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CERAMICS FROM A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE WINTER 1994/95, No. 99 \$7.50



**A Very Personal
Statement**

Trois Rivières

A Workable Studio

Cyberceramics

Steve Heinemann

Involved with clay for almost twenty years. Schooled in Canada and the States. Taught part time at several North American institutions. International residencies. The core for Steve Heinemann, however, has been his Ontario studio. Wendy Walgate spent one August afternoon in conversation with him.

For ten years I've maintained my commitment to establish a studio practice: that would be the core and other side-line activities, such as short-term teaching, would be taken on the understanding that the studio would retain top priority.

This is the first year I've taken a longer term position (a one-year stint at Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver). I had begun to feel more solid as to why I'm a maker. Now, in terms of teaching, the shoe is on the other foot. I don't want to do it just as a "job." The question now is if that makes sense. Can and does the solitary [studio] experience translate in a communal way? I don't think it necessarily does. There are certainly artists who aren't great communicators. And vice versa.

The Work

My work has gone through some relatively major cyclical changes. The first five years were spent throwing and slipcasting and working with a sense of classical form, an understanding. The second phase seemed to be about aiming for something more physical and substantial and involved a long sequence of fossil-like forms. I had been looking closely at fossils, thinking of marks and traces left in stone, an imprint embedded in a massive shape. That spurred a transition from thin, delicate pieces to double-walled forms that had more substance. (Formally these pieces, with their strong contrasts between interior and exterior, were indebted to the work of George Timock, Bill Daley, Graham Marks.) That was about another five-year spell.

Then there was a third sequence, again about a five-year cycle, of more contained, organic forms referencing pods,

stones or the related family of shapes. That in many ways developed from the "fossil" series and the realization that the back side of my work often seemed more interesting than the front. The back side or the underneath was always organic and undefined, and there was a kind of formal pairing between the chaotic, unformed exterior and the very precisely formed geometric imprint (interior). That unformed stage resembled a lump of clay just out of the bag, with all its sense of possibility. It was kind of ironic. After concentrating on learning how to articulate form, now there was more attraction to the sense of what precedes form—form that is still "becoming."

The intention was to make objects that were less defined. There was a period of working with organic shapes, enclosed shapes—some entirely enclosed. These incorporated a full range of scale from small, hand-held forms to very massive, large pieces.

The fourth cycle (and it's difficult to identify it while you're in it) involves a return to the container. The forms are blank or neutral, so the exploration is very much about surface. It's a little surprising because I always thought form was primary. Now I'm involved with organizing space in the sense of the painter or decorator. The bowl was selected as a vehicle partly because there is no more profound form to me, and partly because it offers the right situation and conditions for the exploration of surface.

Maybe there is a sense of reassessment, returning to something to see what you've learned over fifteen years. With the organic forms, for example, my primary interest had been to make something that lacked clear, overt reference,



Untitled, 80 cm long, slip-cast earthenware, multiple firings, 1985.

Below *Detail of the same object.*

something not easily “located” or pinned down. It’s kind of the flip side to the earlier objects. Also, the bowls satisfy a desire to identify with forms that relate to history rather than something that seems to be entirely ahistorical.

Whenever I teach in Toronto, I take my class into the ethnology department at the Royal Ontario Museum. Certain historical forms, like Mimbres bowls and Southwestern pots, such as ollas and water jars have made an indelible impression on me. Last summer the curator and I selected about twenty pieces which are usually in storage. When the students arrived we had an array: some from Africa, some from New Guinea and a number of Southwestern pots. It was absolutely exhilarating to experience them again. I came out feeling, “man, why aren’t I doing this?”

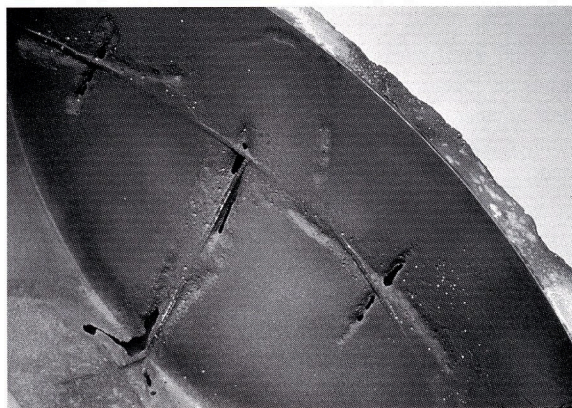
For years, whenever I did slide shows, the very first image was a breadmaking bowl, a large pot from the Southwest. It was such a magnificent piece that people would just take it at face value. I

would show it and talk about cosmologies. I think the time was right for these references to come forward again.

