Excellent Pot

By Peter Schjeldahl

Adrian Saxe

Garth Clark Gallery

24 West 57th Street

Through December 5

Andrew Lord

65 Thompson Street

Through January 9

Adrian Saxe, a Southern Californian, and Andrew Lord, an Englishman living in New York, are big stars of art ceramics. Their concurrent solo shows briefly raise the profile of what for many of us is an obscure and poky medium, if not something proper to the hobby page. Some of this column’s usual readers may have decided at a glance that life is hard enough without having to crash upon an interest in baked clay. Let them go. The rest of us will test what seriousness and what pleasure can be had from a field whose very marginality to the art world may be a cause of present significance and virtue.

Handmade ceramics is a privileged class among objects (including manufactured ceramics) that realize their meaning within arm’s reach, in the zone of foreground clusters that are normally as blundered by us as the background clutter of cities. Most of what we call “art” occupies middle-ground distances at which our powers of contemplation are most proficient. “Good design” in portable objects arrests and rewards our attention to the nearby, the literally graspable, the hand-at-hand. Ceramics can amplify distractions of design with the assurance of having been executed directly by a forming hand. The maker’s hand reaches the hand of the user—touch means touch—through the responsive stuff of clay.

An excellent pot is brute matter turned with a caress. It is clene-