



## JED PERL ON ART Firings

April 5, 2004

The rough-hewn elegance of Isamu Noguchi's work in ceramics is unlike anything else in modern art. Noguchi experimented with clay during three sojourns in Japan – in 1931, 1950, and 1952 – and he approached this ancient medium with the breezy, smiling sophistication of a man who knew how to make much but not too much of his East-meets-West background. He was born in Los Angeles in 1904; his mother was American and his father was Japanese. Although Noguchi spent only part of his childhood in Japan and hardly knew his father, a poet who wrote about the visual arts, Japanese culture was his birthright, and you feel that complex, intimate relationship in the witty figures and looming totems and striking vases and plates that Noguchi made during one particularly intense period of activity in 1952. The frequently unglazed clay gives even Noguchi's most imposing forms an improvisational informality. His relationship with the earth of Japan suggests the confident impetuosity of a mature love affair, and the work that he produced in a bucolic spot called Kita Kamakura is by turns ardent, funny, poignant, lush, and austere.

"Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics," the extraordinary exhibition that is at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles until May 30, gives Noguchi's accomplishment a geographical and historical context. I was glad to see his ceramics juxtaposed with work by Kitaoji Rosanjin, the older artist who was his host at Kita Kamakura and emboldened Noguchi with his own work, which taps into a vein of expressionist playfulness and rapture in Japanese art. This show includes an interesting group of younger potters, among

them Yamada Hikaru and Yagi Kazuo, whose infatuation with what they saw as contemporary art's graphic whimsy and architectonic brutalism does not always avoid crossing the line into kitsch. But even the finest ceramics by Hikaru, Kazuo, and the formidable Rosanjin only underscore Noguchi's high-flying achievement, for he embraces the crafts traditions with the freedom of a man who is unafraid of art's loftiest ambitions.

Noguchi's approach to ceramics is dazzlingly self-confident but not at all snobbish. It is exhilarating to be in the presence of an artist who has such a direct feeling for the making of things, whether an eleven-inch plate or a fourteen-foot-high sculpture called *Even the Centipede*, which consists of many discrete ceramic forms, each a curious confabulation of the animal and vegetable and mineral, attached by pieces of string to a very long pole. Leaving this remarkable show – which was organized by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington and has also been seen at Japan Society in New York – I found myself thinking about the catalytic role that clay played at this point in Noguchi's career.

There is a temptation to believe that ceramics, because they are essentially utilitarian objects, have relatively little to teach us about the nature of aesthetic experience. The opposite is true, for a beautiful utilitarian object poses ultimate questions about the place of beauty in the world. The Chinese have grappled with such questions for a thousand years, and the Japanese continued those inquiries through the rituals of the tea ceremony. There have been some extraordinary ancient tea bowls in a number of important recent shows – in the Hon'ami Koetsu retrospective in Philadelphia in 2000; in "Kazari: Decoration and Display in Japan," at Japan Society in 2002; and in "Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art earlier this season. The master of the tea ceremony gives these bowls such a specialized and exalted importance that the effect is to decontextualize a simple object and force us to confront its essence. Especially when the bowl has been designed in a self-consciously rustic style, its ordinariness can almost embarrass us with its complexities. The strictly prescribed function of the tea bowl turns it into an abstraction of a utilitarian object that is utilitarian nonetheless. Thus the simplest of objects can suggest a taxonomy of aesthetic need.

Potters have been arguing for so long for the freestanding value of their work that they now turn out to have been in the vanguard of a more general effort to re-affirm the value of the aesthetic in the face of a culture in which functionalism rules. The perennially second-class status of the crafts traditions, at least in the West, is an unexpected source of strength, for ceramists have learned to live without the privileged cultural position that painters and sculptors have so recently lost. Ceramists have been fighting for legitimacy for so long

that they may be tempted to give a knowing wink to painters who now bemoan their delegitimation.

