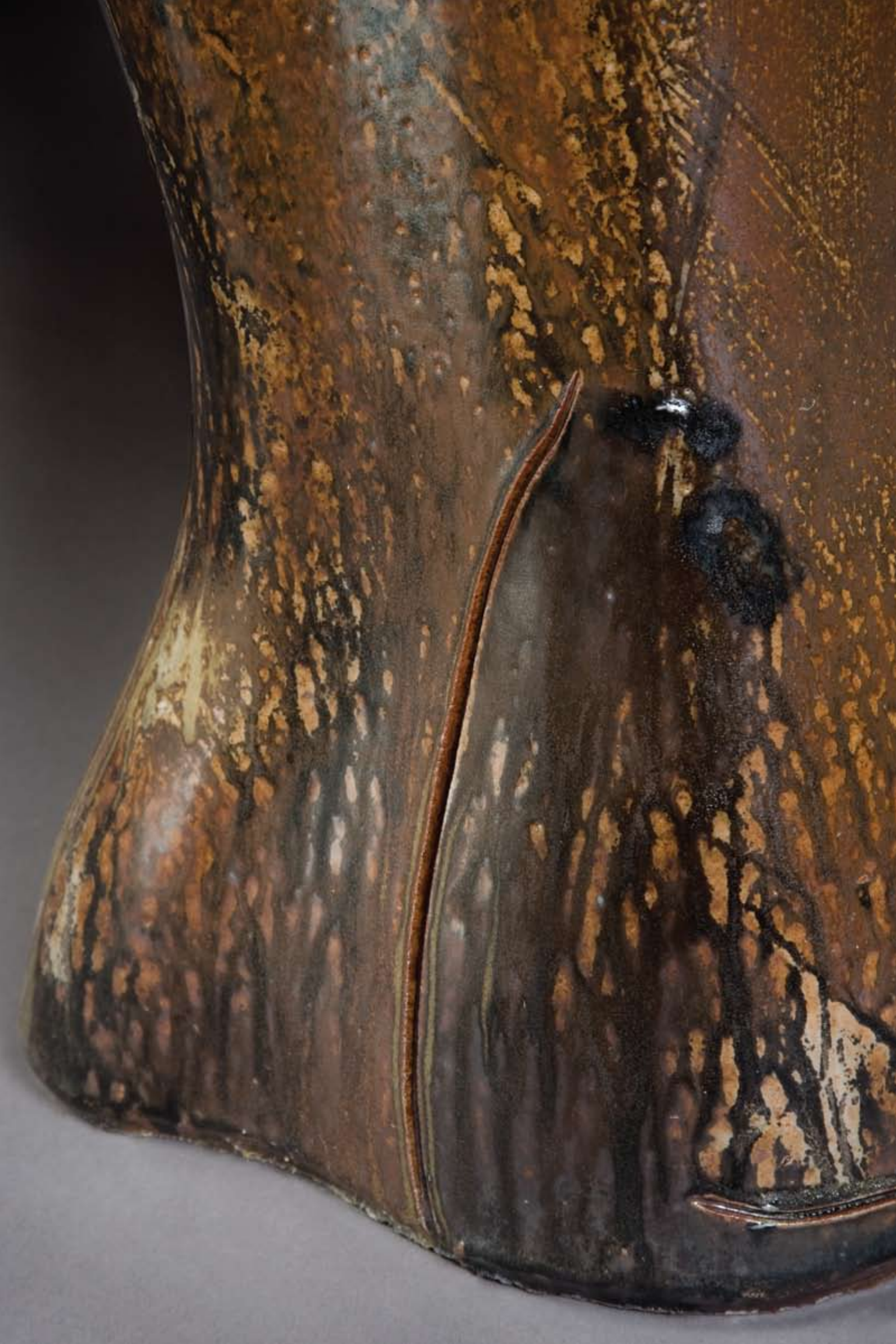
Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
42" x 22" x 21"







Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
39" x 13" x 10"





Sculptural Vessel
High Temperature Stoneware
39" x 27" x 11"

