

Ontario Craft

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Steven

Heinemann's

Pots to Ponder

*Craft Duos
Native Culture on Display*

\$4.00



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Left
Untitled, 68 cm long, ceramic, 1994.

Below
Untitled, 58 cm long, ceramic, 1987-1988.
Photos courtesy Steven Heinemann



By Margaret Cannon

One could, I suppose, stick on Steven Heinemann some antiquated label, such as artist or artisan, but it wouldn't stay stuck for long. As both thinker and maker of splendid things, this outstanding Ontario creator has made a career of transcending such stale academic categories, and working his exquisite, strange transformations on clay with fire, producing objects that restore craft and art's ancient union. More brilliantly than perhaps any other alchemist of earth working in Canada at this time, Heinemann's enigmatic objects appeal to both heart and mind. These are not simply beautiful things, although they are beautiful. Each Heinemann work also engages the mind, taking us on a voyage into the history, philosophy and culture of all things that begin with clay.

Such qualities have long inspired ever-broadening interest in Heinemann's work – an interest that's bound to increase with his reception of this year's coveted \$20,000 Prix Saidye Bronfman Award. Also, the timing of the award could hardly have been better. To mark the Prix Saidye Bronfman's 20th anniversary, the Canadian Museum of Civilization is mounting a show of works by winners throughout the prize's history. The exhibition opened in May and continues to January 5 in Hull before travelling across Canada – providing a high-profile showcase for some old and a lot of very new works by the 20 Bronfman winners, including Steven Heinemann. When I talked with him in his Richmond Hill workshop about the upcoming exhibition, he modestly deflected attention away from the prominence that will be accorded his work in the show.

“The important thing about all this is recognition for Canadian ceramics. Canadian ceramics are being collected all over the world, are represented in the best private and public collections. There are Canadian ceramics in the Victoria and Albert in London.”

Thinking



Far Left
Untitled, 61 cm long, ceramic, 1994.

Left
Untitled, 215 cm high, ceramic,
1987-1988.
Photos by Steven Heinemann

Above
Mimbres, 100 cm long, ceramic, 1985.
Photo by Jack Ramsdale

Steven Heinemann, this year's Bronfman choice, gives his sensuous, mysterious vessels a past, present and future

This generous, low-key response to the award is typical of Heinemann, who prefers to discuss his work-in-progress rather than his personal life. But he does have a history. It began with his birth in Toronto in 1957 to Hungarian immigrants who had operated a nursery in Hungary but ended up here with menial jobs typically handed out to newcomers in Toronto. After several years, however, the couple realized a dream and moved to the country near Queensville, eventually owning their own sod farm. As Heinemann serves up a delicious Hungarian dessert made by his mother, he reveals a clue about the origins of his own approach to work. "They could buy the walnut paste ready made," he explains. Instead, "they pick out the nuts, shell them and grind them themselves. They know just how they want the texture."

Heinemann brought this same attention to detail to his high-school beginnings in work with clay. After spending a year travelling in Europe following graduation, he knew he wanted to work in ceramics. He graduated from Sheridan College with an honours diploma and then went on to study ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute and received his MFA from Alfred University. After completing studies at what he calls "the best schools for ceramics in the U.S.," he then spent time in prestigious ateliers in America and Europe, such as Holland's Europes Keramisch Werkcentrum, refining his techniques.

Heinemann's choice of the term craftsperson rather than sculptor or artist is also revealing. "I'm a craftsperson because I work in a single medium, clay, and that's a problematic stance to take in today's art world. But I don't feel constrained by that." Neither is Heinemann constrained by the fashionable cultural theory art students nowadays are supposed to master, before getting down to more "menial" things, such as technique and studio practice. Teaching at Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute, for

instance, Heinemann found "there was an agenda throughout the school that people were to be trained as "artists" first – meaning they were free agents, thinkers. Art could be made by anyone, even someone else. In fact, ideally it would be made by someone else so you wouldn't sully yourself with potential distractions that would dull the conceptual edge of the work."

Despite the intellectual and creative conflicts, Heinemann continues to teach wherever he can and considers it extremely important. "We have kids coming into the ceramics program who are hungry for stuff. They want to get their hands on things not necessarily located in their heads. You have other faculty coming to the studio to see all these kids making stuff and they say that this is mindless garbage. 'You're polluting these kids by taking them away from a much more critical approach.'"

Which, as anyone who sees Heinemann's work can tell immediately, is as untrue to his motives as it is foreign to his pedagogy.

Clay

In his production, earth becomes thought – moving, engaging, driving us by the visual and intellectual energies involved in this transformation. “I think of my bowls as paintings,” he declares. “They are bowl shapes, but they’re not functioning bowls. The motifs are intended to draw you to them. What I’m involved with here is organizing space. That’s what pottery is: space and volume. For a long time, I was concerned with volume. Now, it’s interior space that concerns me. The bowl shape is universal, with all sorts of associations and connections to civilization and the human world. It’s space to fill.”

