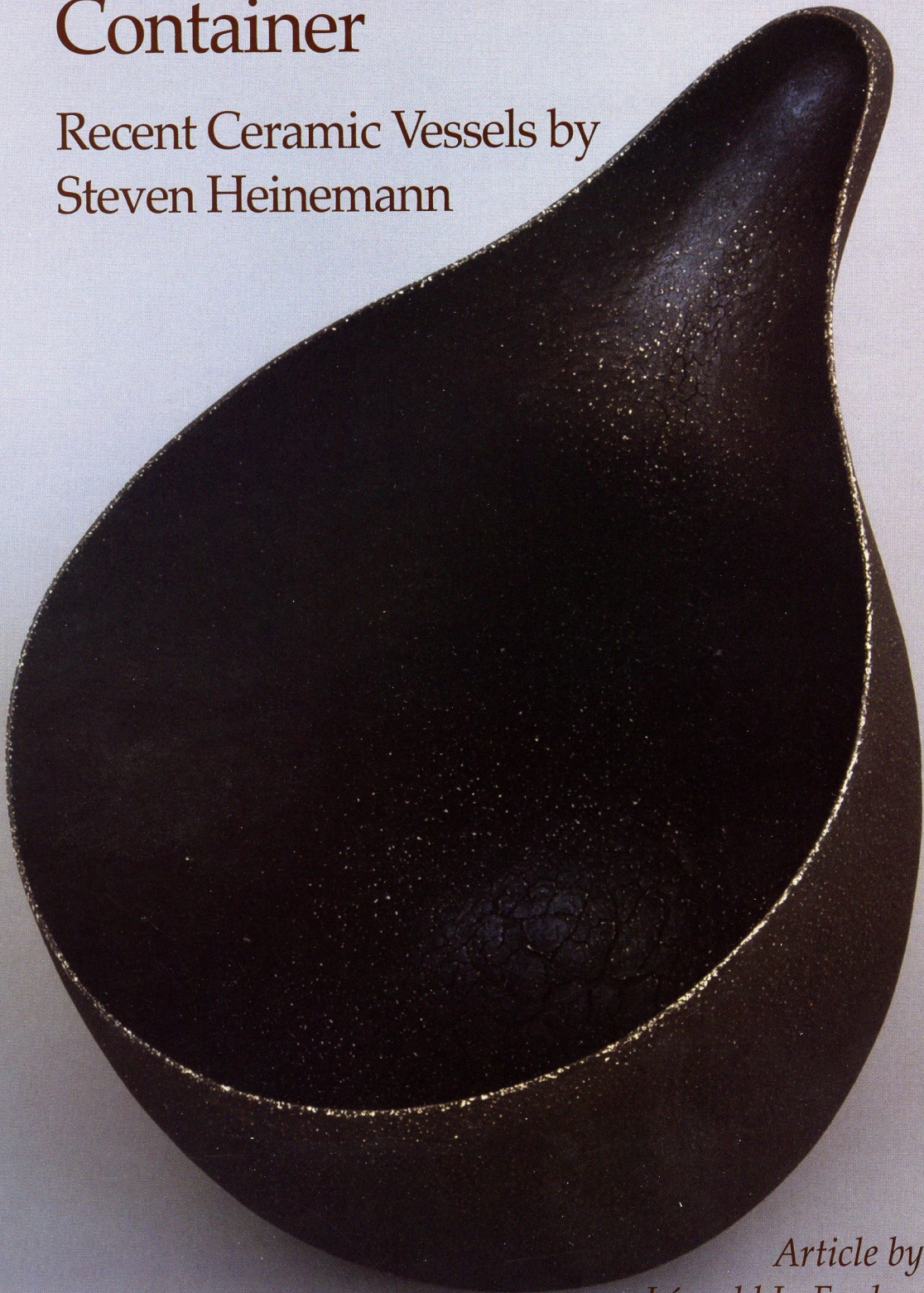


Between Shadow and Container

Recent Ceramic Vessels by
Steven Heinemann



*Article by
Léopold L. Foulem*

BETWEEN A TRUE VESSEL AND A SURFACE, BETWEEN the absolutely flat and the materiality of a form, the deliberate textured coating of these objects acts as a structural element defining the image. In a good number of pieces, the clay shell seems to have disappeared and morphed into a surface, with no exterior or interior. It is as if it were fused into a single entity.

