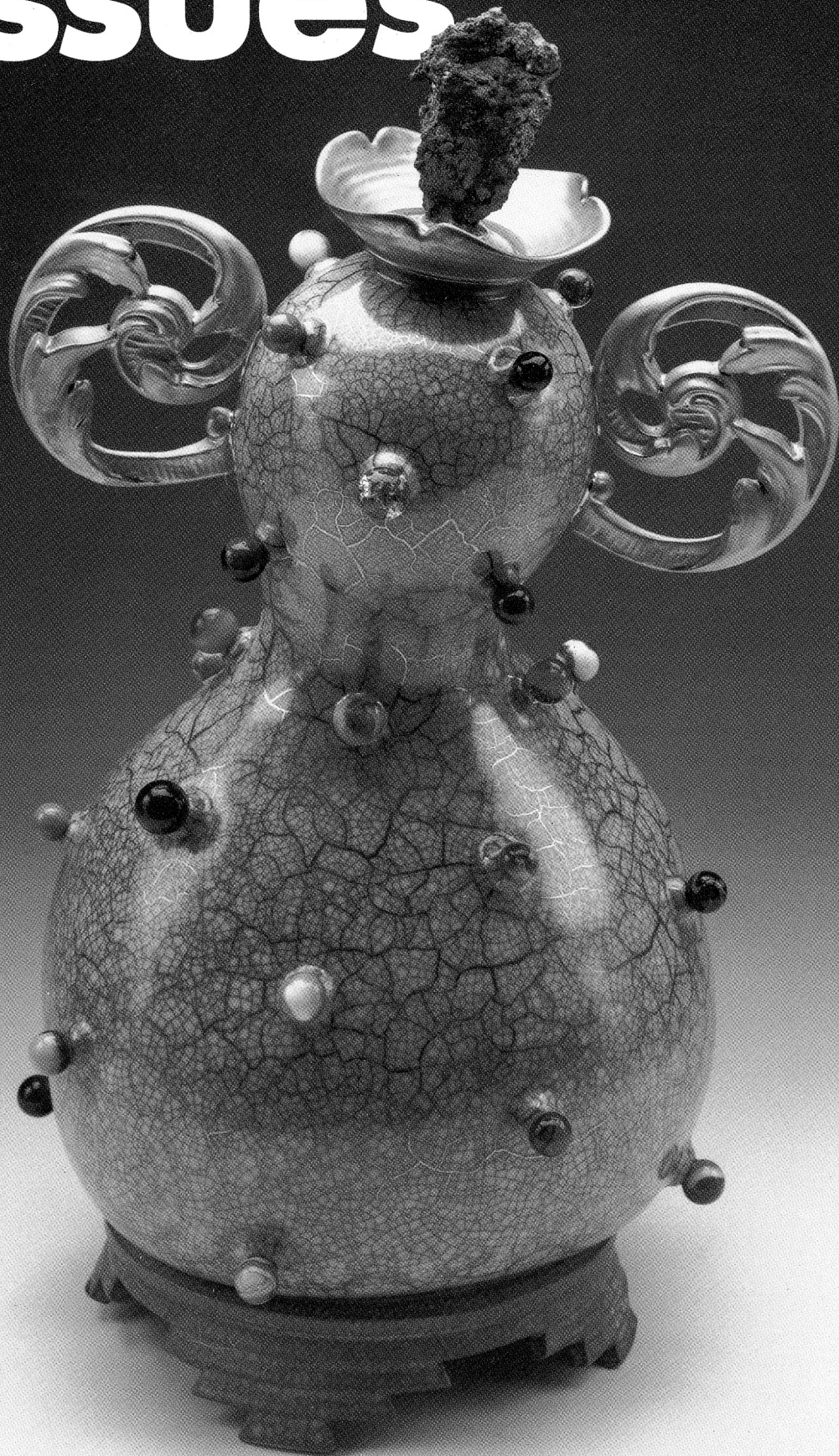


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Adrian Saxe's

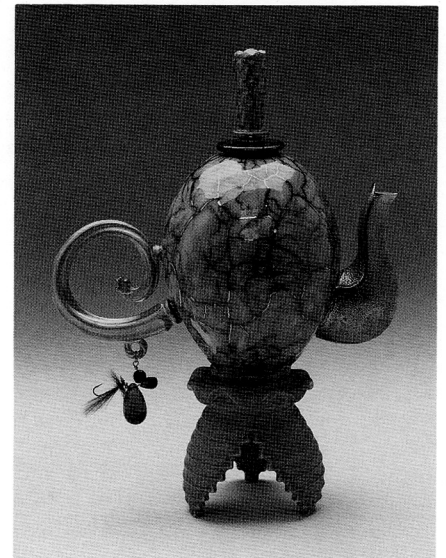
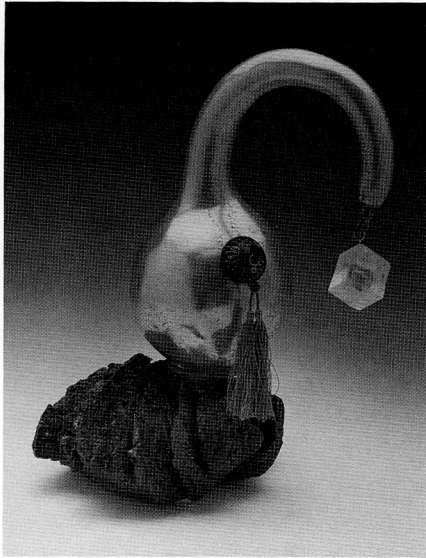


