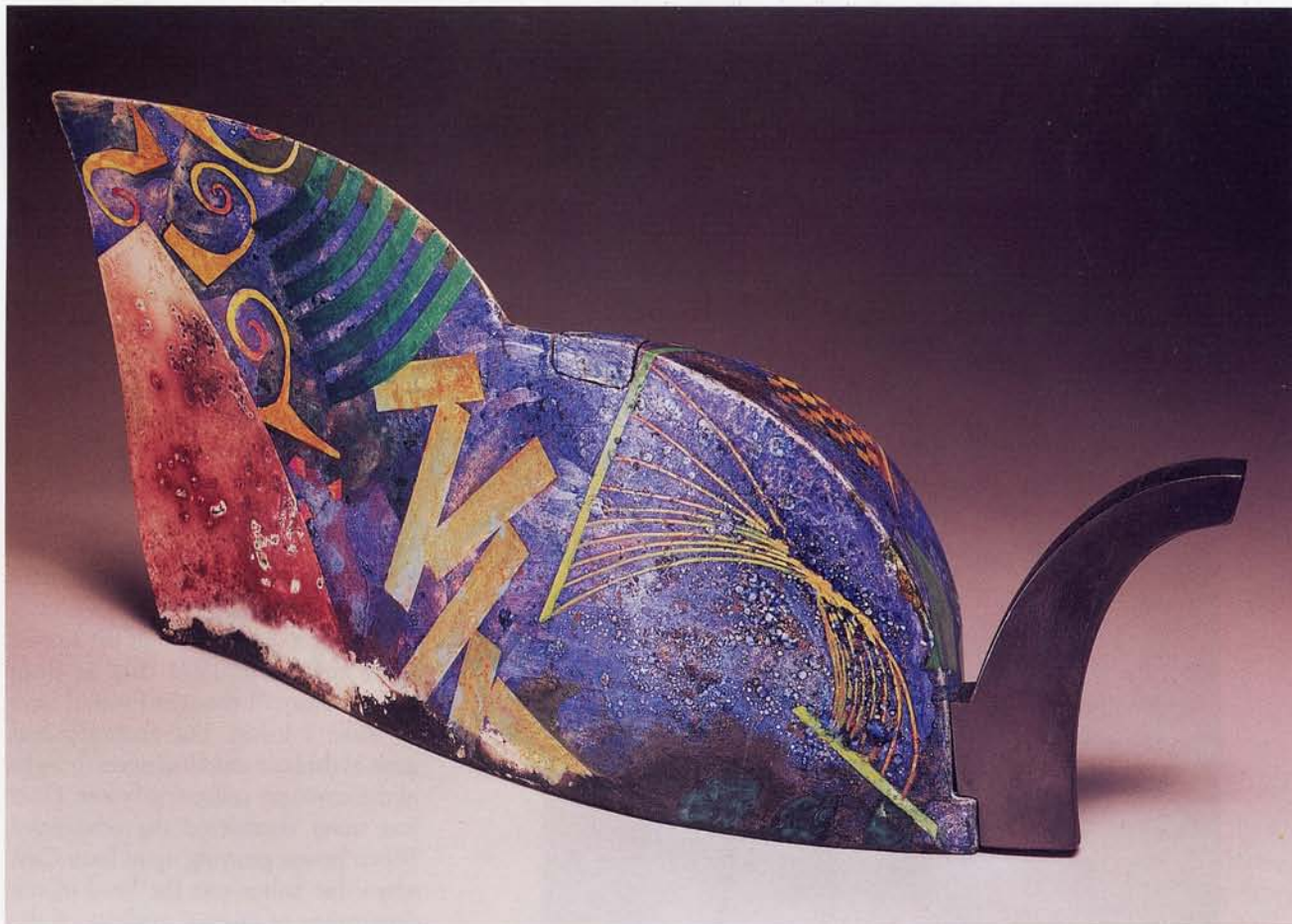


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Untitled teapot, 7 inches in height, pit-fired earthenware, with glaze, acrylics, white gold leaf and epoxy.

Bennett Bean

Playing by His Rules

by Karen S. Chambers

"At the beginning of the Renaissance, painting was not art," muses New Jersey artist Bennett Bean, as he talks about his 30-plus-year career as a potter, painter, sculptor, designer, furniture-maker, teacher. "Painters were hired by the Church to paint paintings that were used as teaching devices to bring the word of God to the unlettered. They were put out of business, lost their socio-economic niche, with the arrival of the printing press. Then the activity became available as art."