When I would talk about that slide of the bowl, it was in the sense that the geometric patterns developed by those people had a lot to do with an attempt to develop some sort of diagram for their place in the universe. You don’t have to see it that way, you can just look at it and say “that’s a great pattern.” But it seems inescapable on close examination of the work. All cultures are trying to account for the seen and unseen forces around them. If you look at Tantric art or the

inscriptions on Mimbres pots, you can find people who have intuited something about what sort of forces are at work in their world. That may sound inflated or pretentious, but it’s very simply a matter of things that you intuit yourself, that make sense to you, and that you work with because somehow you understand.

Looking back, my work seems to be about two very different sorts of things. One is the direct



reference to natural forms and objects; and the other is the use of those references in a less literal and perhaps, more allegorical or diagrammatic way. It's all basically the same, just different strategies. So something like that pod (Heinemann points to a piece in his studio) with its cracked skin seems to be a very literal rendering of something that would occur in nature. For example, the seed-like form inside and the cracking skin is suggestive of growth, and animate forces. On another level, this bowl is about the same thing. Something that had been fairly literal is now beginning to become more abstract, closer to the realm of symbols. I think all my work is in some way not just a response to the natural environment, but about how humans locate themselves in it or don't. There have been all sorts of avenues, strategies and takes on it over the years but I think that the basic "material" is probably the same.

The Search

What I see in my own work is a sense of trying to find a worthwhile, or meaningful, or useful meeting or reconciliation of things that are not necessarily easily reconcilable. So the work is in some ways a hunt for a relationship for things that not only don't easily relate but might seem to be mutually exclusive. This notion of opposites and dualities floats through a lot of artists' work.

Those dualities could apply to mundane as well as more universal or spiritual concerns. They are certainly present in one's own psyche: the contradictory needs and impulses that one lives with on a day-to-day basis. On some level most of us are working to, if not resolve, at least find a meaningful or useful perspective. That's not to say that the work is simply therapy or therapeutic. For example, if I had to characterize my twenties, they would have a lot to do with idealism, a really clear picture of the world and how the world works. And I think the early work reflects that. I wouldn't say that the work I've done since then is more confused, but it's more complex.

I came upon this great article by Mary Bateson about ambivalence, an experience that a lot of us face all the time. The passage was about finding another perspective after being faced with impossible choices. Or you feel like there are two opposite things tugging at you. Bateson refers to philosophers (such as Soren Kierkegaard) who say that "purity is to will one thing," inferring that what you're shooting for is to somehow collect your energies, interests and desires and locate them all in one direction. "But perhaps," she goes on to say, "a divided mind is the beginning of wisdom." I did a little mental flip

when I read that, because maybe this purity stuff isn't all it's cracked up to be. The notion of having to dispense with multiplicity so that you can get to the "One Thing" is not that viable for me right now. This is echoed by thinkers like Camille Paglia, who states that we need both the Appollonian and Dionysian energies in our lives. It also relates to what I was talking about in the creative world: reconciling opposites, in visual terms things like chaos and order, things that reference both the man-made world and organic principles, or other pairings that come up when I sit down and look at them in terms of various pieces.



Untitled pod shape, approximately 120 cm long, pressed low-fire clay, multiple firings, 1992.

Though I'm interested in religious references in terms of reading and study, and have practiced yoga and meditation, more central than that is "the hunt" and its logic which develops and unravels from year to year. With a sense of purpose that isn't even conscious, it eludes you. For example, one of the things that keeps appearing in my work is a preoccupation with a kind of seed imagery: the sense that within a form is a core, a kernel, something that is the central element, the thing that animates it. There's nothing conscious that is organizing that information. Where does this preoccupation come from? It's definitely there—that search for something that is the core. So the things you can't identify as overtly religious impulses are, in a personal or, more private way, emblematic of that.