It was Heinemann’s return to the bowl after a decade of working with organic shapes that led to his nomination for the Bronfman Award. Dorothy Caldwell, a textile artist and former Bronfman winner living just north of Cobourg, put his name forward because she liked this rekindled interest in the dynamics of ceramics’ most traditional vocabulary. “I watched his work develop over the years. I felt a connection to it. His earlier work was more like sculpture. It could be art or craft – but I liked him coming back to his grounding in pottery. He’s a kind of craftsman-philosopher. He makes us think about what we’re doing beyond our own particular field.”

Dan Crichton, a glass artist and teacher at Sheridan College, and winner of the 1994 Bronfman prize, was on the jury that selected Heinemann. “It was unanimous,” he says of the decision, “and the competition was close. But the main [criterion] for the Bronfman is excellence of work: in concept development, in design, and in craftsmanship. Steve Heinemann has all of that.” Crichton and Caldwell also point to Heinemann’s depth, his range of studies and interests, which appear in the textured, multiple layers of his work. Caldwell speaks of his spirituality and quiet strength which resonate with her. Crichton says, “The jury members were moved by his work. It has an intellectual quality, but there is striving and passion beneath. He is answering fundamental human questions.”

The marriage of engaged passion and philosophical reflection in Heinemann’s art has borne wise fruit, by calling into question every expectation of what we thought ceramic art is, or ought to be. Heinemann plays a high mental game with the volumes and masses of his tradition. Pod-shaped vessels over two-metres tall refuse to become bowls, remaining instead hollow shells, sheltering darkness. Heinemann’s bowls and vessels are never glazed; typically, they are huge, heavy, painted in the elusive hues of earth, water, sky. Then there are his “digressions,” such as the enormous shell-shaped objects that rock hypnotically backwards and forwards. Inert lumps of clay “crack” to reveal sleek egg-shaped pods within. Delicate boat-shaped vessels are thin membranes of clay in which even thinner membranes are cuddled.

The influences in Heinemann’s life and art are legion. Many of the designs inscribed in his work, as well as the shapes he uses, are drawn from the 1,000-year-old Mimbres culture of southern New Mexico. But Heinemann is also interested in fossils, in architecture (“shapes and lines,” he says) and in ancient petroglyphs and picked-stone designs such as those within Ireland’s famous Newgrange Passage grave. He draws constantly on the walls and

floors of his studio, on sheets of newsprint at his home, in journals wherever he happens to be. “Think of the clay as nature,” he says of another piece, “and the grid design as civilization.”

The grid is, in fact, the foundation of all crafts design. Whether incised, scratched, picked, or painted, it springs from the weft and warp of textile manufacture, a practice almost as old as pottery; Heinemann cherishes the idea of making abstract designs that mirror the abstraction of crisscrossing threads. He is constantly going back, remembering the usages of the past – techniques such as direct firing and the Roman slip-painting called *terra sigillata*, which brings a delicate, opalescent sheen to the surface, but without hard shine. Heinemann admires too this Roman strategy for allowing the painterly brush-strokes to emerge in the firing.

“I don’t dig the clay,” he says with a tone of genuine regret. He also doesn’t bother with time-consuming activities like throwing pots, although he certainly can, if he wishes. He prefers instead to use the industrial process of slip-casting. “It’s easier to build up a shape in solid clay.

“I can regulate the thickness of the slip, can make a vessel thicker by leaving the slip in the mold for a longer period of time, push clay into the mold for a totally different skin, alter the shape by cutting it in half and placing it on another shape.” The slip-casting gives him a modicum of security. It also reduces the “preciousness” of the object, freeing him to take bigger aesthetic and technical risks.

The inevitable cracks and slumps, the many firings, the long-term experimentation with colour require extraordinary patience and even more time – in many cases, years. “I make things and then set them aside,” he says. “Until I come back to them.” During the long process of gestation, Heinemann can fire a piece more than a dozen times. On some pieces, he abrades the surface with a grinder or sandblaster.

To behold the results of these processes is to witness the history and archeology of the pot, unfolding and coming alive. Under a smooth painted design is another rougher one and, under that, possibly another. Each object is an instance of creation, and also a record of that creation – of time, changes, and shifts of thought. “I’m not finished with this yet,” says Heinemann, stroking a vessel’s surface.

Craft, to Heinemann, is about the restoration of a certain rigorous beauty to everyday life, the intellectual and aesthetic resonance that’s fled ceramics in the era of mass reproduction. “I think of Corbusier and his idea of the house as a ‘machine for living.’ That seemed to play right into the hands of the Puritan strain in Western culture, which is really about minimizing or eliminating the sensuous. Add to that the anti-beauty code of contemporary art, where beauty is the most problematic and suspect of ingredients. For all those reasons, craft becomes a more interesting area. I’ve only been working for 20 years or so and there’s been such movement in that time, that it makes me very hopeful that the field will continue to blossom.”

Margaret Cannon’s most recent book is The Invisible Empire: Racism in Canada