

Bennett Bean

R. Duane Reed Gallery
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The fascinating thing about the recent work of Bennett Bean is how securely it manages to reconcile so many seeming opposites. His earthenware vessels are functional and nonfunctional, colorful and pale, curvaceous and flat, open and closed, delicate and sturdy, individual and divisible into multiple fragments. They have insides that become outsides and outsides that become insides, reflecting cultural traditions that can be identified as Eastern and Western. And they are fully three-dimensional while also presenting a rewarding two-dimensional aspect. His vessels become little dramas—highly decorated surfaces performing risky but perfected arabesques, a tugging and shuffling that keep these objects even more intense and vibrant than they might at first appear.

At the core of this sense of acceleration has been Bean's tendency since the mid-1990s to segment his vessels into several fully independent parts. It is Bean's remarkable achievement to have these elements—whether two, three or four—visually coalesce into a single interdependent unit. He does so by simultaneously using every arrow in his quiver, and this begins, not surprisingly, with the shaping of the clay. He torques and bevels it, creating mini-vessels that in and of themselves are curiously and even awkwardly shaped.

But they are not designed to exist in and of themselves; as in the recent architecture of Frank Gehry or aspects in the sculpture of Richard Serra and Frank Stella, the individual segments are created to dovetail in some suggestive way with their equally individual companions. Blunt edges collapsing, for example, to the right, seemingly screaming of asymmetry and chaos, calm down and appear inevitable when placed next to a segment that performs a similar sweep to the left. Rims never appear broken, and they actually are not; our eye sweeps across space, moving from unit to unit, unquestionably accepting the intervals and subtle twists he presents us, the drama of the whole always overwhelming any separate impression made by the parts.

After a moment we slow up and start to take in this consummate orchestration of bits, savoring a work's internal poetry and visual play. Bean's use of paint and his decorative inclination play an essential role in unifying the formally disparate components. His strategy is to paint these pieced-together vessels as single units carrying his dreamy decoration across the surfaces as if the spaces between them did not exist. Also contributing to a sense of order are the pale and evanescent stippling on the bottom of the works, which are low-footed and rather squat, and Bean's preference for a flattish, primarily frontal main view. The upper part of the vessels appears colorful and vivacious. Bean prefers a loose and gridded abstraction, a bright and fundamentally upbeat patterning that sometimes gives way to a bolder curved form. His paint suggests the qualities of watercolor, a washy delicacy fully in harmony with the vessels it covers and, along with the sheen of their gold leaf interiors, hints at preciousness. Beyond their particular loveliness and the aesthetic satisfaction these pieced vessels afford, Bennett Bean has accomplished a wonderful act of liberation: he has both imploded and confirmed the vessel tradition, a fragmentation that somehow remains tethered to the structure that has served so well for so long. He intensifies rather than diffuses, reconstructs at the moment he deconstructs. His exercises in creating a kind of vessel-fugue reveal an artist at the apex of his powers.

—JAMES YOOD

James Yood teaches contemporary art theory and criticism at Northwestern University and writes regularly for AMERICAN CRAFT.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM: *Quartet on Base*, white earthenware, glazed, painted, gilded, 13 by 30 by 12 inches; *Pair on Base*, white earthenware, glazed, painted, gilded, 5 by 8 by 5 1/4 inches. Photos: Lindsay Rais

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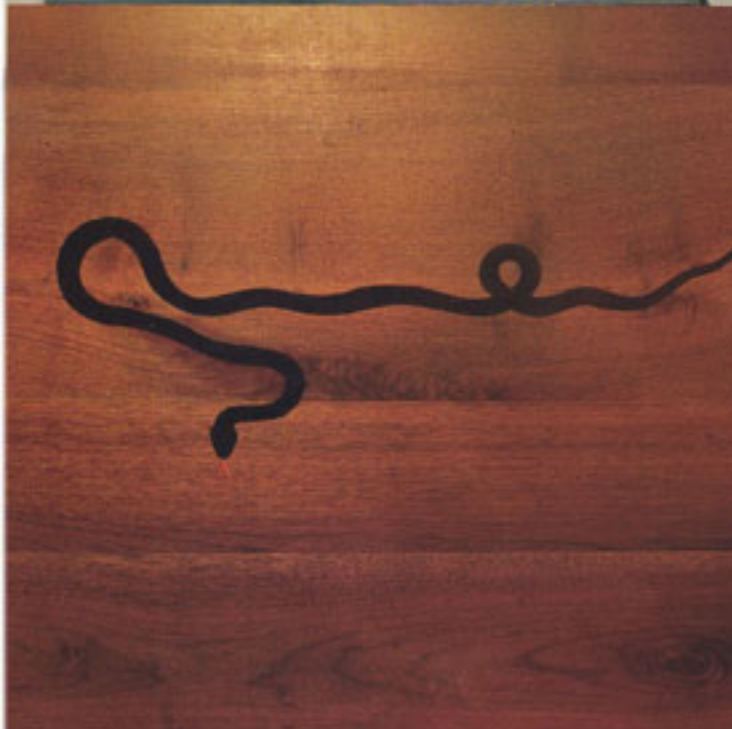
MY KIND OF PLACE

FULL OF ECLECTIC COLLECTIONS, **BENNETT BEAN'S** HOUSE IN THE NEW JERSEY COUNTRYSIDE OFFERS WHAT HE CALLS "AN EVOLUTIONARY MAP OF THE CHANGES OF MY TASTE."



