

# Los Angeles Times

ART REVIEW

## The Human Value of California Clay

Adrian Saxe Uses and Undermines Tradition in LACMA Exhibition

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
TIMES ART CRITIC

Smart pots, sexy pots, cultured pots—Adrian Saxe's gorgeous ceramic vessels are regularly tagged by admiring critics with human attributes of braininess, erotic allure and exquisite refinement, as if the vessels themselves were breathing, sentient creatures rather than hand-fashioned lumps of clay transformed by fire. The miraculous power of an almost godlike, pagan magic is unconsciously implied.

In the eagerly awaited retrospective exhibition that opened Thursday at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, it's easy to see why. Vessels have long been regarded anthropomorphically, as is plain from the common names ascribed to their compo-

nent parts: lip, shoulder, body, foot. Saxe pumps up those associations in a host of formally inventive ways.

Then, he goes them one better. He exploits subtle properties of ceramic presentation and display, in a manner that makes a viewer self-consciously aware of being addressed. You find yourself having an animated visual conversation with his work in ways common to art, not crafts.

Born in Glendale, Saxe has drawn on traditions prominent in California clay, both to build upon and to undermine them. On the occasion of the Los Angeles-based artist's 50th birthday, "The Clay Art of Adrian Saxe" brings together nearly 100 works made between 1967 and 1992.

He's not been unmindful of contempora-

ries working in other artistic mediums, either, especially the sleek, slick, figurative and abstract forms of 1960s L.A. Pop and the excruciating perceptual precision of Light and Space art. Both were on the ascendant when Saxe was a student at the Chouinard Art Institute in the late 1960s, while the quality of craftsmanship so important to artists ranging from Craig Kauffman to Robert Irwin is simply intrinsic to Saxe's chosen territory.

As for clay, it had come through an extraordinary rebirth and efflorescence in the 1950s. The following years saw the emergence of a playful, often jokey approach called funk, which opened a floodgate of puns about clay, inspired by Pop and the legacy of Marcel Duchamp. If the

funk attitude, in its many variations, often seemed to trivialize ceramics in a not unworthy effort to deflate the pious rhetoric that had congealed around it, funk's irreverence also spoke of a new anxiety toward the precarious status of the work of art in the contemporary world.

In the exhibition, Saxe's earliest work shows him groping through this tangled field. There are corny erotic jokes in clay and exquisitely glazed abstract objects, principally concerned with properties of reflected light. Growing technical mastery is everywhere in evidence.

There are also a dozen plates, mugs and covered dishes—the traditional output of the craftsman potter who sells dinnerware to make a living—as well as a prototype jardiniere Saxe designed for potted plants at the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino. These utilitarian works, dating from the 1970s, are of interest for reasons other than their attractive (if mundane) formal qualities.

Through them, Saxe began to consider the labyrinths through which art in general, and ceramics in particular, are given social and cultural value. He found that a simple porcelain plate might be as easy to make as a stoneware one but that it could also bring a higher price—if for no other reason than the thoughtless prejudices associated with the material. An excep-

tionally rich history for these tendencies, with all their social, cultural, political and aesthetic ramifications, was on display in the expansive decorative arts collections at the Huntington.

By the end of the 1970s Saxe was well on his way to incorporating these considerations into his own work, as can be seen in two related ways. First, each distinct part of a vessel is increasingly emphasized, from form to surface, foot to lid. Second, each discrete part becomes a useful site in which an aspect of the tangled, global history of ceramics can turn up. Saxe's cross-cultural pots might mix the ancient vessel form of a gourd with a Chinese celadon glaze and Art Deco incising. Traditions from Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas collide.

About 1980, the eccentric form of a saw-toothed machine gear suddenly appeared, adapted by the artist from a design in a Pratt & Whitney machine-tool manual. A witty joke about his visual and conceptual shifting-of-gears among disparate cultural sources, the form also seems pointedly symbolic of a passing era.

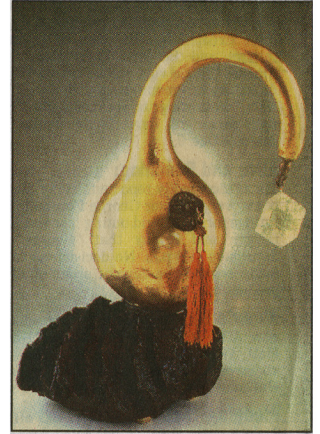
The gear's prominent appearance on a luxury item plainly announced the industrial foundation on which the wealth of modern empires was built. Yet, subsumed into a purely decorative flourish made of porcelain or gilded—about as functional as your appendix—the gear waved goodbye to the Machine Age. In the home-spun world of modern handcrafts, it was the triumph of machines that

had given clay its claim to moral legitimacy as an oppositional force. Saxe's art signaled a cultural crisis. For more than a decade he has been mining this new and fecund territory. With outrageous humor and unspeakable beauty, he makes intensely seductive objects that exploit traditional anthropomorphic qualities associated with ceramics. Having pressed the question of the utility of his own art in a post-industrial world, his work engages us in a dialogue about our own place in a radically shifting cultural universe.

The result is that Saxe has become the most significant ceramic artist of his generation. For this reason, one small feature of the show is a keen disappointment. Organized by curator Martha Drexler Lynn and handsomely installed in sumptuous galleries on the second floor of LACMA's Hammer Wing, the show instead should have been mounted in the temporary exhibition galleries of the Anderson Building for 20th-Century Art.

Given modern ambivalence about the very status of ceramics as serious art, and given the way in which Saxe's brilliant work has burst open those historical prejudices toward the medium, the museum missed a golden opportunity for a bold polemical statement. And because context confers meaning, it also lost an added layer of educational elucidation for the work of a major artist.

■ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (213) 857-6522, through Jan. 30. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.



Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Adrian Saxe's "Seasonal Affective Disorder": One of nearly 100 works at LACMA.