These images are practically impalpable, so thin and so evanescent, that the forms could be perceived as transitory artefacts. They are not containers, simply skeletons, tangible shadows, vestigial remnants. Depending on the angle at which each one is considered, they could be seen as cutouts. The decorative impulse is simply not a decisive factor in this new opus. The sheer power of these volumetric shapes themselves is left to enthral the viewer. No artifices, only the visual divulcation of a form by the differentiation of the positive and negative spaces by a specific contour.

Whereas modern sculptor Constantin Brancusi's wooden cups of circa 1918–1925 are massive, Heinemann's slip cast vessels are ethereal. They are closer to perceptual three-dimensional drawings than to traditional sculpture, because the emphasis is placed on the surface as framework and the only compositional constituent. The earlier architectonic structures of the 1980s and 1990s were closer to *bona fide* sculptures than to true ceramics. The recent ceramics are unequivocally more conceptual and minimal. The inside and outside walls are not separate layered coats of information anymore, but simply a sheath outlining a volumetric ceramic image. By restraining the profile's vocabulary to feasible pottery shapes, Heinemann squarely contextualises his artistic output. The acknowledgement and exploitation of the 'space of pottery' shifts the artistic discourse and conceptual premises to an entirely different arena. For example, there are now in some instances two independent inner spaces: the case and the void. Both of these notions are tackled specifically in *Nebula*, a black egg-shaped vessel with an ancillary part attached to the rim. The whole crusty off-centred object is sprinkled with white spots piercing through the dark patina. These contrasting dots punctuate especially the rim and incite the viewer to look inside where a miniature cosmos is to be experienced as if one were floating in space like an astronaut. (The vacuum has become an explicitly narrative space instead of being a neutral zone.) Whereas in Picasso's *corrida* plates (1953) the spectators were sitting on the edge of the dish; in this situation, he is actually drifting in the centre looking down, surrounded by thousands of bright specks.

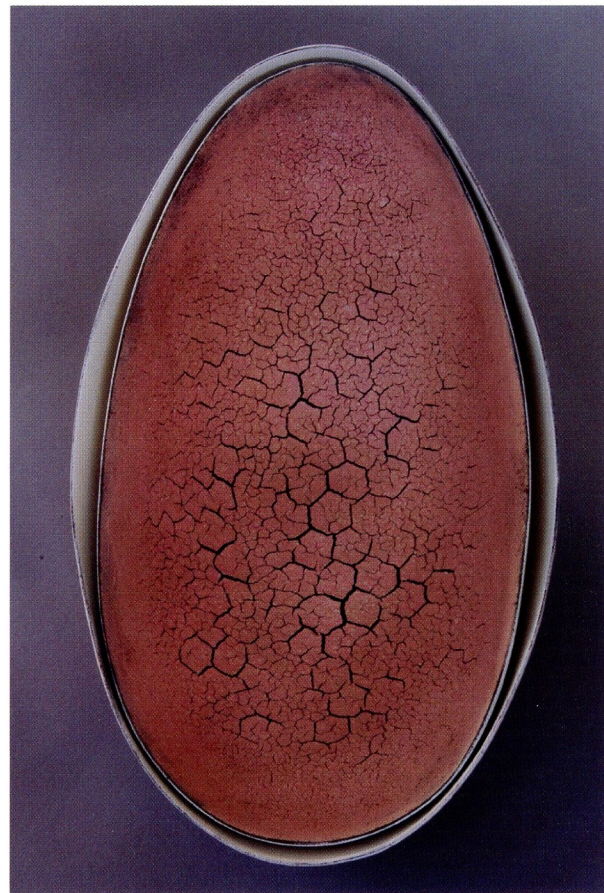
This recent body of works can be split in two groups for categorization purposes. Those in the first would fit the description of imaginary utensils and the others

could be characterized as biomorphic forms. Regardless of their classification, all are volume conscious and possess an aura of modernity conferring upon them a universal appeal. This cosmopolitan look implies that the vessels are more generic than eccentric. This is not to say, however, that they lack individuality.

The in-between space now created by the corporeal separation of the probable rim of a fictitious bowl into two slender slices of clay, becomes the core of the static ovoid form called *Double Bowl*. The initial tangible brim has disappeared, only the inside and outside surfaces are left, peeled off and cloned as two inserted volumes, similar to lemon wedges, reminding one of a set of nesting bowls seen from above. The pinkish rind, subtler and more palpable, tactile, than an 18th century Qing Dynasty monochrome ware, is covered with a tracery of innumerable dark crevices, the same sort of fissures found on each of these recent works.

It is the varied textural effects of the haphazard *craquelures* that characterize each piece. In few instances, the rips coalesce into figurative designs. Their patterns may describe recognizable unspecific floral motifs. However, more often than not, those random contours are self-referential totally abstract

Untitled (Double Bowl). 2008. ceramic, multiple firings.
35 x 23 x 21 cm.



