

Schjeldahl, Peter. Excellent Pot, Voice, December 8, 1992.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN HOLLAND

Above, Andrew Lord: *5 Pieces. Round. Copper and Tin. (1991-92)*

# 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 solos briefly raise the profile of what for most art people is an obscure and poky métier, 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 crank up 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 clutter that is normally as blurred to 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 at-hand. Ceramics can amplify attractions 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 meeting touch—through the responsive stuff of clay.

An excellent pot is brute matter tamed with a caress. It is elemen-

tal nature tricked into figuring forth epitomes of cultured desire: how we want a thing to look and to feel, to function and to be, and what we want it to say to and about us. From pungent to delicate, the range of appeal in good ceramics can resonate with all manner of personal and social happiness, in modern Western tradition especially pertaining to domesticity, to "home": kitchen, dining room, parlor. We are reminded that arm's reach, ambit of embraces, is Eros's arena, where the in-here of ourselves gropes for sensuous and reassuring agreement with the out-there of the world.

Of course, most of the appeal, the life-enhancing potential of ceramics, is violently moot in the world most of us actually inhabit. Like everything else vested with values of intimate comfort and grace—the old bourgeois gestalt—craft ideals have foundered in the twin waves of commodity-based culture: manufactured dreck on the one hand and self-consciously precious collectibles on the other. (Efforts to improve the former regularly create new market lines in the latter.) The finely handmade has lost its modesty, even as the modestly useful has gone dead to the touch. This is not yet true in all cultures or all of the time even here, but the trend is everywhere and unstoppable. The superior ceramic item today is not handled, only dusted. It is shelved decoratively and out of harm's way, in alienated splendor.

Andrew Lord and Adrian Saxe are poets of precisely that alienated splendor, producers of luxurious objects tense with consciousness. Their very different approaches to ceramics are alike in cutting against the insular, genteel nostalgias, the denials of lived reality, that render the usual run of contemporary crafts a subject

of little intellectual interest. Lord and Saxe make just those nostalgias—odors of obsolete conventions, lost social rituals, discontinued functions, defunct period styles—part of their content. That is the alienation effect in action, smashing our assumed emotional connection to inherited form in order to connect with it again in intelligent, edgy ways.

Saxe is showing in a ceramics gallery, Lord in an art gallery. The distinction is exact to their respective positions on the art-craft continuum. Head of the ceramics program at UCLA, Saxe is an academically grounded doyen of a four-decade-long West Coast clay tradition whose major figures include Peter Voulkos and Ken Price. (The tradition had a loss recently in the death of Robert Arneson, Bay Area master of satirical statuary.) Lord, though a craft-educated student of pottery traditions (notably Delft in Holland, where he lived for some years), has strategized a career entirely in the art world, having his first New York hit in the early '80s with pots that looked as if they had popped out of Cubist still-life paintings.

It might be said of Lord that he makes ceramics for people who don't like ceramics. He vexes craft folk by his indifference to the foot-body-handle-lid academic orders of the pot, as also to addressing any function besides that of sculptural decor. Meanwhile, he has gotten a bit of a free ride from craft-ignorant art critics who all but credit him with inventing effects common to other ceramics. Though representational of pitchers, vases, and so on, his pieces elegantly slur all design elements in configurations that are like woolly, taste-haunted dreams of pots. Pulling against this apparitional quality is a robustly matter-of-fact presence of the maker's hand.

Lord's new things are huge by usual ceramic standards, with units up to about three feet tall, in six groups of five each and a vast one of 27. Each array deploys a different repertoire of forming gestures (squeezing, punching, striating with fingers, etc.), a different metallic glaze (copper, tin, antimony, etc., with accents of gold leaf), and a different stylistic flavor from a vague range of English, Dutch, Chinese, and what-not reminiscences. The virtuosity of it all is giddily ravishing while, on account of Lord's sober deliberation, never overbearing. The show is like a quietly ecstatic prose poem, an elegy, on gone worlds of civilized material delight.

In contrast to Lord's abstraction and perhaps very English refinement, the very American Saxe is a virtuoso in sharp focus and at a screaming pitch, nothing if not overbearing. His fantastically ornate vessels, their academic orders pedantically exaggerated, are spectacularly skilled, harshly jokey, and show-off erudite. They strenuously activate all sorts of polarities: nature and artifice (gourd forms studded with false jewels, not to mention dangling foreign matter of cloth tassels, plastic toys, fishing lures), "high" and "low" mediums (porcelain bodies on stoneware bases), European and Asian modalities, and so on in a spirit of clickety-clack eclecticism. He even ventures a female-male jape in teapots molded from 19th-century lady figurines, fitted at crotch level with gilded spouts.

Saxe's ceramics are engines of simultaneous seduction and insult. They beg to be touched and they insinuate a willingness to be used, even, though pouring fluid from the larger ones would be iffy (acutely so with pieces designed to sink fishing hooks into the little

fingers of wielding hands). This work that can be neither resisted nor succumbed to is a sort of materialized, exploded history and philosophy of ceramics, putting into play disparate lore and analysis of the medium. The lore involves Saxe's expertise in the decadent rococo of 18th-century Sevres and 19th-century Meissen pottery. The analysis is an analogy to present decadence: the divorce of fine ceramics, as trophies for collectors, from ordinary sanity, let alone usages of daily life. Saxe's antic forms seem to me fuled by strains of anger and sorrow and a yearning for erotic communion too fierce, too shadowed with frustration, to be

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deemed nostalgic. His pots are love-hate paens to the timeless, heartless muse of folly.

Lord and Saxe make objects whose goodness is inextricable from the straits of contemporary craft. Lord's poetic art-ification of ceramics implies loss. For a thing to be dreamed of, it must be absent. (I note that his gallery baldly labels Lord's output "sculpture," an honorific perhaps relevant less to explaining the work's complex character than to positioning it in the market—sculpture being pricier than pots, natch.) Saxe makes of the collectibles trade an improbable site of reflection on civilization and its discontents. Lord and Saxe may fairly be called artists, except that their promontories in ceramics prove so much more interesting than those informing most current art that they might consider waiving the compliment.