Steven Heinemann
Ideas in Containers

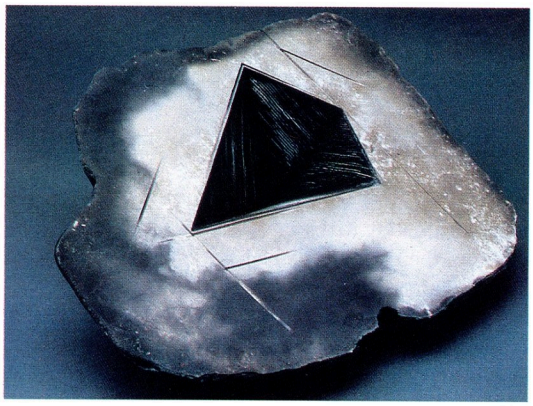
Article by Earl Miller

FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, CANADIAN POTTER Steven Heinemann has honed his artistic vision to centre on the earthy origins of plain brown clay. But instead of using clay as a material for building utilitarian vessels, he employs it to communicate ideas. Heinemann puts clay through rigorous technical processes to form complex archaeological, geological and contemporary references to consider the material, philosophical and social functions of a ceramic vessel.

Contemporary influences leading to Heinemann's abandoning of function for concept include, first of all, post-war potters such as Lucie Rie and Hans Coper and Peter Voulkos. In the wake of formal, painterly abstraction – Pollock et al – these mentors produced non-utilitarian works that were more works of art than vessels. Contemporary art has also been influential to Heinemann, in particular, one aspect of the Duchampian legacy of conceptual art in which material and media takes on philosophical meaning. Such *beaux-arts* indulgences set Heinemann apart from most Canadian ceramists since, unlike European countries, the Canadian ceramics scene is distanced from the art world.

However, by international studies, travels and teaching positions, Heinemann, who resides just north of Toronto, Canada, in suburban Richmond Hill, has been able to produce objects reflecting a diversity of modern and historic influences. His cosmopolitan education comprises studies and apprenticeships at some of the most prestigious institutions and ateliers for ceramics anywhere: Toronto's Sheridan College, the Kansas City Art Institute, Alfred University and, later on, post-graduate work in major

Untitled. 1983.



Untitled. 1983.

North American and European studios, including Holland's Keramisch Werkcentrum.

Heinemann's education marked the beginnings of his meticulous studies of historic vessel-making techniques. His research reflects a steadfast perfectionist attitude which is necessary for the time-consuming, painstaking technical process he has wrought not only from history but from intensive experimentation – experiments in achieving a subtle correctness of colour and form involve numerous re-workings that can include firing a piece more than a dozen times. A careful, predetermined approach has effected a gradual and, therefore, easily traced alchemisation of technique and form into symbol and meaning.

While Heinemann's current work differs vastly from his earliest, many significant similarities will be found when considering the careful evolution of the entire span of his production. Near the end of his student years, Heinemann was concerned with porcelain. He began to fire classically-inspired pieces with an elegant flow and motion of form. Remarkably thin for vessels, they bore the illusion of being as light as a feather. Because of their fragile appearance and milky white surfaces, they recalled shells or flower petals.

What is now most memorable about this early work, however, is not the appearance of it, although the stark pale beauty of the porcelain pieces is striking, is that Heinemann had chosen to produce unfamiliar abstract objects. "Going away from the idea of the fixed purpose of the utilitarian object to a purpose that's more open to consideration", he says, marked the beginnings of a conviction that vessels should contain meaning rather than food, drink or trinkets.

His porcelain works simultaneously introduced slipcasting as a technique that would be the foundation for building all his subsequent objects and for him involves placing liquid clay in a mould in stratas of different colours. In the porcelain series, every layer of slip underwent the same process. The mould was tilted and then held in a given position, forcing the liquefied clay to move. Some of the slip would temporarily settle at which time the remainder of the clay was poured out. While Heinemann subsequently moved away from layering and sedimentation, he continued to work with different variations of casting. In a later series, for instance, he employed a press or hand-moulding approach, pounding the clay in the mould until he reached the desired thickness.

No matter what form it takes, slipcasting is always a flexible technique; for instance, the cast's thickness may be increased simply by leaving slip in the mould for a longer amount of time. Furthermore, recasting is possible and allows for better control of outcome. Slipcasting is conventionally an industrial process of mass production but Heinemann individualises this mould process, leaving, he says, "a trace of the hand".

While slipcasting and abstraction continue to define his production, porcelain no longer does. Heinemann wanted to move on, so in 1982 he made the significant decision to experiment with earthenware clay, a medium which has proven a perfect vehicle for his interest in emphasising the clay content in ceramics. The rough textures of the larger denser pieces comprising this new series made them inappropriate for casting in porcelain. Appearing like rocks or gem deposits, they assertively introduced a geological motif through prominent interior surfaces. Vessels were split open to reveal mysterious, geometrically patterned insides resembling the planar surfaces of crystals.

In one 1983 piece, untitled as his works usually are, the surface is mostly a scooped-out dark interior built of black and white triangular planes. Another 1983 piece, centred on a smaller kite shaped centre, also bears a prominent concrete-grey surface which, although smooth, has crusty edges like the rock forms it suggests. To stress even more the stone quality of the series, Heinemann did not glaze their surfaces. These 'rock' works were defined by clay's obvious natural but too often overlooked earthy quality. Heinemann focused not only on clay's appearance, but on its metaphoric potential in representing – as his geological references do – the earth.