Drawing

Drawing is central to my work: I draw before, during, and I draw after. It takes on all sorts of forms and it varies from phase to phase depending on the need. For example, the large drawings grow out of a need to visualize the clay object



Heinemann: "What I see in my own work is a sense of trying to find a worthwhile, or meaningful, or useful meeting or reconciliation of things that are not necessarily easily reconcilable."

more clearly before investing time making it. I must see it well enough to be able to eliminate some possibilities. These drawings are more studied and fully developed. Other drawings are an ongoing process of notating ideas. For years, I kept sketchbooks and other visual diaries of observations. Now they're more like jottings. Because I've been at it ten, fifteen years, I'm beginning to recognize that certain things appear over and over again. What I have now is a kind of filing system with about ten interest headings such as bowls, organic forms, joining, seed imagery. Drawings that are at one point diagrams can be, at another point, three-dimensional forms and it's not clear in the original jotting just which. Because the search is for meaning, I might try various approaches just to get to this quality that might be on a little scrap of paper—"this has something, what is it?" Off that little jotting can be the thing that "locates" for the very first time something that is important. So I value that whole process.

Other than that, there's a drawing sensibility in the work itself: line and the energy that line can convey, or the different qualities it can convey depending on how it's used. I'm interested in the sort of mark making that engages the surface the way I might be able to interact with a drawing. For example, scratching directly into the surface of greenware

affords an experience similar to that with a piece of paper.

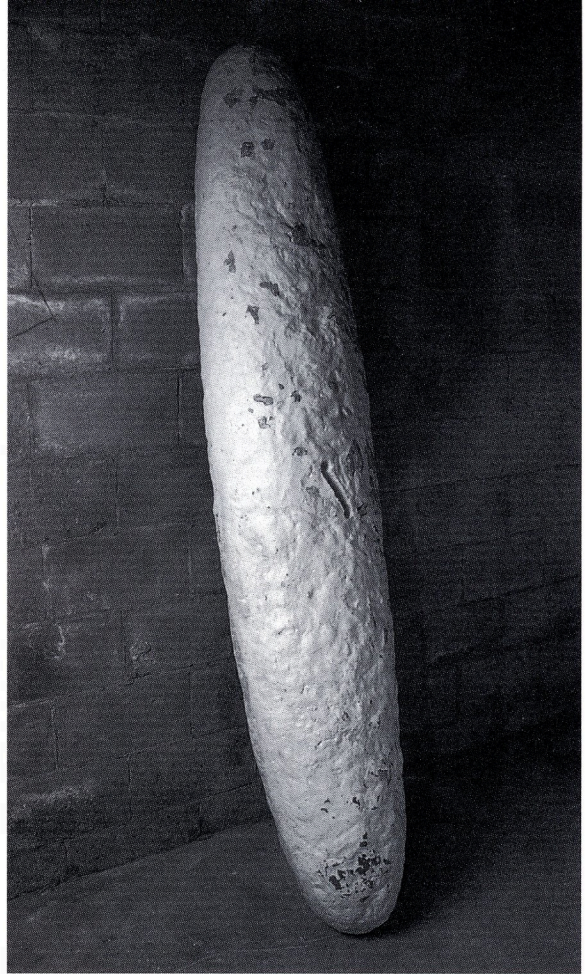
I recognize an obvious corollary between the clay medium and the content of my work, which has to do with organic principles, energies and forms and the human relationship to all that. Clay is not just a nice way of depicting those things, it *is* those things. I think for years that was the governing principle: the clay itself was not coincidence nor accident. This medium which has all of these characteristics and properties is so much a part of the very thing that I'm trying to depict. So there wasn't the need to introduce a lot of glazes to deal with that, because it was in the material. I've worked at all sorts of ways of getting at that. My greatest and recurring interest has been in the cracked clay itself. It's something that doesn't merely convey the earth element, it is that. So that's an enduring and ongoing fact. However, at a certain point I became conscious of the need to develop surfaces—but not necessarily elaborate surfaces. What happened was a realization that the forms sink or swim depending on their surface. I started surface investigation begrudgingly, thinking that I'm really about form—do I have to do this? I even wondered if I were in the wrong medium because I didn't want to glaze. However, I started to learn and develop interests.

Years ago at Alfred, Anne Kraus and I would slog away in the plaster room, slip casting and having mishaps. One day she brought in this article on Bernard Palissy and his trials of fifteen years, trying to develop a glaze from nothing. He went to the chemist's, bought materials, pounded various mixtures and he put them in the glass furnace. None of them worked. He tried three hundred of them, and he tried every possible combination. He tried one last time—he practically pawned his third child to get space in the glass kiln—and one puny little tile came out with a shiny glaze. He was so ecstatic that he decided that this was his life's work. There was something about this kind of obsession that we could identify with.