Left: *Nebula*. 2008. Ceramic, multiple firings.
30 x 28 x 42 cm.

compositional elements. Since the ceramics are multi fired, each firing is an occasion for the artist to build up stratification and modify the patterning of these accidental two-dimensional configurations. The successive layering creates dynamic depth, breaking the flatness of the skeletal forms, thus confirming the category to which they belong. Contrary to antique Chinese porcelain, the network of cracks is planned as a morphological feature rather than simply expected decorative enhancement. The tactility of the surface is a crucial factor as a congenital component of the ceramic image.

Connections to historical pottery styles are actually subtle, less literal and more transcendental, than in earlier works such as *Mimbres* (1985). The univocal formal links to the ceramics *corpus* are found at the conceptual stratum as in *Residuum*, a black and even darker exaggerated spouted contrivance. Its ancestry goes back to Mesopotamia. One could even trace it to typical ancient pouring vessels. (In previous exhibitions, similar artefacts were indeed called ladles, notably in 2004.) A matte coating covers the slick and polished exterior wall while in the interior a coarser and coarser pattern resembling cornflakes

become progressively conspicuous as it reaches the bottom of the hemispherical pouch located at one end of this cantilever form. The edges of some of the flakes are curved up to the point of detaching themselves slightly from a light brick-red background. This non-functional aspect of the vessel emphasizes the status of the object as image.

An analogous highly textured ground is found in *Geologue 1*, another very dark and black piece. The slim globule-shaped form is fabricated somewhat as an origami with unfolding sections confusing the onlooker in the perception of the volume. The vertical and horizontal planes are unclear as to their structural orientation. If one moves sideways, the perpendicular ridge becomes a flat top band framing the expansive concave pictorial field that is treated as if it were a reinterpretation of one of American conceptual artist Michael Heizer's well known land art project, *Nine Nevada Depressions* (1968).

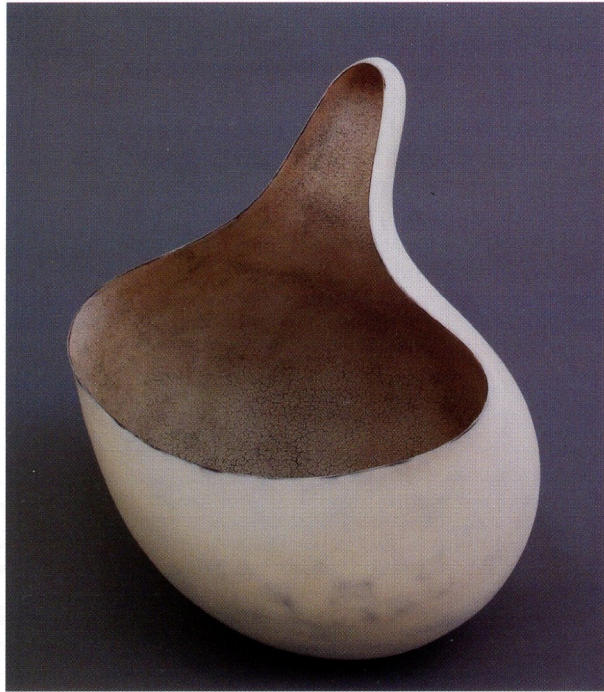
The two large white dangerously slender bulbous seedpod vessels, *She* and *Terra Alba*, both of 2008, seemed to have been closely sheared on the exterior. The outer wall is shiny and soft, like polished marble. The prototype could originate from prehistoric Crete, since this is a severely mutilated archetypal Minoan jug. The radically chopped off handle section is now

Residuum. 2008. Ceramic, multiple firings.
73 x 19 x 20 cm.

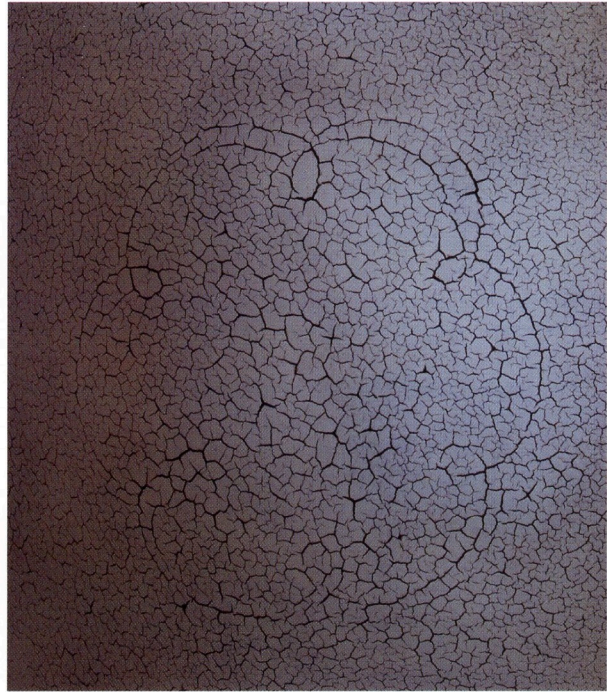


Residuum (Detail). 2008.

