

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

JULY 24, 2019

Bay Area ceramics scene fired up in new ways

by Charles Desmarais



Woody De Othello's ceramic sculpture "The Weary" (2018) stands 4 feet tall.

"I always second-guess the students when they come into class. I look at them, I'm like, 'What are you doing here? Are you nuts? Run away — you may like this!'"

That's Annabeth Rosen, who has held the Robert Arneson Endowed Chair at UC Davis since 1997 and has taught ceramic art at the college level for 30 years, grasping for an explanation of the current resurgence of interest in ceramics among young artists.

"I say, if they sink to the bottom of the barrel — if gravity pulls them towards the earth, or whatever, and they're stuck there — they're done for. 'Do a different thing if you can!'"

"And yet," she continued, "making a real thing in the real world, whether you invented it and people recognize it as something to consider, or it's some recognizable form — a statue or a bust or a relief or something functional — there is nothing so satisfying."

Objects fashioned from clay may be found in virtually every culture through most of human history. In their forms, we can trace ancient sacred ritual and simple folkways of play, of diet, of inebriation. Some of the highest cultural achievements of Africa, Asia and Europe are made of clay — hollowed out and built up, scribed and painted.

We use today's ceramic containers for purposes both decorous and lowly: to deliver our morning stimulants; to deposit our wastes.

In the Bay Area, the firing of ceramics does not seem to have been a prehistoric craft — the Ohlone tribe and their neighbors probably moved around too much. But the medium has a

rich, modern history here.

The energetic and experimental artistic trend that has come to be known as the American Art Pottery movement made its way to the West Coast in the final years of the 19th century, says the Metropolitan Museum of Art website, “foreshadowing the nascent studio pottery movement that would flourish there in the mid-twentieth century.”

At least 40 substantial production studios made their homes in Northern California, many of them moonlighting to make roof tiles and sewer pipes even as they produced objects we today would call fine art. Roblin Art Pottery was a San Francisco studio that maintained the highest standards, operating between 1898 and 1906 — the year of the San Francisco earthquake, which must have devastated a business dealing exclusively in breakables. Arequipa Pottery, on the other hand, was made in Fairfax from 1911-18 by patients recovering from the lung-damaging effects of the earthquake. Products of these organizations and others are avidly sought today by collectors of Arts and Crafts pottery; the Oakland Museum of California Art holds many examples.

But it was at the cusp of the 1960s that clay took center stage among Bay Area arts. It all revolved around one man, Peter Voulkos.

There were other significant artists who took porcelain and earthenware off the kitchen shelf and made works to challenge assumptions about art and craft, about society and life. People like Richard Shaw, 78, whose technical skill is so profound that viewers often confuse his devilishly trompe-l’oeil works in clay for real-life cigarette butts, decks of cards, books and other common objects. Like Ron Nagle, 80, whose palm-sized miniatures suggest magical landscapes in a bejeweled world, or Jim Melchert, 88, beloved for a conceptual and intellectual approach to art that still allows for the pleasures of form and color.

But none are cited more frequently, or spoken of with more reverence, than Voulkos, the man who forced the art world to take notice by turning the polite craft of making tableware into a sculptural tool of abstract expressionism. He worked on a scale that had previously been reserved for garden decor and ceremonial urns, and he slashed and cut and reconfigured forms with a violent intensity that might be compared to that which Willem de Kooning brought to painting. When Voulkos died, Shaw, who took over as head of ceramics at UC Berkeley when Voulkos retired after 26 years, in 1985, told The Chronicle, “He was the best — he was the king.”

After a long, slow burn, Sahar Khoury has taken Bay Area art by storm in the past two years. The Oakland artist’s bracingly irreverent attitude to the traditions that bound ceramics for centuries has placed her at the top of many curatorial and collector lists, with solo shows at two different galleries, a featured position in the 2018 “Bay Area Now” exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and a recently announced SECA Award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

But if her adventurous approach is reminiscent of the free spirit of Voulkos, Khoury’s startling mix of media — from leather belts and steel bolts that hold sculptures together, to a ready embrace of humble materials like papier-mâché and cheap plastic — sets her apart from the master. Voulkos and other key ceramics artists of the 1950s and ’60s set out to upend convention, but they recognized its boundaries. Khoury is not incrementally revising custom; she simply ignores it.

Like so many artists working in the medium today, she is not, in her mind, making ceramics.

She's making art.

And yet, there is a rich history no thinking artist would disdain. The past can sometimes be a noise one needs to block while working, but you wouldn't reject it in contempt.