RETROSPECTIVE

As an undergraduate student, I was equally motivated by painting as I was pottery. My paintings were abstracted figure motifs and I was fascinated by the way a human figure could be defined by linear line as well as positive and negative shape. To make a single brush mark and to then stand back would result in a different read. Every mark would make a difference. I still remember the day when our painting professor requested the attention of our advanced figure painting class. He proceeded to chastise us for having nothing to express in our paintings. How could we, he said, none of us had been outside Superior, Wisconsin. We had no life experience and hadn't read enough. What did we think we were doing? In my mind I couldn't discount his criticism, but I still liked painting and continued on with the understanding that it wasn't about me, it was about painting.

When it was time to apply for graduate school, I was disappointed to realize on the application that one had to apply for a specific medium, (painting, ceramics, sculpture), and so I chose ceramics, thinking that I didn't have the intellect to be a painter.

In graduate school, at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1969, I began my career making functional pots. It didn't take long for me to realize that in the academic ceramic world there had been a change in the weather. Pottery was out of favor and the expectation is that graduate students would use clay in ways that would be more akin to the excitement of main stream art that was going through successive movements of funk, pop, hard-edge and conceptualism. The names of the craft medium programs changed from weaving to fibers, jewelry making to art metals, and pottery was now ceramics. The art/craft exhibition "Objects USA," was at the Milwaukee Art Museum, representing the new wave of the new craft, with only a few token pots represented.



After seeing this exhibition, I accepted the challenge and went back to the studio to make sculptural clay forms. I used the wheel, because I knew how to use it as a tool, and made some awkward looking bent clay compositions. The logic was that I could always make pots at a later date. As physics has it, hollow clay tubes don't bend very well. They buckle, but I was stubborn and resisted giving up my hard fought for throwing skills on the potters wheel.



I was feeling somewhat frightened with my studio struggle and was in a dedicated search for some method

and idea for a direction. At the time, the professor of ceramics required the graduate students to either pay for our work by the cubic inch, that would included firing costs, or, as we convinced him, we would buy our



own clay at the Milwaukee refractorys and materials dealer and gas would be free. One day on a trip for clay, I was overwhelmed by hundreds of bent ceramic forms. They were salt-fired drain pipes in numerous diameters and

configurations, stacked on wooden shipping pallets. This was my answer! I purchased three of the elbows and brought them back to the graduate ceramic studio. I made a plaster cast of each bend, and now I could make bent tubular sculptures without the wheel. The potters wheel would allow me to make transitional flanges and base forms. Even though I soon made my own shapes for molds, this was the beginning for five years of ceramic tubular sculpture.

At my first teaching position at Nicholls State University, Thibodaux Louisiana, (1971-1973) I had two ceramic courses and one 3D design class using a wood shop. With a deadline for a show in the university gallery, and a humidity level that would not allow my clay forms to dry, I came up with an idea to combine wooden racks to hold my already fired tubular shapes. This idea extended to exchanging the clay for canvas and a few experiments were done with wooden strips that echoed the canvas.

In 1973, I was hired by the University of Notre Dame, with a one-year contract, to set up a ceramic program in the Old Field House site. The understanding, based



on my portfolio, was that it would be primarily a sculpture program. After a few weeks of class, my pioneer students asked if they would be able

to make pots. For the success of survival I made five wheels. After all, pottery making had been my original inspiration.

I continued developing mold making techniques and became absorbed with the mold process as an end onto itself.



After two years at Notre Dame, pottery making continued to grow. We had increasing undergraduates and graduate students taking advantage of the large romantic interior of the field house. As a young faculty member, I realized that my pottery making ability was minimal and that I should develop my skills to be worthy as a university teacher. In addition, Bernard Leach had directed a film



that identifies the form as an experience onto itself. In addition, this new work would be supported and complimented by linear wooden frames and stands that would be united with the ceramic curve as well as complimenting painted gestural line.

