

Untitled (1980-81), 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (57.5 cm) high,
porcelain and stoneware. Courtesy Garth
Clark Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Allen
Laughmiller.



Adrian Saxe: An Interview

Garth Clark

Garth Clark Arguably the best point at which to begin is with what has rightly or wrongly become your leitmotif, the antelope jar. What is the significance of the antelope for you and why has it endured so long in your work?

Adrian Saxe The antelope was first used intuitively, simply in response to the need for a certain decorative distinction. Actually, the first animal I used was the ram. The Huntington Gallery commissioned me to do jardinières, with the stipulation that they be both very fine objects and that they blend unobtrusively into their environment. That is a tough commission. No artist wants his work to fade into the background—particularly a young artist seeking his signature.

So I began to do some research and found myself drawn to the use of the ram, the stag, and other animals of the hunt found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European pottery. (Although some of the best uses of these animals I found on monumental English silver of the same period.) At first I used the ram in relief, but rapidly this grew to a full figure.

Before settling on the antelope, I tried snails, salamanders, panda bears, pigs, cats, and even a pegasus, which turned out to be too cloying and cute. But finally I settled with the antelope. It worked for me, though I was not too sure why. Since then I occasionally have decided to abandon this animal, but I keep coming back to it and each time I return, its purpose becomes more clear.

It is now a crucial element in my work—a contrast that throws all other elements into high relief, making the total statement more understandable. You see that my forms are very geometric in their underlying structure. They are controlled and cerebral. The antelope is the opposite, it represents a life force. It is poised on the lid in its aerie, as if about to take flight. It is not of the world of geometry or cultural reference, it is from nature. The conventionalized quality of the pot dramatizes the naturalism of the antelope, and vice versa.

GC But it goes further than that, it creates a sense of ambivalence or at least ambiguity in terms of function.

AS Certainly, the antelope does not perform in the expected way. By changing its scale and making it very prominent, one is directed to its apparent function as a handle. Yet by making it difficult to use as a lifting device, one is denying the way in which the animal has been used in pottery before (conventionalizing the form so it *could* function as a handle). This forces a dialogue about function and its connections. One begins to think about what a handle is, what it means, and what it means to be denied this function. So one appraises the vessel's function in the manner it was intended; it is concerned with aesthetic ritual—didactic and visual—rather than utility.

GC The antelope has a history of importance in our decorative arts. It was used broadly during the Art Deco movement, along with the fountain and the ziggeraut. It was treated in metal by Edgar Brandt, in glass by René Lalique, in ceramics by John Skeaping, Jean Mayodon, Harold Staebler, and many others.

AS The antelope's fascination for us ranges from simple admiration of its beauty to the mythical roots of its symbolism. For me, it is an extraordinary device and I am less concerned with what it means than with the feelings it projects. It has delicacy and elegance combined with strength—a palpable aggression even. There is a sense of agility and, in my work I hope, a sense of arrested motion. Again this highlights a contrast: the antelope represents real time arrested, the forms represent past time assembled.

GC In your new forms, the antelope seems to be part of a system of some kind; I am referring in particular to the more complex works with base, vessel, and lid.

AS Yes, there is a hierarchical organization of forms and complexity. The bases I keep to a very primal expression. They are visibly affected by the fire, they are earthier, less finished, cracked, and sometimes include shards of previous works. There is the appearance of weathering and decomposition. Yet they are not organic. The bases represent their material source, which in turn metaphorically indicates ceramic and aesthetic foundations. The vessel, on the other hand, is a more refined, culturally determined



manifestation of the medium. Then, finally, comes the antelope again—the contrasting gesture that can be represented, but unlike the rest of the piece, cannot be controlled.

GC They are also porcelain. Is your choice of medium simply aesthetic, or is it tied to the complex and rarified history of the material?

AS Stoneware could be used as effectively in aesthetic terms, but it does not carry the rich cultural identity porcelain possesses. Stoneware does not have the same esoteric resonance.