I realize that when it comes to displays of empty virtuosity, craftspeople can be the worst offenders; the crafts magazines are lousy with feats of technical wizardry that merely play catch-up with the junk that was presented in last year's art magazines. But that is hardly the whole story. The best ceramists, who like all artists are most truly philosophical when they are in the midst of their work, know that beauty is grounded in the exigencies of materials – they believe in a kind of natural authority. And you do not have to be a purist to celebrate the fundamentals of shape and color and texture. Ken Price, in his crazily colored ceramic sculptures of recent years, is simultaneously a hipster eccentric and an artisanal fundamentalist. Indeed, there are dangers in taking an overly pious attitude toward the fundamentals of ceramics, especially when the fundamentals take on an element of evangelism, as they do in the life of the English potter Bernard Leach, who is the subject of a fine new biography.

"Ceramists are a strange lot," John Ashbery observed a quarter of a century ago, reviewing an exhibition of American ceramics. Commenting on how resentful they could be about their shaky standing in the art world, he wryly observed that "Nietzsche said that it is not the business of the gods to make clay pots, but few potters would agree with him." Ashbery implied that ceramists had a point, and it is difficult not to feel that pottery can have a divine spark after you have taken a look at something like the late sixteenth-century tea bowl in red raku included in the Metropolitan's "Turning Point" show, a bowl that is known as *Twilight* on account of the delicately shimmering radiance of its surface. Something in the chemical effect of the glaze, in the blurring of gray and orange and gold, analogizes meteorological effects in much the same way as Turner's bursts of watercolor on ultra-absorbent paper, only the effect is far more abstract. This tea bowl is not about twilight, it is twilight.

Potters regard the firing of their work with a mixture of anxiety and awe, which is no surprise when you see what heat can do for minerals on the glaze of a bowl such as *Twilight*. There comes a time in any working process when the artist is not entirely in control, but for the ceramist whose pots are in the kiln this is literally true. There is no phase in the work of a painter or a sculptor or a printmaker or a weaver that can match the moment of truth when the potter goes into the cooling kiln to see what has transpired. Accounts of the lives of potters are full of tales of calamities in the kiln. When wood-fired kilns were the only ones available, just keeping proper temperatures could be harrowing; catastrophes were frequent, but sometimes the very unpredictability of the process yielded extraordinary, unexpected results. For the ceramist, the fire in

the kiln is nothing less than divine intervention.

Bernard Leach, who was a virtual ambassador-at-large for the art of ceramics through much of the twentieth century, had his moment of truth in Japan in 1911, during a firing of raku. Born in Hong Kong and trained as an artist at the Slade School of Art, Leach had left England for the East in hopes of finding a place for himself in the arts, and his path was still unclear when he was invited to a traditional event, a party at which people decorated ceramics and then ate and drank while they were fired. In his diary Leach described the darkening evening: "Most of us sat in the tea room, beautiful, and watched a few standing round the growling kiln from which cascades of sparks emitted with curious wiggling movements." When the cups were finally removed, "the colors had altered and in one or two cases almost vanished," and Leach was in the presence of "the direct and primitive treatment of clay." The whole evening seemed "a miracle, I was carried into a new world, something dormant awoke." For Leach, that raku party was the beginning of the act of creation.

Emmanuel Cooper's book *Bernard Leach: Life and Work* (Yale University Press) takes you deep into the world of early and mid-twentieth-century ceramics, where a reconsideration of artisanal traditions took on the character of an international cause. Leach, always a distinguished-looking man, clearly relished the public role. He presided over the comings and goings of generations of students and disciples at St. Ives, the art community on the Cornish coast, and worked hard to see that the Japanese potters whom he admired were known in Europe, and that his Western friends were known in Japan. He traveled far and wide, sometimes with Hamada Shoji and Yonagi Soetsu. They appeared as guest artists and lecturers wherever potters gathered, including two weeks at Black Mountain College in 1952. On a trip to Santa Fe, they went out to San Ildefonso, where "they wandered around looking for the renowned potter Maria Martinez, whom they found raking pots out of an ash heap. Black and shining from being fired with horse dung, the pots gleamed and sparkled and ... all three nodded their approval."