Bean was holding forth in the living room of the 18th-century farmhouse he has shared for 27 years with his wife, Cathy Bao, a former professor of philosophy: "Essentially, the same thing happened with ceramics. Potters were put out of business by plastics, tin, alu-

minum. They lost their spot, so ceramics became available for art. Now, the mistake that most people make is that they think the content of ceramics should be the same as art; it should be art in clay. But there are characteristics in ceramics that are totally of that universe. The basic one is the vessel."

For Bean, the "real distinction between art and not-art is content, not material, not style." He explains that the subject of his ceramic work, "the same way a painting has a subject, comes from the traditional vessel. I'm not making pieces about use, volume, tactility, narrative. My pieces, since about 1980, are specifically about decorated surfaces outside and space inside."

But Bean's work is hardly simple. The decoration has become increasingly

complex as he plays the organic effects of pit firing against areas of translucent glaze, bright acrylic paint and luminous gilding. He no longer makes utilitarian pots, but instead constructs dynamic tableaux of sliced-open, wheel-thrown forms with slab additions.

Bean has arrived at this point through a career-long search that began as a student at the State University of Iowa. "I was a standard undergraduate art major, trying to make up my mind between painting and ceramics. The painting faculty were so self-obsessed that they were unable to communicate at all. The faculty of the ceramics department and the students were at least grounded in the world. Also, I was seduced by the technique; throwing is absolutely seductive."



Untitled ("Footed Vessel Series"), 17 inches in height, glazed earthenware, pit fired, with acrylics on the exterior and gold leaf applied to the interior.

Although Bean took 13 semesters of drawing during his academic career, he majored in ceramics, earning a B.A. degree in 1963. He began his graduate work at the University of Washington, where Fred Bauer and Patti Warashina were fellow students, but left after one semester to study with Paul Soldner at Claremont College in Southern California, receiving an M.F.A. in 1966. Then, as part of the last generation of graduate students to be assured a teaching post, Bean was hired by Wagner College on Staten Island to teach ceramics, as well as a variety of other craft and design courses, and sculpture.

He found himself in the middle of the fine-art world. "It seemed impossible to do ceramics there, so I thought what do people do in New York? Well, they do art, so I started making art."

Bean began making acrylic-and-Plexiglas sculptures in the California version of minimalism called "Cool Art,"

and six months later sold a piece to the Whitney Museum of American Art. After his work was included in the prestigious Whitney Biennial in 1968, he was picked up by a major commercial gallery specializing in contemporary fine art. But this immediate success "was quite a shock to my system. It seemed to me that you were supposed to labor in the vineyards of anonymity for years and slowly be recognized. Well, I showed up in New York, read a book, and literally was seized upon by the establishment," Bean recounts. "I looked at this with a somewhat jaundiced view. By '70 I had had enough of that universe, thought that the clay subculture was filled with much nicer people and that I would return to that world."

That was the year Bean found a colonial farmhouse near the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey that his wife says was "suffering from benign neglect." After moving to the farm, he returned

to throwing pots, picking up where he left off in graduate school, "making Bizen-influenced Japanese pots. Since then, it has been a slow evolution to the work that I'm doing now. It was very much a step at a time."

The house was within commuting distance to Staten Island, where he continued to teach until 1978, although his tenure was a stormy one. The administration fired Bean three times, but he was reinstated each time. The final time, he was given what he refers to as a "terminal sabbatical," during which he realized that he could make more money and have a better time as a full-time practicing artist.

It was on the occasion of the second firing attempt in 1974 that, as Bean tells the story, "I thought I would have to make a living. The economy had gone in the hole and I had never thought of the economy collapsing before. I had just never considered the economy." When he was growing up in Iowa City, where his father was the head of the department of internal medicine at the state university, "checks came 12 times a year no matter what the economy was doing, so I thought, 'Oh my God, a depression is coming and I've got to make something that is completely depression-proof.' The only thing I could think of was death; hence the 'Burial Urn' series," an exploration of Chinese celadons and Song-dynasty forms.

This interest in Oriental ceramics, still pervasive in Western ceramics communities at the time, led to a 1975 series of flameware sake warmers. With these, Bean realized that a work was not necessarily finished when it came out of the kiln. "I was doing flameware and I was doing lusters, because the flameware didn't have enough visual strength. It was matt and brown; it was like 'let's get a little more oomph out of this deal.'"

In the spirit of experimentation and curiosity that characterizes his career, he wondered what would happen if he "just painted the lusters on and fired them with a torch. I went outside where I wouldn't die from luster fumes and painted it, fired it with a torch, looked at it, realized it wasn't good, added sec-

Continued



Untitled ("Triple Series"), 15 inches in height, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware, with masked glazes, pit fired, accented with acrylics and gold leaf.