The new work was successful for exhibitions and galleries. An article about the work was published in "Ceramics Monthly" magazine and the work was included in the Chicago "New Art Forms Exhibitions." The question became, what is this work? It's not painting, or sculpture, it's not pottery (no openings), even though they are hollow, and because of the wooden additions they were not pure ceramic. They were art objects without a context.



about Hamada, proclaimed as a national treasure in Japan, entitled, "The Art of the Potter." I had never lost my feeling for pottery and when I saw this film I was

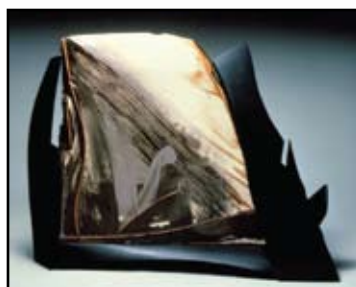


inspired to return to the art of the potter. Maybe, as in the East, pottery was the highest art form, but few, like me, had prevailed long enough to get there.

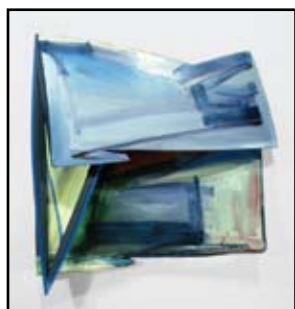
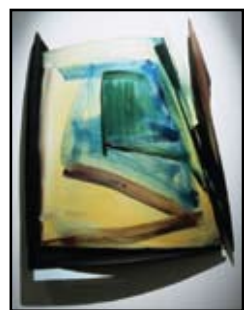
I pursued studio pottery for eight years, determined to find the state of mind that I had come to realize as a ceramic artist. In addition to pottery, I did continue to make sculptures through the years.

Eventually in the early 80's the art/craft question caught up to me. I never could get the same experience from the pottery that I had known from the sculpture. But instead of choosing sculpture over pottery, I decided to let both directions exist independently. Certainly they relate but by definition they are separate. Like folk music sharing similar notes and instruments with jazz.

The new sculpture direction was influenced by the platter form, especially when on the wall or standing on a wooden support. The compound planar shapes escape the grounding of the table and gains a freedom of form in space. I have always been aware of the association of a platter to a painting. But the platter is never flat. Like a sail the shape is defined by both sides which are opposite, yet like the platter the mind perceives the unification



Again, it might be clay that was holding things back. It was too much of a challenge to hang the large heavy pieces on the wall. Why not just make them entirely out of wood and join the



sculptural painting format. This work was some of the most moving studio art experiences that I have ever had. The compositions were sprayed matt black to begin

with and then oil paint was used for marks and gestures. The process was difficult but dynamic. This was the only work I ever made that caused me to have anxious dreams, where I had to salvage a composition gone astray. To date, a couple of these works are the best I have done but for me the lack of clay is not an advantage.



After a period of just making pots because I was the chair of the department, I had a chance to look from a perspective where nothing made sense, beyond trying to make things right. With a years leave it was again time to pick up my studio art in a new direction. To not deal with the big question



of what now? I decided to embrace the spirit for all ceramic artists and build a large wood firing kiln. The kiln story is unique onto itself but in the end, ceramic forms are placed in it to be fired.

For the new work, I would use the mold process, and for this series the works would relate to vessels, not to be confused with the nonobjective. The forms were vase like, relating to the human figure, and large enough to relate to one. The kiln space was so large it encouraged large forms. Instead of using linear wooden frames, I composed the clay form



to imply such additions and then confirmed this implication with painted contrasting line. With the first series I didn't know if the forms would stand up in the high heat of the wood, but they will bend if placement is not taken into account.

The wood was a great benefit in the beginning, muting or adding ash accumulations in unknown ways.

Sometimes dripping, sometimes with a web scale, and sometimes just looking like being pulled out of the ashes of a fire. After a decade of these results, I want the pieces to maintain much more of the original contrast that is represented before firing.

The new work will be a combination of what I can get from the wood fire, but also what I can accomplish in a gas fired salt kiln.