There is a charm to Leach's early years, especially when he is living in the East and his artistic and erotic curiosity suggest a man who is taking his own measure. Later on, however, he strikes one as a puritanical sensualist whose conflicts have been all too tidily resolved. Cooper, himself a potter, has written an impressive book, detailed without being absurdly so, and welcomingly dry about the man's steel-plated ego, which Leach camouflaged with his devotion to what he modestly called, in the title of his one of many books, *A Potter's Work*. While Leach did some beautiful pieces, his achievement is rather middle-of-the-road. You have to admire his efforts to honor the work that journeymen potters had done in pre-industrial times, but finally Leach's artistic program has an

element of dutiful revivalism. His work is strongest, I think, when it is simplest – when the swelling form of a vase or a pitcher is left relatively unadorned. He is not an inspired draftsman, and there is a fussiness to the applied designs, whether incised or painted, that evoke Eastern calligraphy and English and Continental decorative styles. Leach's friend Hamada has a far surer feeling for decorative scale, acknowledging the freedom of abstract art in the swing of his brush. Leach, even in the clean-lined geometric patterns of his most forward-looking designs, remains trapped in an 1890s preciousness.

Reading about the potter's art can be overwhelming for anybody but the most ardent practitioners and collectors. You are immediately plunged into controversies between artists who create unique studio pieces and those who advocate a more standardized form of artisanal production, and this is just one battle in what amounts to an ongoing war between various kinds of traditionalists and innovators. After a while you may find yourself wondering where the philosophical disputes end and the gossip begins. Leach disliked Rosanjin, or so I infer from Cooper's biography, and I can see why he would have had little patience for the almost belligerent informality of the ceramics produced by Noguchi's friend. I also cannot help but wonder if Leach saw a rival in Rosanjin, who was another larger-than-life figure – much married, brilliantly entrepreneurial, as celebrated as a restaurateur as he was as a potter and a calligrapher. They both sound like the kind of men who suck the oxygen out of a room. Although Leach obviously admired pottery that was suave and punctilious in ways that Rosanjin disliked, Hamada did work that recalls some of Rosanjin's work, and both Rosanjin and Hamada took a great interest in folk art, to which Hamada, as one of the founders of the movement known as Mingei, had wanted to give new attention.

If there was a fundamental disagreement among ceramists in the twentieth century, it was about the nature of artistic discipline. Do you sustain a tradition by staying within certain predetermined parameters, as Leach did, or by riffing on it, as Rosanjin and Noguchi did? Leach was sometimes guilty of a small-minded territoriality. He was dismissive of Picasso's ceramics. I can see why he would have wanted to steer students away from a let's-have-fun attitude that might leave lesser talents looking merely puerile, but Leach probably also harbored the resentment of the hard-working insider for the outsider who easily appropriates a tradition.

One gathers that Picasso's work set off shock waves in the ceramics world. Kawai Kanjiro, another supporter of Mingei, was seen by some as a turncoat when he took an interest in Picasso's pitchers and platters. While Picasso's feeling for glazes looks hit-or-miss compared with the refinements of Leach and his friends, Leach's defense of the artisanal traditions can become overly

defensive. Leach was working at a time when there was a great deal of talk about rediscovering the unity of the arts, and in comparison with the broadness of conception that the Wiener Werkstätte and the Bauhaus brought to the study of ceramics, his aspirations are a tad provincial.

For Leach, pottery is a cause, and a community must exist to support it. Although nowadays many potters work alone, historically ceramics were a group effort, and even today the importance that ceramists ascribe to working with clay from a certain place or with firing pots in a certain kind of kiln can give pottery centers the quality of pilgrimage sites, where men and women gather, almost ritualistically, to engage in a primal game involving clay and fire and glazes and more fire. Noguchi, although he might be said to have been a tourist in the potters' world, was absolutely alive to this sense of ritual – to ceramics as serious play. Working at Kita Kamakura, aided by ceramists with infinitely more skill, he was *homo ludens*, the master of the games.