Sexy Pots

In one of Adrian Saxe's spectacularly crafted gourd-shaped vessels, a shiny, golden stem bends salaciously—but also gracefully—back toward a petrified lump of crusty, turdlike material. The sharp edges, violently weathered contours, and burned surface of this weighty chunk of unformed matter suggest that it was belched up from the bowels of the earth, or fell from space as the only remaining trace of a meteorite's fiery descent. From the tip of the vegetable's suggestively drooping neck dangles a delicate, earring-like chain at the end of which hangs a blocky fragment of Chinese flourite. The glassy mineral resembles an expensive—and incredibly refractive—rendition of a gag ice cube. Next to this fraudulent piece of magic-store trickery, Saxe has stoppered a round orifice in the tumescent body of the porcelain gourd with a metallic-looking plug. Molded from a piece of eighteenth-century decoration that once served to hide the nail holes in luxurious, French furniture, the plug is exquisitely detailed and festooned with an antique silk tassel. Its thick, braided swags of rusty orange ornamentation brush delicately across, and sway tantalizingly above, the rough surface of the refined vessel's brute, unpainted base.

Titled *Seasonal Affective Disorder* (1991), Saxe's strange container sets up a neat, symbolic dichotomy between a seemingly inexhaustible series of slippery oppositions. It also has the capacity to host a wacky array of unlikely stories, from volcanic eruptions to plummeting meteors, and yuppie diseases to the healing potential of crystals. Like the recently reported condition that supposedly causes people to behave like plants, from which the piece obtains its title, his twisted vessel proposes that an imbalance between light and shadow or heat and coldness gives objects, including our bodies, their sense of vitality and tension. The treatment doctors recommend for the psychosomatic malaise or run-down disinterest in living that is prevalent in winter, when sunlight is scarce, is illuminating one's home or office like a greenhouse, to trick one's body into believing that it's on a continuous "Club Med" vacation. The darker, flipside of the condition suggests that people share more with bears than vegetation—that some of us need nothing more than hibernation, four or five months of uninterrupted slumber. Like the dreams that must accompany such a deep sleep, Saxe's clay containers freely move across the spectrum of animal, vegetable, and mineral forms, momentarily locating whatever might be human in all three categories.

Adrian Saxe
Untitled Ewer, 1992
Porcelain
13-1/2" x 9-1/2" x 4-1/2"
Photos: Anthony Cuiña
Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery



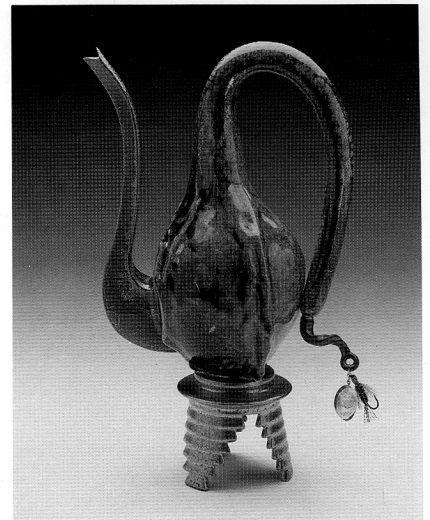
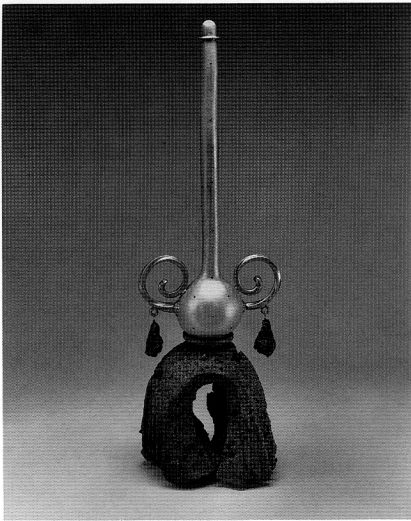
As this seemingly diversionary tour suggests, bodily allusion is essential to Saxe's work. His engaging creations appeal to our physiques at the same time that they call forth thought. The exuberant excessiveness of their artificial, overwrought details prevents us from taking them in all at once. When we focus our concentration on any single element, Saxe's intentionally shifty objects take over, switching nouns with verbs and confounding sense in order to get us to stretch our capacity to hold logic together with nonsense. When we look at a detail of any one of his vessels, other elements sneak into our awareness, as if through our skin. By sidestepping rational control, they open up a dreamy or hallucinatory world of fluidity, in which everything is just what it seems, but also something else. Saxe's pots thus operate by setting us up: by inviting or eliciting a set of expectations and then delivering something different, they rarely let us down.

