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Simple Pleasures

By Roberta Smith

Andrew Lord is an English potter who lives in Amsterdam and his American debut is one of the best shows of the year; long on quality and quantity, it overflows into the gallery's back offices. Lord is pushing the tea service, coffee pot, pitcher, Chinese jar, fruit plate toward being a major art form, upping their scale, deforming their familiar, comforting shapes and generally taking them beyond function into a highly articulated esthetic. His vessels come in two basic styles: with angles and without. They are painted, respectively, in two ways: geometric and not. Many bristle with inward and outward jutting triangulations and accorded edges. Cubist still lifes in real life, they suggest the Cubists were right about the way the world looks. The rest are serenely, humptiously curvilinear with the inflated Classicism, complete with double and triple undulations, of Picasso circa 1920. The glazes are either grisaille on white or washed-out primaries on white and the placement of color is supposed to exaggerate the effects of light, giving each item its permanent shadows and highlights, permanent times of day.

The titles have a spare phe-

nomenological sound which conjures up LeWitt and Flavin: *The Italian Set in Intense Light/Angled/Outlines/Colored*, *The Two Teapots in Morning Light/Angled/Grey*, *The Chinese Jar in the Afternoon/Angled/Graded/Colored*. But the look is loose, almost random, for Lord outlines, fills in, dabs, brushes and dapples his paint/glaze in a freewheeling manner which is just short of slapdash. The work is consistently in its animated asymmetrical jangle; the pots don't sit squarely on their shelves, the forms don't sit squarely with each other; the paint doesn't sit squarely on the forms. This lack of alignment seems very unusual for ceramics and makes the work seem poised, ready for action. The action is multi-directional; these things skitter around the history of art and craft, evoking (besides Picasso) Cezanne, Boccioni, Schlemmer, Caligari, American spongeware, Constructivist theater costumes. There are also unglazed monochrome pots, perhaps the most extraordinary of all, whose velvety gray clays dramatize the forms, offer themselves as Lord's "drawings" and as brooding updates on Wedgwood's timeless black Basalt.

Lord's work seems more dignified and original than anything the Pattern and Decoration artists have produced in either three-dimensions or ceramics in this country; it suggests that the best P. & D. may be yet to come. The way his angled structures are simultaneously additive and subtractive seems particularly relevant to contemporary sculpture. He also shares a brainy seductive stylishness with artists like Jennifer Bartlett and Howard Hodgkin. If I have any complaint it is of a certain campy cuteness, but the way Lord animates and estheticizes some of our most basic utensils while bringing down (without bringing down at all) such wonderful painting as surface decoration could only happen in ceramics. The perfectness of the fit is very rich. (Blum-Helman, 20 West 57th Street, 245-2888, through January 10)