Anyway, what's happened making this kind of grudging foray into working with glazes and surfaces is that even if what was needed was the most minimal thing, I still had to learn about it. The years have allowed a pretty fair exploration of the ceramic surface. Through that I've gotten it down to the things that are going to work without having to depend on recipes and formulas. For me, teaching glaze chemistry and learning about specific materials through trial and error probably played a big part. Once you learn how a material behaves, you are free to run with it.

There is an obvious correlation between what we ceramists do and the work of the medieval alchemist. As Mircea Eliade writes in *The Forge and the Crucible*, ceramics was the first alchemy, the first recognition by humans that they could transform the material of the natural world. Carl Jung got interested in alchemy when he found that patients were coming to him with entire series of dreams that referenced alchemical symbols. Of course, they had no knowledge of hermetic, esoteric, medieval practice. He began his own research and eventually published material on his study of alchemy. (There's a treasure trove here for anyone who's interested.)

My own interest is on a number of levels. On the one hand, there's the natural world and the human relationship to it; on the other is work with a natural material in ways that

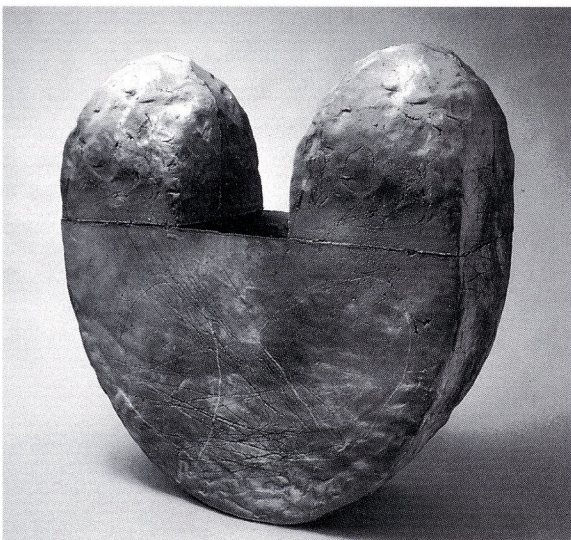


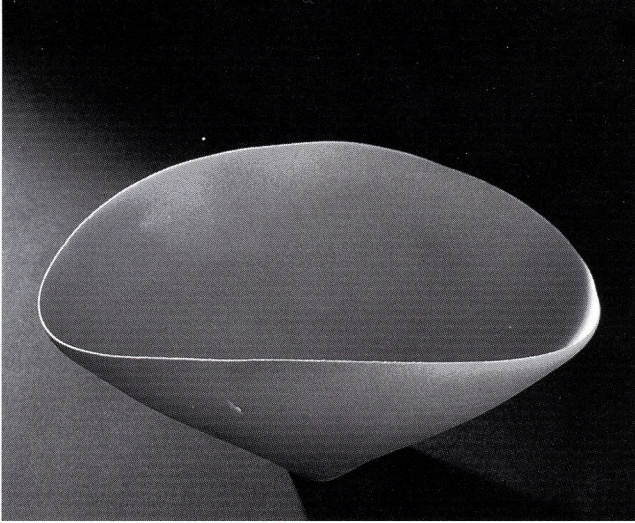
Above *Untitled, low-fire clay, pressed, 210 cm high, 1992.*

Below *Handbuilt object, multiple firings, 1988.*

have ancient origins. Adding to that (as Jung realized), alchemy is a kind of map or allegory for all the processes of the psyche and its transformation. Time and again I discover that things I have worked with quite innocently have a place in this esoteric practice. It's very curious.

For example, color. When I got involved in surfaces on the bowls I tested all sorts of colors and none of them felt right. I almost dispensed with the whole thing. The resulting palette for these bowls has been black, white, red and yellow. Yellow is the one color that I took on in addition to the red of clay which I've always been interested in. It turns out that these are the four alchemical colors and correspond with the four stages of transformation in alchemy. We have this notion of the imagination as a groundless thing: it's just somebody "fantasizing." However, the way that someone like the visionary poet/artist William Blake thought and wrote about imagination was that it was not merely personal fantasy, it was one's connection to the big picture: the means by which you could intuit the nature of where we are. These little clues cause you to recognize that, in our best moments, what we're doing is not simply private fascination or quirky personal obsession. In the best cases there's a correspondence between things that we can intuit and things that were recognized and established a long time ago. Those occurrences are always interesting little signals. However, I don't necessarily seek





Thrown, altered porcelain bowl,

30 cm across, 1979.

them out and I'm always a bit wary of them becoming a distraction.