Noguchi always had a particular feeling for collaboration. His work in the theater, for Martha Graham and Balanchine and others, is a landmark in the dramatic arts, and if there is any question about the importance that he attached to these collaborations, you have only to consider the attention that he gave to his work in the theater and to his designs for gardens and playgrounds and furnishings in his autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*. (A new edition is due this summer from Steidl.) Just now there is an upswing of interest in Noguchi, who died in 1988. The Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, which has been undergoing renovations, is slated to reopen in June. The Vitra Design Museum in Germany, which has been putting some of Noguchi's designs for furniture and tableware into production, has mounted a large touring show called "Isamu Noguchi – Sculptural Design," orchestrated by the theatrical director Robert Wilson. The exhibition, which is coming to the Noguchi Museum, emphasizes the range of his interests. In an art world where multimedia is the preferred medium, Noguchi can seem prophetic.

As for his instinctive response to a wide variety of materials, it is almost shamanistic. The Akari lamps, those concoctions of paper and bamboo that have not been out of style since they went into production half a century ago, suggest a visitation of Platonic forms. The challenge of unconventional materials or the discovery of an unexpected use for a conventional material brings out the best in Noguchi. Last fall, the Pace Gallery offered a selection of bronze versions of sculptures originally made of interlocking forms cut from sheets of slate and marble, and although the bronzes had been done under Noguchi's supervision, they had none of the lithe power of the stone originals. This series of works was provoked by Noguchi's interest in the sheets of marble that were readily available and relatively inexpensive in New York in the 1940s, and the joyous

ingenuity of those puzzle-like structures was lost in the transcription to bronze.

Noguchi's ceramics are not the most familiar aspects of his work today, but they were exhibited in Tokyo and New York immediately after he did them, and "Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics" convinces me that they are among his finest achievements. In the splendid catalogue, Bert Winther-Tamaki argues that Noguchi's friendship in the 1930s with Arshile Gorky, who was preoccupied with his Armenian beginnings, may have prepared Noguchi for his own encounters with Japan. For Noguchi, the conflict between tradition and assimilation was exacerbated by Japanese nationalism and the war; he was a voluntary intern at a relocation camp for Japanese-Americans in Poston, Arizona in 1942, but was back in his studio in Greenwich Village later the same year. When he traveled to Japan in the early 1950s, New York artists were taking an interest in Zen, and there was a gathering American fascination with Japanese architecture, painting, calligraphy, and decorative arts.

Japan may have been in Noguchi's blood, but it was probably from Brancusi, with whom Noguchi apprenticed in Paris in the 1920s, that he first learned that the sophisticated Western artist must be nourished by non-Western sources – and can lean and lean hard on his particular connection to those traditions, as Brancusi remained in some sense always a Romanian artist. Noguchi eventually found in the ancient funerary figures of Japan, called haniwa, a form that haunted him in much the way that the Cycladic figures had haunted the Paris of the 1920s. In the 1940s Noguchi knew both Picasso's and Miró's ceramics, and he may have felt a particular affinity with Miró's way of inscribing personages on sheets of clay; there is no question that when Noguchi makes slightly comical figures, such as his tender salute to the poet Buson, he recalls Picasso's amusingly off-the-cuff ceramic nymphs and fauns. I also suspect that Elie Nadelman's later work, especially the doll-like figures based on Greek and Roman terra-cottas that were shown in New York in the 1940s, encouraged Noguchi to think of the artist as an archaeologist who exhumes an ancient world and gives it a new kind of mysterious amplitude.