The "great wall" of the great room, a fairly recent addition that blends with the traditional exterior of the farmhouse, but is completely contemporary inside. "Fancy, fancy pegboard," is how Bennett Bean describes his innovative grid display system. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bean's own DNA as a design motif in this *Self-Portrait*, a

detail of one of several Tibetan chests Bennett and Cathy Bao Bean have collected; the couple's grandson inspired this collage; the artist in his studio; yarn samples for rug designs; Bean fixed a defect in an otherwise perfect piece of black walnut by inlaying this metal snake referring to his birth year, 1941, the Chinese Year of the Snake.



BY JOYCE LOVELACE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY IHARA

From the beginning I always looked at the world around me as something to have a relationship with," says Bennett Bean, whose colorful ceramic vessels have been praised by critics and prized by collectors for going on three decades. As prolific an artist as ever at 65, he delights in "the dance" of creative engagement—the "control and giving up," the graceful movements and occasional missteps—whether he's potting, painting or traveling to Nepal to oversee the weaving of rugs he designs.

"I have endless ideas of what to do," says Bean. "The real problem in my life is what not to do." His canvas, stage and playground is an 18th-century half-hall colonial farmhouse set on ten acres in rural New Jersey, the first and only home he's ever owned. When he and his wife, the writer Cathy Bao Bean, bought it in 1970, it was "an old, falling-down property." Most of what they've done to it since has been "about skin. We've made few structural changes, except to keep it standing up." But what skin: over time the house and surrounding land have been lovingly transformed into a deeply personal show-place, replete indoors and out with exquisite details, visual surprises and thoughtfully arranged spaces and objects.

"What this place is about," Bean explains, "is not making a distinction between making houses or pots or gardens. It's the same sensibility." (Cathy, who manages the couple's business affairs, gives practical input but leaves the art direction to her husband.) Like many visual artists, particularly those who maintain their studios at home (Bean's workshop and showroom is the converted barn), he sees his home as a natural extension of his art. His aesthetic decisions and design solutions are all of a piece. "You make a pot. Then you make a table for it to stand on. So where will it go? Okay, you make a room. Okay, so what else goes in there? And on it goes."

It's a simple approach to home design, taken to a sublime level by a craftsman with an uncompromising eye for material and detail, and the kind of patience that comes from a genuine enjoyment of process. Bean's rule of thumb for everything in the house is that "it's all readable at 18 inches. Because when I work on my pots and paintings I'm about the length of my arm away. I go to that point, and that's where it should look good. It has to work at that distance."

A few years ago the couple did a major renovation of the existing building and, just in time for their son's wedding, added on a great room for entertaining. After living for so long with all the charms, quirks and limitations of an "old, old house," Bean took pleasure in creating a light-filled, airy space that outwardly blends with the traditional exterior but is completely contemporary inside, with tall windows and a 20-foot-high, barrel-vaulted ceiling. Here, he says, "I could do what I want," and so gave full rein to his vision and imagination. He ordered a special Venetian plaster ("the good one") from Italy and, working with an assistant, spent 11 months layering the walls "like a painting," going through "probably 15 colors" until he was satisfied. "The Venetian plaster," he says of the highly polished surface, "feels like silk. People are absolutely shocked when they touch it. They go, *oh my*. They're not expecting a wall to be so refined."

Eventually Bean started putting the plaster on picture frames, and then in his paintings. That happens a lot, he says. "The thing that has really intrigued me is the feedback and cross-pollination between my house and my work." Some of the same motifs found in his ceramics are subtly sandblasted on the great room's limestone fireplace. His signature use of gold leaf echoes in the bird's-eye maple floor, which is inlaid with a random pattern of gilded copper squares. *(continued on page 91)*

OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In the great room, tall shelves and windows flank the fireplace. In a corner of the room—Bean's spalted maple screen inlaid with obsidian, stools from Vietnam, a miniature Buddhist stupa on the

pedestal table (Bean practiced Buddhism for many years), and rug of his design. The exercise area in his studio with a Bean painting; a typically eclectic grouping of furniture and objects.





"This room is about different kinds of clays," Bean says of the garden room, an indoor eating area with an outdoor feel. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bamboo planting near the house; a Bean ceramic sculpture; George Ohr pot shards that Bean found early on and repaired, adding his

signature gold leaf; bulb trowels of sterling silver or stainless steel aligned on a Federal period table in the dining room. Pairing old with new is a Bean approach to objects, as with this Bean clay vessel close by the framed Asian fragment; the central medallion in one of his rugs.