GC Your use of a motif is of course not new in art. Yet your continued use of the antelope seems to have perplexed certain people. Perhaps they are looking for growth in the wrong place. After all, many artists have had signature devices: Philip Guston's boots and hoods, Léger's flower form, Braque's dove.

AS Another obvious example is Billy Al Bengston's iris or *Dracula* form and his earlier chevrons. They establish a personal, identifiable emblem or graphic device for "punctuating" and organizing his abstract painted fields. They seem derived purely from the craft of painting and the decorative possibilities of the materials he used. I do much the same thing with the antelope, except that it doesn't function in any graphic way, nor does it have the range of variation that Bengston's recent *Draculas* have. Not all artists use signature devices that are so readily identifiable, but we all have "constants" that we come back to time and again. We use them to organize the visual sense of our work; they are the compass points by which we navigate.

GC Let's turn now from the antelope to more general aspects of form. First, the forms of your vessels, which in some cases are influenced by very specific models, such as the Buddhist bell form.

AS As a student I was deliberately emulating bronze forms, particularly Chinese ceremonial wine vessels. I was not alone in this fascination. For hundreds of years the Chinese potters have borrowed forms and stylizations from bronze ritual vessels, which they continually adapted to their own forms. This went to and fro and created a dialogue between clay and bronze vessels that is still a powerful source of inspiration. The bronzes showed very interesting ways of dealing with conventionalized detail—the rings or the bosses on the caldrons, for example. Also, tracing the evolution of decorative and structural devices from clay to bronze and back again was very enlightening. The surface was not simply decorative, but responded to a real understanding of where that statement was derived from and what the next and logical step of development should be.

GC But what of ceramic influences?

AS From the beginning, as a student, I found it difficult to swallow the shallow Anglo-Oriental aesthetic that was predominant in the art schools. The characterization of the tea-ceremony aesthetic as being the "natural" form for clay was not convincing. The only clay that was natural to me was clay that was still inside the hill. Every step from digging it up onward was very unnatural in the organic scheme of things. I felt that a Sèvres urn was as natural as a teabowl. In fact, for me it was more natural. My roots are Western, not Asian. So when everyone else was into Zen, I turned instead to Europe, particularly eighteenth-century Europe.

I was intrigued by the complexity of decorative art in a nascent machine age: the division of labor, the duality of art and craft, the precision, and above all the overwhelming and eclectic curiosity about all kinds of visual material. The French and English porcelains interested me most because of their eccentric appearance and inventive structure and processes. Chelsea porcelains in England were among my favorites. At times they were excessive, but at their best, during the Red Anchor period, they excelled at producing mannered, innovative form with remarkable refinement. My real passion, however, is for mid-eighteenth-century Sèvres. It is ambitious and complex and, for me, it is the most satisfying technically and formally.

GC Your involvement with this period extended beyond the objects, did it not?

AS What I admired was the European impulse to collect all

Icosidodecamerous End-Cutting Bowl
with Stand (1982), 5¼" (13.3 cm) high,
porcelain with raku base. Courtesy Garth
Clark Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Allen
Laughmiller.

Untitled (1982), 8¾" (21.3 cm) high,
porcelain. Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery,
Los Angeles. Photo: Allen Laughmiller.





kinds of things that were unfamiliar and very “mystical,” be it a rock crystal or a Chinese celadon pot, and give it special importance by displaying it in a different context than that which it was created for—setting it in bronze mounts, ormolu, or Bombay cases, for example, so that these objects would make sense in their new environment. Something in that process of curiosity, for that is what it was, struck an answering chord. I share the urge to isolate things of visual interest and then to restructure them in a way that alters our perception of the original purpose.

GC In your discussion of pottery you seem particularly obsessed by the aspect of process.

AS Respectful of process, rather than obsessed. You see, at this stage it is easy enough to pinpoint the cultural reference in a form. And today I am cognizant of these references, their meaning and context, and I use this information deliberately. But much of my early response to form—shapes that are now seminal to my work—came simply from working with the medium. One can only learn so much by drawing or by reading a book. The greater lesson is learned in trying to physically manipulate the material. For example, one finds that a recurring slab of clay is structurally stronger than a flat one. Out of this simple discovery a new form can emerge.