Making a Bean Pot

Bennett Bean's richly decorated earthenware forms are complicated visually and technically, taking nearly 20 steps and combining traditional and nontraditional ceramic processes. It is a long process but a way of working that "is entirely appropriate to my neuroses," Bean says.

He begins by throwing a group of vessels from a white earthenware body. When they are leather hard, he burnishes them with a stainless-steel rod to remove the throwing marks. He then arranges two or more vessels into a composition where each part relates to the other in a dialogue of forms, sometimes cutting them apart and overlapping the sections or adding extensions. When thoroughly dry, they are brushed with white terra sigillata and polished, then fired to Cone 06.

Bean then masks off areas using Chartpak Pressure Sensitive Graphic Tape, Contact paper or wax. His

glazes—made of equal parts (by volume) Mason stain, Pemco frit P25 and 20 Mule Team Borax—are mixed to a thin consistency and painted on like watercolor. "This glaze is designed to go in a pit and get hard enough to stay on the pot, but not so goopy that the ashes and crud from the pit stick to it," Bean explains.

The pots are pit fired with dry wood, but the wood smoke imparts a gray, not the deep black that Bean wants. That comes from the addition of green hardwood sawdust and oats. Salt and copper cause the pink blushes. Wearing heat-resistant gloves, Bean can rearrange the pots during the firing to control the effects. The heat of the wood fire burns off the tape and melts the wax, leaving white areas.

Usually, his assistant, Jane Clark, gilds the interiors and other designated areas. Then, using acrylic, Bean paints the remaining masked areas. One of his

"rules" is to only paint the unglazed areas. But, if necessary to make the composition work, he will paint over the glaze. The entire piece is then sealed inside and out with urethane gel. Multipart forms are mounted on matt black wooden slabs to control how they are seen by viewers.

Bean does not make detailed drawings for his pieces, although he does make "shorthand notes to myself. When I'm working on these pieces, I am not planning on the future. When I work on the green clay, I'm making green clay shapes. I'm not thinking about what color the glaze is going to be or how they're going to be painted. I'm doing what I'm doing. When I get to the decoration stage, then I'm thinking about decoration as pattern, but not as color. When I get to the painting stage, I'm thinking about painting. So I'm doing exactly what I'm doing when I'm doing it. I've made the rules."



Untitled vessel, 7½ inches in height, pit-fired earthenware, with acrylics and black latex, by Bennett Bean, Blairstown, New Jersey.

tions, fired it again with a torch. A lot of it was impatience, because a luster firing is a 12- or 14-hour process. Now I can do six luster firings in 20 minutes, and keep adding, keep embellishing.”

That discovery made him conclude that “they lied to me in graduate school. They said when the thing came out of the kiln, it was permanent, it would be that way for 2000 years.” He saw that post-firing techniques could be used to get the effects he envisioned. “My expectations and what I was getting back from the kiln were not always the same. This was an effort to get the last word.”

This experience led to a series that began in 1975 in which Bean airbrushed designs onto the fired surface of platters using semivitreous slips. The compositions were partially inspired by the works of the post-painterly abstractionist Larry Poons, who arranged geometric motifs in a regular pattern on the picture plane. This exploration was the beginning of what has become Bean’s signature look, a formal dialogue of hard-edged geo-

metric motifs versus more organic effects resulting from wood firing.

These works clearly mark an abandonment of the Oriental heritage that no longer seemed appropriate to Bean. He looked, instead, closer to home, admiring Native American ceramics and collecting American art pottery. Bean also began to explore postfiring decorative effects, such as the sheen that Native American potters achieved by rubbing the surface of a fired pot with an animal skin impregnated with fat. He adapted the process, first using linseed oil and now paste urethane.

To add color after firing, Bean began by using various colorants, including ochre, which he thought would be marginally acceptable to ceramics purists. Opting not to be restricted by tradition, he soon turned to other materials, experimenting with various paints before choosing acrylic in 1982.

Another more traditional postfiring technique that Bean uses is gilding. This began in 1983 when he started apply-

ing gold leaf in response to a desire to use the open vessel form, without relinquishing the basic tenet of his aesthetic exploration: decorated surface outside, space inside. “I saw some Mimbres bowls and thought I’d like to make that shape. It’s such a wonderful shape. But as soon as I made that shape, it became skin outside and skin inside. I’d lost my space. It was surface inside and surface outside. The space had opened out. The problem was finding a material that read as space, and gold did that.”

Why Bean felt compelled to resolve this issue in this manner is explained by his intellectual process of creation: “Construct yourself a universe, based on some ideas that you’re interested in and make rules around those ideas—I’ll do this; I won’t do that. Once you have those rules, it’s like a sonnet. It’s a very clear, very rational structure, and within that rational structure, you have complete freedom to play.”

For Bean, following the rules is a very creative process. ▲