It is hard to pick and choose among these wonderful pieces. Some of them are little more than *jeux d'esprit*, chunks of clay with a few incised or raised marks that suggest a face, or longer lengths of clay evoking sheaves of wheat or a jack-in-the-pulpit. When the ceramics were exhibited in Japan in 1952, Noguchi presented panels hung with tiny shards of clay – fantastic bits of sculpture that suggested elements in a spectral anatomy. *Apartment*, a tall structure occupied by a few enigmatic figures, is a beguiling variation on the themes first sounded in Giacometti's *Palace at 4 AM*. Everything Noguchi knows – about ancient haniwa figures, about Brancusi, Giacometti, Zen, and pottery – is at his fingertips, and he moves easily among all these influences. Some of the objects

that are called vases are so elaborate – with legs and table-like surfaces and multiple receptacles – that they seem more like sculptures than some of the sculptures, which are a matter of a few twists of clay. The existentialist philosophy that was popular among artists at mid-century had an optimistic side, and Noguchi picked up on a new sense that the artist was discovering his own nature as he chose freely among the possibilities offered by several traditions. When Sartre said that Giacometti was pushing art back to the beginning of creation, he could have been speaking of Noguchi's experience at the old farmhouse that Rosanjin loaned him at Kita Kamakura. Noguchi takes Rosanjin's experimental spirit and flips it high into the air, so that traditions become possibilities.

Noguchi was unlocking possibilities at Kita Kamakura, and if you leave "Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics" feeling that those possibilities did not outlive his brief tenure in Japan, it is one of the paradoxes of ceramics that, for all the communal feeling that this art inspires, the biggest achievements always remain isolated. The great tea bowls, no matter how firmly they are lodged in a traditional context, sometimes have a stand-alone eccentricity that confounds that tradition. This peculiar situation must appeal to Ken Price, the ceramist who turns seventy next year. He has become such a master of confounding objects that his recent work hovers, slightly ghostlike, beyond the vexing questions of genre and category.

The ceramic sculptures that Price exhibited at the Site Santa Fe Biennial and the Franklin Parrasch Gallery in 2001, and last fall at Matthew Marks, are bafflements, with their liquidly curving forms painted in particularly virulent acrylic colors that suggest a Surrealist reptilian glow. Forty years ago, when Price was near the beginning of his career, the critic John Coplans was reminded of Brancusi, Arp, and Miró, and described "a strange interplay between the joyful and the ominous." Coplans's words are still an apt description of Price's work, although there is a let-loose craziness to the new shapes, a gleeful daring in the suggestion of the phallic and the vaginal. While there is something of the glibly pneumatic quality of cartoon characters about Price's melting amoebas, he regards these curves not as static patterns but as fluid profiles that compose and recompose as we move around the curvaceous forms.

Constructing objects that are two or three feet high, Price sometimes suggests the serrated shapes of Chinese scholars' rocks or the slipping-away-from-you creepy streamlining of snakes and sea creatures. And he rejects the traditional ceramic color, which emerges from the firing in the kiln, in favor of a crazy dazzle of acrylic, layered onto the surface and repeatedly sanded down to achieve an intoxicating shimmer that suggests customized hot-rod finishes or a

riff on the Art Nouveau glamour of Gallé or Tiffany glass.

Price is doing the best work of his career. There have been times when he was not immune to a syndrome common among ceramic artists, a need to work off their ambivalence about the crafts traditions by satirizing them. Price's *Happy's Curios*, which appeared as an installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1978, featured display cases filled with Price's elaborate renderings of inexpensive Mexican ceramics. While there is no doubt that this was a loving sort of satire, his variations on south-of-the-border styles lacked the unself-conscious assurance of the Mexican originals. Price was left in the same uncomfortable situation as the Pattern and Decoration artists of the 1970s, who in drawing gallerygoers' attention to the informal beauty of contemporary Middle Eastern or Asian decorative styles only demonstrated how very difficult it was to rival the modest but unquestionable visual power of the originals. There is something too sweetly ingratiating about Price's work in *Happy's Curios*; his salute to Mexico's hardworking craftsmen can feel condescending.