The dangling, icy crystal of *Seasonal Affective Disorder* contrasts with its hot, orange tassel. Like an upside-down flame, it refers, in an oblique manner, to the ceramicist's kiln, to the magically transformative power of highly controlled but sometimes unpredictably intense heat. This piece also represents a structuralist's fantasy of the way the world sometimes divides into an infinite array of oppositions. Hot and cold, fire and ice, swollen and flat, round and cubical, hard and soft, hirsute and glabrous, translucent and opaque begin a potentially endless list of opposites brought to mind by Saxe's coupling of a makeshift plug and an extravagant, imitation ice cube. This axis of terms mirrors and duplicates the opposition between the elegant, swan-like gourd and the coarseness of the base upon which it sits.

Sex is never far from the surface of any narrative that spills from Saxe's containers. *Phytogenic Object of Affection* (1991), for example, resembles an erect and distended version of *Seasonal Affective Disorder*. With shrivelled pears dangling like a pair of organic earrings from two spiralling pink handles, this towering and helmeted vessel of gold evokes fantasies of fertility rites and headhunting, shrunken testicles and castration anxiety, campy decoration and overblown clichés. A series of *Untitled Mystery Ewers* (1991) explicitly evokes the physical functioning of sex. These curvacious pots, which can only be filled by lifting them off their stands and pouring liquid in through their bottoms, have inspired Saxe to produce a new series in which this hidden orifice comes in the form of female genitalia. Likewise, the stopper in the sole orifice of *Seasonal Affective Disorder* sets one off on a wild, mind-bending trip through limitless anthropomorphic associations. The cool, fragile, porcelain plug resembles the pasty-covered breast of a sinuous,

Adrian Saxe
Seasonal Affective Disorder, 1991
 Porcelain, stoneware
 12-3/4" x 10-3/4" x 7-1/2"

Adrian Saxe
Untitled Ewer (Chou), 1992
 Porcelain
 11" x 8-1/2" x 4-1/4"



lopsided stripper. Simultaneously womblike and phallic, the vessel also fuses a symbolic umbilical cord with a belly button. In Saxe's hands, this mundane bodily reference sends up Modernism's fantasy of aesthetic autonomy. His self-conscious pottery gleefully usurps the supposedly heroic self-scrutiny of that period by turning its highly reflexive study of materials into a fun-filled romp through narrative possibilities.

Despite a perverse economy of means, the impeccable execution of a master craftsman, and the exquisite sense of balance perfected by a seasoned libertine, Saxe concocts and constructs pots that don't really hold together as coherent wholes. These are consistently articulated ensembles of divisive styles, with an unrelated multiplicity of historical referents and a variety of elements from every sphere of life—fishing lures to radio transistors, antique marbles to bits of dried flowers, nineteenth-century figurines to expensive gems. Rather than following a common postmodern model of composition—in which meaning is intended to emerge wholly from the inconsistencies of strangely conflated sources—the outrageously playful works of this Los Angeles-based ceramicist cohere on a more duplicitous and sophisticated level. Their mutant fusion of cheap ornamentation with specialized, ritualistic ceremonies, of mass-produced kitsch with aristocratic elegance, is best understood as postmodernism raised to the second power. They are not cacophonous collages of unequally valued fragments, but fully resolved, if flamboyant, objects, in which beauty returns to the picture in the absence of any reliance upon moribund modernist traditions.

Saxe's delightfully uncategorizable, voraciously inclusive, hilariously unsettling, and profoundly intelligent objects confuse distinctions among a multiplicity of styles from art history and signs from contemporary culture to preserve the power of art, augmenting its aura and building upon its abstract capacities by buttressing its potential for narrative, reference, and metaphor. His asymmetrical vessels hold liquids and contradictions together in an intoxicating parade of hyperconscious stylization that never forgets the priority of physical sensation. Sensationalistic without being superficial, his exotic, erotic, and funny containers, for the sake of nothing but pleasure, play out an exciting, contemporary confabulation between functionality and decoration, between the bodies of the vessels and those of their viewers.

Adrian Saxe
***Phylogenetic Object of Affection*, 1991**
 Porcelain, stoneware
 19-1/2" x 10" x 7"

Adrian Saxe
***Untitled Mystery Ewer*, 1991**
 Porcelain
 12-1/2" x 8" x 4-1/2"

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