The Canadian Ceramic Scene

I'd be loath to attempt to characterize something that is distinctly Canadian about what we do...We are all partaking in an international phenomenon now. I am impressed by the extent to which it continues to evolve and mature. There are Canadians working who are equal to anybody anywhere; a terrific degree of growth has taken place.

Probably the truism about Canadian conservatism does have some basis. The European work that I encountered in Holland is fully absorbed on the edge of contemporary art making. These ceramists go to all the Documentas in Germany and the Biennales in Venice and are completely absorbed in the discourse of contemporary art making. Whereas, say, if you had to characterize American work—it probably has to do with energy and adventure. For Canadians in general, and certainly for me as a student, I was definitely susceptible to a range of influences which I don't think my American counterparts were in the same way. For example, I was completely absorbed and smitten by Hans Coper's work as a student, and when I went to Kansas City they said, "Hans who?" They were all looking at this Japanese stuff and wanting to be Mingei potters. So I could have a kinship or connection with Coper's work, which was much more formal, studied and classical. By the time I got to Kansas City I could be somewhat detached from the Japanese obsession there. If nothing else, Canadians have had a vantage point that's allowed the absorption of a broad range of influences. That has to be a plus.

I was talking to a former student of mine in Vancouver the other day and she's not working in clay anymore. She said preparing for an exhibition in clay is twice as much work as in any other medium. I suspect that's at least partially true. There are all sorts of reasons why you wouldn't possibly want to go near ceramics. I can see how hard it is for a lot of students to make it stick. They're offered other technologies and media which give not only quicker feedback but also seem to be so much more a part of a contemporary milieu. The interesting question for ceramists is always, "How do we make clay

relevant now?" Can it be? In contrast we can look at past cultures whose dominant expression was ceramics and consequently made it reach a high pitch. In the present, ceramics is a fringe activity carried on by a few diehards. There is a crisis of relevancy for ceramics—particularly in the art schools. It never seems to be sexy enough. It never seems to be sufficiently of its moment in a way that works in other contemporary art media can be: light on their feet. They [other media] take on the tenure of the moment. I'm not sure ceramics can in the same way. Why would someone want to make clay a lifelong commitment? If I had the answer to that! One possibility is that some of us thrive on resistance. All sorts of resistances go along with ceramics; it may qualify as a form of masochism. By "resistance," I mean the medium resists doing so many things. Again, if you're in the art school environment and you want an image, you go out and get an image. You can computerize it, or paint it or print it out. It's not that immediate with clay. There are also, on a more social level, resistances toward the medium. I'm referring to the reluctance, on the part of dominant institutions like the Canada Council, to acknowledge a craft-based practice like ceramics as a viable and necessary part of Canadian culture.

For those of us who take it on, it's perhaps with some vague sense that there's something of interest in being able to carry things forward. This means that you don't look at history as a burden, or as something to be dispensed with so that you can get on with your creativity. Instead, it is this thing with a great sense of dignity to it. As such, it fulfills for me a kind of hunger for something you could call roots...something that is not fulfilled by contemporary culture. The whole question revolves around relevancy and how you can bring this thing forward in a way that is interesting, necessary and makes some sense to the very, very different lives we live today. That is a really challenging proposition and may be totally preposterous, or even impossible. But it's genuinely engaging.

A recent graduate of Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, Wendy Walgate lives in Toronto and works at Harbourfront Studios.

Then and now: The bowl form such as the one, opposite, served as an object of concentration during Steve Heinemann's final year at Sheridan College, Oakville, Ontario. After fifteen years of sculpture, the artist has now returned to the container—perhaps as a means of reassessment, perhaps to allow exploration of surface. However, he also recognizes a link to history and that "there is no more profound form to me."

Top Slip-cast earthenware bowl, multiple firings, 55 cm across, 1992.

Center Earthenware bowl, 59 cm across, 1994.

Bottom Untitled, 71 cm across, 1994.

