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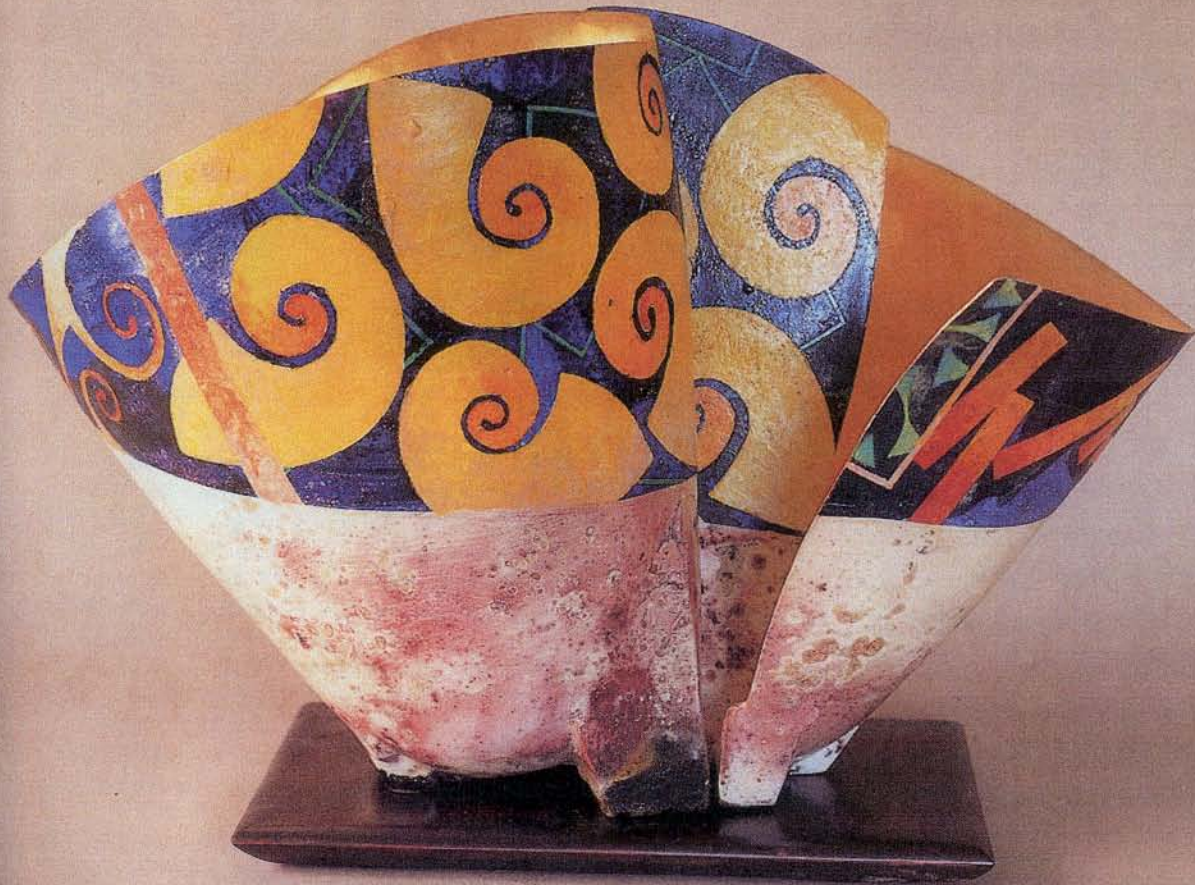
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Not Just Another Pretty Pot

The Work of Bennett Bean



Article by Karen S. Chambers

IN THE ART WORLD OF THE 20TH CENTURY, MAKING beautiful work is dangerous if the artist wishes to be taken seriously, to avoid that dreaded epithet: decorative. But American ceramist, Bennett Bean, dares to make beautiful works. They are seductive with visual activity to engage your eye. His sensuous,

thrown white earthenware forms are embellished with gold and transparent glazes, richly coloured acrylic paint, and touched by the organic effects of pit-firing. He often slices open his pots, as he unpretentiously calls his work, and combines them in a choreographed dance of formal elements.



Untitled (Triple Series). 1996. Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf. 32.5 x 70 x 33 cm. Arkansas Centre Foundation Collection.

Yet Bean's works are more than just beautiful objects. They are a visual representation of Bean's intellectual concerns which nearly always involve dualities: space inside and surface outside; traditional ceramic decorating techniques and non-ceramic methods; form in dialogue with form; and controlling the viewers' experience of a dimensional object. Some of these issues could be explored in other media but some are specific to ceramics. The richness of clay's craft and decorative art lineage and its physical properties have engaged Bean for three decades, transformed by his art-based sensibility. While he also expresses this in painting, cast bronze sculpture, functional furniture and interior design, among other activities, making pots remains his core activity.