At the time, Price was quoted as saying that he meant to "elevate but not sanctify." The remark is worth considering when you have seen his recent work, because this is exactly what he is doing now. These enigmatic objects are kitsch that has been pulverized and metamorphosized; kitsch that has been absorbed through the artist's nervous system. Although Price's swelling shapes may bring Arp's marble statues to mind, there is something cryptic about Price's relationship to that modern master, because Price has no interest in form as classical expression. He remains a ceramic artist even as he rejects practicality and utility. In spite of all the things that his works evoke, you are left feeling that he is essentially ambivalent about art's metaphorical possibilities. His ceramics are things, not sculptures. Price insists on the value of craft for its own sake, until it becomes a kind of peculiar relative of art-for-art's-sake. There is a sneaky elitism about Price's work. He uses his west-of-the-Mississippi Joe Craftsman persona to dispel whatever unease the sleek formalism of his work provokes.

Price mocks all the neat old distinctions between the art traditions and the craft traditions. He does so not as an ideologue, but with a craftsman's stubborn cunning. There is a preternatural calm to the work that Price is doing now. Like some of the jazz masters, he has arrived at the point where he is so cool that he is beyond cool, with an elegant weirdness that we might call classical except that it relates to nothing other than itself. While some may see the growing attention to Price's work as symptomatic of our anything-goes art world, the recessive power of his work has nothing to do with other ceramists who are gaining attention, such as Grayson Perry, the Englishman who won the Turner Prize last year for rather conventionally shaped pots decorated with figurative

scenes that mix social comment and sexual confrontation for effects that suggest an Art Spiegelman wanna-be.

You can argue that Price is hardly a potter any longer, but what saves his work from affectation is some essential belief in the utilitarian simplicity of the act of creation. Of course, he disguises this simplicity in a hipster's funky shell. Finally he takes his stand with the potter who resolves all the questions of meaning and metaphor before the work is ever begun, thereby leaving himself free to pursue a formalism that, because it is focused on mere pottery, will never be arid. **This is the attitude that you will find in any first-rate ceramist working today, and I certainly feel it in the work of Alice Federico, which has been shown at the Amos Eno Gallery in recent years. Working in Montana with Japanese-style wood-fired kilns, Federico has produced variations on amphora shapes, some built of several thrown pieces to produce tall vases that bring to mind the figures of haniwa ceramics – and sometimes Noguchi's work in Japan. Federico's darkened, abraded surfaces, produced by the effects of sodium carbonate or wood ash, have an old-fashioned natural authority, which she sets in a tension with forms that have a modern vigor and even aggressiveness. These pots bring to mind Hamada's observation that for the ceramist "real feeling seems to hover impartially; it is something inherent in the nature of a work."**

Hamada's voice comes through vividly in a book that Leach published in the 1970s, which takes the form of a dialogue between the two men, ranging through philosophic speculations and autobiographical reminiscences and including some absolutely practical advice about clay and glazes and the best type of wood to stoke a kiln. The book has a stirring pragmatism; we see how a ceramist's speculative forays grow out of his hard work. "With one's intellect," Hamada announces, "with one's mind, one can understand what tradition means. But in work, what comes out must come out through one's own fingertips, one's own hands, otherwise it is no work at all." There is something in the ancientness and the plainness of ceramics that mixes together the practical and the metaphysical to a very extreme degree. No other art is simultaneously so literal and so metaphorical. Every ceramist who makes *a* vessel, a literal thing, is also making *the* vessel, a metaphorical thing.

The conundrum of Noguchi's and Price's ceramics is that the literal possibilities and the metaphorical possibilities seem to compete endlessly with each other, becoming unlikely friends. This may be the oldest artistic competition on earth, considering that pots are among the first things that men made. You can see the competition evolving in those ancient Japanese tea bowls, which for centuries have dared anybody to call them trivial. Right now, when every artist is expected to justify the act of creation, we could use a good strong dose of the

ceramist's quietly militant aestheticism.

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