



ArtSeen

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KATHY ERTEMAN

by Robert Kushner

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Nowadays there are so many approaches to ceramics: glitzy and brassy; a vast family of figuration—great-grandchildren of Meissen; wabi sabi earthy; watch my bravura technique; and more. But restraint is rarely an admired objective.

Lately a stampede of painters and sculptors has invaded ceramic studios as if ceramics were the new photography, ready to be exploited. Most of these results are prosaic and disappointing largely because of inexperience and an odd lack of empathy with the materials themselves. Clay left to its own devices likes to become lumpy turds. But in the hands of a master ceramist, one who knows what clay and glaze can uniquely accomplish, the forms can defy gravity, soar upward, enclose space within their own sinuous profiles. It is wonderful to observe the work of a master ceramist at the moment when her work takes off and soars. Kathy Erteman's new pieces do just that. After decades of molding and throwing utilitarian, functional studio pottery, teaching, designing, and producing, Erteman has asked the profound question: what do I want to make if utility is no longer a necessity?



In her current exhibition Erteman is showing three forms: bottles, buckets, and horizontally stretched buckets. It would be ridiculous to use one of her “buckets” to hold water, even white roses, or anything less rarified than air. They are meditations on the elegant functionality of a commonplace tin bucket. This approach, the non-functional derived from the functional, is not unique in the current ceramic dialog. There is no reference to the millennia of Mediterranean ceramic traditions. Nor the heady chroma of Chinese porcelain. Nor the rustication of Japanese

Mingei pottery. Instead, the artist pushes the work in a different direction: North. She revels in a synthesis of mid-century northern European sensibilities: Dutch, English, German, Austrian, Scandinavian. Erteman creates straightforward, clean, historically modern expressions. Modern as in British-Viennese Dame Lucy Rie; the formidable German transplant, Ruth Duckworth; Gertrud and Otto Natzler, Viennese ceramists active in the Los Angeles of Erteman's (and my own) youth.

Working with a high-fire white clay body, wheel thrown, not cast, the walls of the objects become as thin as possible without rendering them freakishly fragile or unstable. Erteman sometimes leaves the ridges of the throwing process, sometimes smooths the outsides in order to better accept the applied glazes. She has perfected an innovative technique of transferring her unique rough volcanic glazes onto paper and from the paper to the clay body. Placing these textures in varying densities over a colored under-layer of slip, she achieves a remarkable range of effects from caked and scabrous, to embedded and luscious or from the suave elegance of a granite countertop, to the grotty annoyance of a sneaker stuck in hot asphalt. The ceramic shapes have to be smooth and even (like a bucket), but not too sharp or indented. If the clay bodies were too curvaceous, the transfers could not occur correctly. Sometimes there is a pronounced slouch as the clay responds to gravity while drying or to heat while firing. These inward movements become poignant reminders, the clay insisting on being itself—just mud.

There is no irony in Erteman's buckets, no social statement or agendas. She loves the simple, the direct, the pared down, the well executed, the tranquil. Her vessels are meditative and somber, but not grim. They are quiet, but not visually taciturn. There is a lot of black but it is not morose. On the contrary the blacks, in their remarkable range from matte to satiny, radiate a pure velvety light. Most of the pieces feature a ground of one color: white, ochre, deep rose, onto which Erteman applies stripes (usually vertical) or rectangles of black and textured areas. In several pieces, she breaks out of this pattern, employing four or more shades of violet, gray, or black to create a harlequin progression around the object.

In an ideal world, this body of work would have more physical space. Each piece functions as sculpture: while looking we want to walk around them to experience the overall balance and placement of the textured rectangles and stripes. Admittedly space is always a premium, and this work is one half of a larger two person exhibition (with painter Richard Orient), but Erteman's works have big elbows and could use more room to release their poised secrets. Still, here we can see a seasoned artist with a lifetime of experience in the clay studio, securely finding her mature voice and taking full flight.

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