Ceramics today, in Bean's view, has the opportunity to become a vehicle for artistic expression. Just as painters were supplanted by printers in disseminating the teachings of the Church in the Renaissance and, more recently, photojournalists by television in delivering the news, ceramists no longer have a well-defined place in society's economy. Now that potters no longer need to make functional wares, clay can be used as an art medium, as painting and photography are today. "The mistake that most people make," Bean says, "is that they think the content of ceramics should be the same as art." He believes that ceramic art should address the "characteristics in ceramics that are totally of that universe. The basic form is the vessel".

The vessel form has been Bean's focus throughout his career. What interests him is not use, volume, tactility or narrative. His pieces are specifically about surfaces decorated and space contained: primarily formal concerns. After a decade starting in undergraduate school in the mid 1960s when Bean made Japanese-influenced pots, he has developed a distinctive style utilising a variety of post-firing decorating techniques. His mature work has evolved from relatively simple forms with somewhat restrained surface patterning to much more complex compositions of overlapping and interacting forms with exuberant and assertive decoration.

In some ways it has been an orderly progression, the result of the way Bean structures his aesthetic explorations. "The real importance is to construct yourself a universe in which you cannot become lost or fragmented but one in which to develop the work where that universal is based on ideas that you are interested in, and you make rules around those ideas: I will do this, I won't do that. And once you have those rules, it is a little like writing a sonnet. It is clear, rational structure and, within that rational structure, you have complete freedom to play." It is this freedom to play within boundaries that characterises Bean's evolution as an artist. "It is a funny kind of dance back and forth because many of the changes in my work come from accidents but show me directions that I could go," he explains.



Untitled (Double Series). 1996. Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf. 22.5 x 37.5 x 20 cm. Private Collection.

Born in 1941 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Bean was a son of a doctor serving in the Army. His father became the head of the Department of Internal Medicine at the State University of Iowa in 1949, and Bean grew up in Iowa City. He began his academic career at the well-respected Grinnell College but transferred to the State University of Iowa in 1962 to pursue his art studies. Although he took 13 semesters of drawing and considered painting as a focus, he was drawn to the ceramics department "because the faculty was at least grounded in the world. Also I was seduced by the technique of throwing". After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1963, he went to the University of Washington where Fred Bauer and Patti Warashima were fellow students. After a semester, he transferred to the Claremont Graduate School in Southern California and studied with Paul Soldner. In graduate school, Bean made Japanese-inspired pots as was common at the time. When he received his Master of Fine Arts in clay in 1966, he was offered a teaching post at Wagner College on Staten Island, one of the boroughs of New York City.

Although he was teaching ceramics, Bean began to make minimalistic sculpture working with plexiglass and cast acrylic in a vein that has been dubbed 'Cool Art' and could be identified as Californian in origin. It was slick in appearance and the execution was elegant and straightforward in design, utilising hard-edged geometric forms, and was emotionally reserved.

New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art bought a sculpture in 1967 and included Bean in the prestigious Biennial the following year. His immediate success "was quite a shock to my system", he recalls. "It seemed to me that you were supposed to labour in the vineyards of anonymity for years and then slowly be recognised. Well, I showed up in New York, read a book, and literally was seized upon by the establishment, so I looked at this with a somewhat jaundiced view as I thought that was not really what was supposed to happen. By 1970 I had had enough of that universe and thought that the clay subculture was filled with much nicer people and that I would return to that world."

That year he moved out of the city, buying an 18th century colonial farmhouse with a barn with 30-foot ceilings in rural New Jersey to accommodate the large-scale sculptures he had been making. He commuted to Staten Island to teach and started making pots. "Since then, it has been a slow evolution to the work that I am doing now. It was a step at a time."

After making works that were inspired by the 16th century Bizen tradition, his interest in Oriental ceramics led him, in 1974, to create a series of burial urns. They were an exploration of Sung Dynasty forms and celadon glazes. A 1975 series of flameware sake warmers led him to the realisation that a work was not necessarily finished when it came out of the kiln. Bean believes that "you are only going to come up with a



Untitled (Double Series). 1996. Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf. 25 x 32.5 x 17.5 cm. Private Collection.

couple of ideas in your life. One of the major discoveries that I made was that the pot wasn't finished when it came out of the kiln. So most of the work that I've been doing for the last 20 years has been about that."

To supplement the decorative effect of the flame-ware, he began making lustre work. He wondered "what would happen if I just painted the lustres on and fired them with a torch". This allowed him to achieve the effect of a lustre firing, usually a 12 to 14-hour process, in minutes, and to repeat the process until he found the effect he wanted.

About this time, Bean also began to look to his own heritage for inspiration. The Oriental influence, which had been pervasive during his school years, no longer seemed appropriate to him. He collected American art pottery and the eccentric southern potter George Ohr. Unable to afford Ohr's prices, Bean bought four cartons of broken pieces from James W. Carpenter, the

antiques dealer who had bought Ohr's hoarded output in the early 1970s. Bean restored the salvageable pieces, adding his own elements to create 'Ohr-Bean pots' that now occupy a gilded shelf in his dining room.