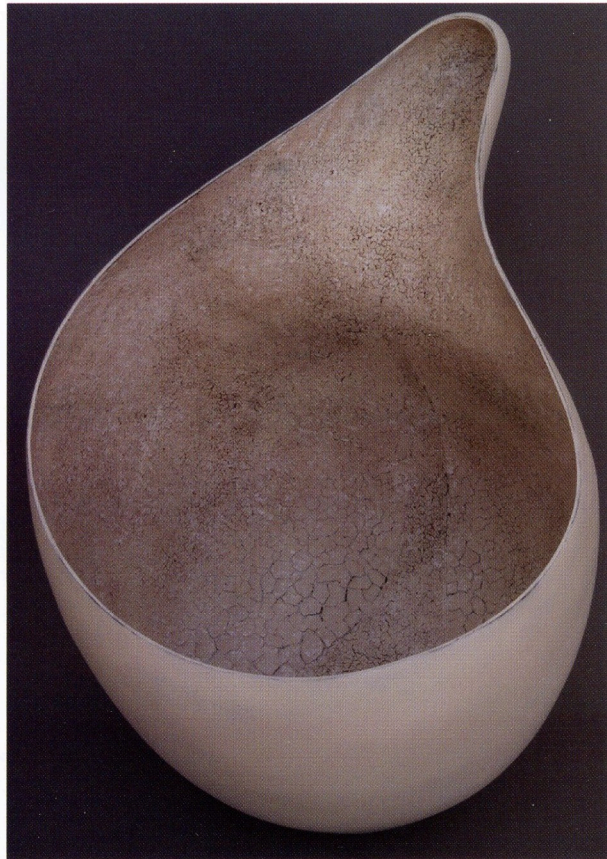




Above: *She*. 2008. Ceramic, multiple firings. 44 x 58 x 74.
Below: *Terra Alba (Detail)*. 2008.



Above: *She (Detail)*. 2008.
Below: *Terra Alba*. 2008. Ceramic, multiple firings.
6 x 43 x 56 cm.



a sizable hollow space giving entrance to a suggestive womb-shaped void. An important peculiarity of these two monochrome biomorphic specimens is their own dissimilar silhouette. Depending on the angle they are viewed or photographed, one profile is that of a genuine fictile form but the other is the frontal portrayal of an organism issued maybe from the vegetable kingdom, or perhaps a lady's slipper.

The internal cavity of *Terra Alba* is coated with white lush and thick pale scales. In one lateral middle section of the well, an iconic design of a giant drop has been carved out in the compacted dried out crust. This sexually evocative elongated pear-shaped motif is situated on the inside membrane going down right to the bottom of it, as to suggest the slow and continuous oozing of a whitish and creamy liquid discharged and spread all over the interior. Since its twin is called *She*, this might not be too far fetched an interpretation.

Hanging on the gallery wall is a large flat conformation resembling an expansive water lily where the outstretched middle section, in warm desert tones, became a meditative enclave. Its parched surface was split in two by a subdued diagonal line created by

the juxtaposition of one eggshell coloured area and a second in ochre. The curved-in narrow ledge framing this ellipsoidal site confirmed its volumetric nature.

This series of current works is obviously a quest for elusive primal pot forms. By evacuating all superfluous elements and keeping exclusively the strict essential components necessary to create an idiomatic vessel, the artist has successfully achieved formal unadulterated evocative ceramic images standing between shadow and container.

Léopold L. Foulem is a Canadian ceramist known internationally. He lives and works in Montréal, Québec, Canada. He has lectured on various subjects related to ceramics as genre; many of which have been published. He is an acknowledged scholar on the ceramics of Pablo Picasso. His ceramics have been presented on four continents.

Steven Heinemann's recent works were shown in a one-person exhibition held at Galerie Elena Lee in Montréal, Québec, Canada, in September 2008.

Geologue. 2008. Ceramic, multiple firings. 91 x 45 x 18 cm.