While Heinemann wished to stress what material can reveal in a vessel, he also wanted to emphasise what is not revealed by it. He wanted to show the unformed quality of rough, untreated surfaces and how such imperfections give a sense of possibility that a finished piece couldn't. In his geological works, viewers may know little more than that they look like

Untitled. 1988.

rocks. It is not difficult though to form imaginative readings that go beyond literal representation. The intricate models of geological faults cutting through these pieces suggest origins of natural chaos and violence that could mark the beginnings of the earth.

Such an open-ended approach to interpretation centres on Heinemann's redefinition of the term, 'container'. Typically, container describes a functional pot or vessel. Heinemann, on the other hand, refers to his

Untitled. 1991.

work as "containers for shapes and forms that are open to be filled with an accumulation of ideas".

In 1987, to further his investigations into what constitutes a container while continuing the rough crusty textures of earthenware, Heinemann greatly modified his forms and produced large organic ovoid shapes. These recall pods, stones, or ancient icons. A 1988 work centred on an oval form, for example, crudely resembles an animal's face. This anthropomorphic portrait and the cryptic petroglyph-like drawings covering it appear tribal – faux-primitive – but ambiguously so. While its origin, imaginary or otherwise, remains unclear, there are visible influences. This and similar pieces recall the oblong picked stone designs of Ireland's New Grange Passage grave, and drawings on them are inspired by the art of the 1000 year old Mimbres tribe of New Mexico.

This 'pod' stage, unlike Heinemann's previous geological series, involves entirely enclosed shapes. Consequently the exterior is given more importance by sandblasting, vegetable colouring in elemental colours (earth, water, sky), an occasional return to glazing, and intriguing marks, scratches, and drawings. While the exposed, intricate interiors are gone, some prominent surface cracks do raise curiosity about what may lie beneath.

In a 1991 work, a mysterious phallic mark centres on an oval shaped work bearing an antiquated, stone-coloured surface with pocks and holes hinting, again, at its insides. Since it resembles a seed pod, the piece bespeaks underlying future potential, further illustrating the concept of possibility Heinemann's work considers. While definitively organic, it also appears otherworldly, as if it were either an alien pod out of a science fiction movie or an icon of a forgotten ancient civilisation. Here, Heinemann constructs a web of duality – dualities of past and future, growth and aging and nature and culture may be seen in this particular object, the series it belongs to, and much of Heinemann's entire oeuvre.

Dualities in form and colour play an important role in the fourth and most recent stage of his work. In late

1992, Heinemann returned to the most standard of all utilitarian vessels: the bowl. Colour and form in these bowls is stripped down to pairings of tones of colour, and images or hints of images.

For the first time since the beginning of his career, his vessels actually appear like vessels – functional. But function is symbolic only because Heinemann's oversized bowls are not meant to be eaten from. They are, he says, "familiar objects that don't serve a familiar purpose".

The simple form of the bowl, while a universal symbol of the needs of food, water and accompanying shelter, also carries whatever cultural, historical or tribal significance its designs lend to it. However, when bereft of specific meaning, the bowl is representative of an object stripped down to the most basic of basic shapes. Heinemann sees the bowl as "an open form" which, true to his contemplation of the concept of container, is filled with interpretive possibilities.

To communicate his ideas, Heinemann's bowls are typically decorated with straightforward patterns and sketchy drawings usually recalling flowers, seeds or other organic forms. Patterns may be placed over his bowls' double tones, while drawings are usually placed in their centre. A 1997 piece is split into two slightly different earth tones at the middle of the bowl where symmetrical etching-like drawings of four petal-like forms are contained within four (colour) rectangles.

With the bowls, Heinemann has taken on a more painterly role, increasing his emphasis on colour. A simple but effective palette is employed: black, white, red and yellow. Colours are often chipped away to reveal a multiple of layers, a process lending a time-worn aged quality to the bowls.

Despite Heinemann's use of colour, the texture and tone of the underlying clay is sometimes revealed, allowing clay to merge with subdued colour. Clay is stressed even more in his newest bowls, where colour is stripped down and minimalised to nearly neutral tones. Such a pleasurably earthy surface instils the desire to touch the bowls or even to work with clay, to get one's hands dirty.

Again, though, Heinemann is playing with duality; wild urges for tactile sensations are balanced by cool intellectualism. The empty shell of the bowl coupled with the ambiguous markings at the bowl's centre reveal just enough possible symbolism to pique curiosity without providing clear answers. Here stands exemplified Heinemann's most important means of approaching content: provide a container and imbue it with just the necessary amount of information to lead those viewing his work on their own individual paths of thought and memories. These works are not only, as Heinemann says, "containers for ideas", they are containers for interpreting them.

The bowl series exemplifies Steven Heinemann's encouragement of viewers to contemplate how he uses clay to construct objects that hold ideas, in what stands as a convincing argument against functionalism as the primary social role for ceramics. Lending a conceptual role to an ancient form is a risky venture because it can counter both the ideologies of concept-driven post-modernists and utilitarian traditionalists. Heinemann, however, virtuously walks the thin, precarious line between the contemporary and the antiquarian and, in doing so, creates visceral and visually satisfying works that are simultaneously thought-provoking.

Untitled. (Detail) 1997.

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Caption title page: *Untitled. 1997.*