Khoury recalls that it was history, in fact, that prompted her to sign up for Richard Shaw's final ceramic class at UC Berkeley, at the end of his 46-year teaching career. She was surprised that other artists were unaware of his work. "I can vividly remember telling my cohort who he was. ... I was kind of shocked by that. I said, 'You know, this is pretty major.' "

She wasn't really thinking that ceramics was going to be a part of her life, Khoury says. But young artists she respected were making ceramics and were "sort of blowing up." She became aware of new experimentation in the manner of Robert Arneson, who famously made scatological sculptures that riffed on forms like toilets and urinals, and the proto-feminist Viola Frey, who made works on a scale rarely seen. Both were towering figures of the genre who made figurative sculptures that were as imposing as their authors.

Khoury is hardly the only one who noticed. She is but one of at least a dozen artists capturing attention who are once again making the Bay Area a white-hot kiln of innovation.

Woody De Othello's El Cerrito studio is a neatly organized den of genial monsters. "I'm still an avid cartoon-watcher," he says. "It comes from being a '90s kid."

Unlike Khoury ("She gets a pass," he says, because her offhand approach to tradition is so conceptually inventive), he has embraced ceramics from the very beginning of his career. On the first day of his first class in the medium, when he touched the clay, he recalls, "I knew everything about my past, and everything about my future."

In De Othello's work, overscaled and unapologetically goofy, it is easy to see echoes of Arneson and Frey, even as it is clear he is cutting his own path. He also mentions John DeFazio, who heads the ceramics program at the San Francisco Art Institute, who once helped create the wildly inventive TV show "PeeWee's Playhouse." One DeFazio series molds portrait heads into bongos. It is a form also used by the artist Guy Overfelt, who studied at SFAI, for his series "After Picasso," which quotes Pablo Picasso's well-known ceramic objects, but with strategically placed holes and water chambers.

Also startling in his approach is Nathan Lynch, chair of ceramics at California College of the Arts, whose cheerfully bulbous drinking fountain greets visitors at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin. His most recent exhibition featured a two-person soaking tub embraced by blubbery brackets; he will have a large solo show at the Scottsdale (Ariz.) Museum of Contemporary Art in 2020.

Lynch explains his work in terms that might apply to many of the Bay Area's new ceramists. He is drawn to clay, he says, "because it responds to both interior and exterior pressure, making it possible to create a piece that appears like it's full of air while also compressed by outside forces. This gives the form a human quality that viewers respond to — it communicates a kind of empathy. The sculptures are not figurative in any way, but they have a formal quality that people are drawn to, in part because we can see ourselves in the forms."

Wanxin Zhang, meanwhile, left a budding career as a sculptor in China in 1992, where, he says, "we never had starving artists" because official artists, like him, were employed by the state. Frustrated by a system that seemed to embrace no sculptors after Rodin, he

came to California, where he eventually got a job at Artworks Foundry in Berkeley. There he helped to produce works in bronze by Voulkos, Arneson and others whose first success was in ceramics. Zhang eventually adopted the medium, becoming a kind of artistic heir to Arneson and, like Arneson, often uses the medium to express broadly political ideas.

The vagaries of the art market and fashion being what they are, it is not clear that the new Bay Area ceramists have an easy road ahead. If it's a "movement" of any sort, it will be hard to sustain. Prices for works of art in clay are perversely low — a video piece or a photograph will often be more highly prized by a collector than a major ceramic sculpture.

There are technical barriers to entry for young artists interested in the medium, too. Kilns and clay are expensive and take up precious real estate, and the dangers of working with glazes and clay dust require ventilation and careful work. Transportation is a pain: clay is heavy when wet, fragile after firing. Magic often happens in the kiln, but so do accidents that can ruin days or weeks of work.

The sense one gets, though, is that exactly such challenges are factors in the tangible excitement one feels in talking to serious ceramic artists. There are new skills to be learned, experiments to be analyzed and, to keep costs down, kiln space to be shared.

Annabeth Rosen compares the work to that of social practice artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, who has served meals as creative actions. "That's kind of the heart of people who've worked in clay for so long. All the potters that you know ... were drawn to this sense of community. Ceramics is moving tons of material around the studio, (with) people helping — the physical labor is enormous."

Artist Nicki Green, another rising star, has been working in the studio at UC Berkeley, which has renewed its commitment to ceramics by replacing its kiln. She has been incorporating bricks from the old one — the one used by Peter Voulkos for many years — into current work. It might be a touching gesture of tribute, but it is also a challenge from an artist of today, whose work is defiantly feminist and queer, to a past that now seems impossibly distant.