Looking at Native American pottery, he particularly admired Mimbres pots for their forms and decoration. With this aesthetic information, Bean began to develop both a style and way of working that is uniquely his. Because he liked the sheen that Native American potters achieved by sealing the surface of a fired pot by rubbing it with an animal skin impregnated with fat, he adapted the process first by using linseed oil and now paste urethane to accomplish that effect. There has been a similar evolution from 'proper' ceramic behaviour in his application of colour after firing. First Bean used ochre, which was acceptable, and then experimented with various paints before settling on acrylic in 1982.



*Untitled (Footed Vessel Series), 1996.
Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf, 42.5 x 31 x 41 cm.
Private Collection.*



Untitled Double Series. 1996. Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf. 26 x 43 x 26 cm. Private Collection.

Also part of that tradition is another post-firing technique that Bean uses: gilding. Bean first gilded the interiors of his pots in 1983. Used in the traditional manner by applying gold-leaf on a prepared surface, the gold is not about luxury, preciousness or beauty. Instead it is used to reinforce the artist's ideas about space and surface. Although Bean had been drawn to the forms of Mimbres bowls, their openness was at odds with his conceptual framework which was to consider the vessel as "space inside and skin outside". The shape was "wonderful, but as soon as I made that shape, it became skin outside and skin inside, surface outside and surface inside. The space had opened out".

Bean needed to find a material that would "read as space, and gold did that". Now Bean also uses gold-leaf on the exteriors of the pots which makes the dialogue between interior space and exterior skin more complicated and engaging. He articulates his concern with issues dealing with duality or oppositions in how he creates his surface designs. The effects of pit-firing with the dusky blacks coming from the addition of green hardwood sawdust and oats and the blushes of pink from copper are confined to

selected areas. He glazes some areas and masks other areas of the white earthenware body with Chartpak pressure sensitive graphic tape, contact paper or wax to resist the glazes that he applies like watercolour.

Bean's rule is that these masked areas are the only places he paints or gilds although, like all his rules, it is not inviolable. His geometric patterns are drawn from a vocabulary of motifs that he has been building for nearly 20 years. His first surface pattern motifs were inspired by the all-over compositions of Larry Poons, an American Post-Painterly Abstractionist who arrayed sharply defined geometric shapes on solid fields of colour. Bean's motifs range from diamonds to curlicues that recall the jewellery he gave his wife in the 1980s to the fans of lines of her computer screen saver.

This progression fits in with Bean's own creative process where he sets up rules for himself, and slowly those rules change, often precipitated by an accident. A nick in the rim of one of his pots in the late 1980s gave him permission to violate the rim. The cut led to larger openings or 'doors' which allowed a greater dialogue between inside and outside. This, in turn, has led to the *Wing Series* where Bean slices open the



Untitled Vessel. 1991. Earthenware, acrylic. 21.5 x 18 x 31 cm. Bean Family Collection.

wheel-thrown pots and then arranges them to overlap and interlock, often adding slabs to create more complex compositions. This change in Bean's rules allows for more discussion of the inside/outside issue and introduces a horizontality and linearity that is absent in the traditional vessel form.

Pots are, by their nature, sculpture in the round and meant to be seen from all angles. One of Bean's ongoing aesthetic concerns has been about presentation. In 1986 he began a series of sculptures, the *Dolmen Series*, where a ceramic work was placed on a granite pedestal designed by Bean to complement the vessel. It controlled how the ceramic piece was to be seen. His more recent *Wing Series* and his *Doubles* and *Triples* interlocking compositions of several forms are presented on glazed ceramic slabs, which reinforce the idea that they are aesthetic experiences set apart from the world.

In addition to Bean's brightly coloured pots, he has also been working on another series, which has not yet been exhibited. The buff-coloured anagama-fired forms are abstract and more geometric than organic yet, as always with Bean, they still allude to the vessel or container. They are smaller than his thrown pots

yet seem monumental. To ensure that they receive attention, Bean places them on relatively massive wood slabs to isolate them from their environment. Although they appear different from the rest of Bean's current oeuvre, they in fact address exactly the same concerns: the ceramic heritage, the vessel form and the presentation.

Bean's reliance on rules does not reflect a rigid personality, but rather it is a way of focusing his attention, of channelling his curiosity. Curiosity is for him "one of the most essential characteristics". It is what motivates him to keep changing "because I always want to see what will happen".

Whatever it is, it can be guaranteed that technique will be subordinate to ideas in his work and that those ideas will be expressed beautifully.

Karen S. Chambers is a freelance writer living in New York. She is a regular contributor to art journals. Caption title page: *Untitled (Double Series). 1996. Earthenware, acrylic, gold leaf. 32 x 45 x 29 cm. Photography by Bobby Hanson, courtesy of The Arkansas Arts Centre.*