As I learned to manipulate clay, I applied each new lesson to inventing “new” forms. Although these forms were made with the deliberate intent to be original, I discovered over the years that these had been achieved by potters before me. And so while some forms were innovative, others were not. None of this mattered. That I achieved certain existing destinations was not as important as the fact that I arrived at them by my own and innocent route. And so as much as my delight in the world of decorative and contemporary fine art is a major source for my art, so, too, is the lesson of process, the act of making. I don’t think this is very different from the hands-on aspect of the other arts. Painters learn as much from the act of painting as from other painters. It’s the same in pottery.

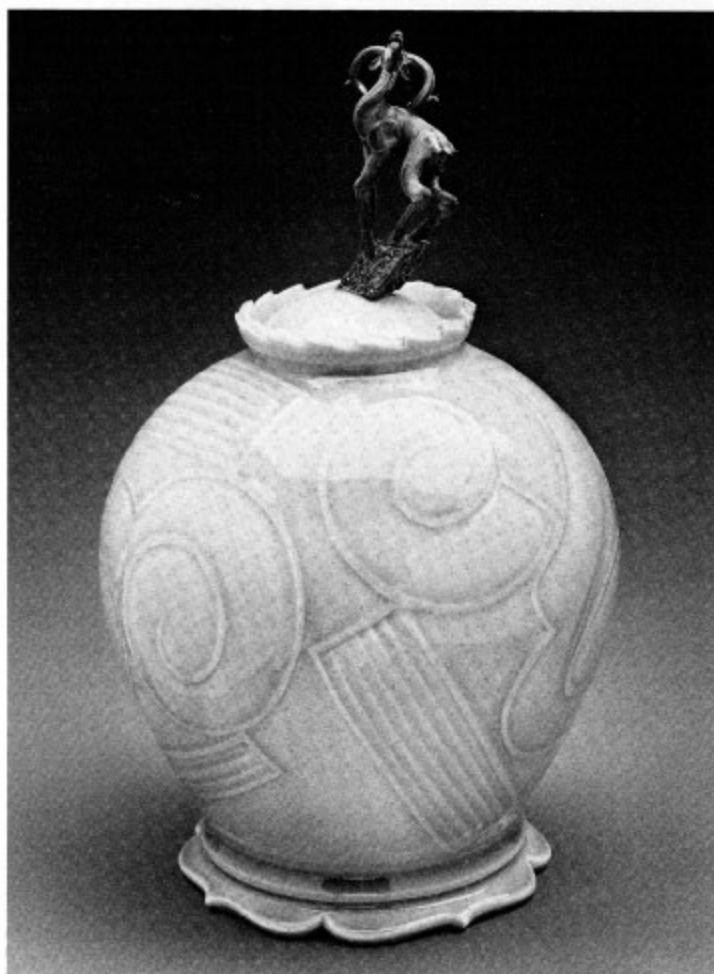
GC But technique, process, craft—call it what you will—is an emotionally charged area. Few artists have had the courage to talk about it much (and I don’t mean the particulars but the generalities) because they feared stigmatization as craftsmen. Yet I hear more talk from painters about the “stuff” of painting itself as being the crucial inner source. The *act* of painting is becoming more respectable and is being examined as a vital, energizing force. It can even be a cutting edge for some artists.

AS It is partly that for me. I tend to want to do things with clay and glaze that can’t be done. This is not masochism or perverseness. It just provides a different kind of edge. I have also become strongly involved with the intellectual processes of art through my friends in the field and through teaching. This is another kind of edge—more reductive and less intuitive. But if I relied solely upon this my work would become cold. So I need the balance of learning through direct experience, pushing the material, and feeding off the energy that releases. The punishment of this approach is rough when one opens the kiln and finds two months of ideas cracked, blistered, crazed, and lying in molten puddles. But I have to keep playing, experimenting, and pushing. It’s part of that eighteenth-century spirit of curiosity I so admire.

GC Speaking of being on the edge, there was a time when you were on the edge aesthetically, at least by default.

AS That’s true, I was one of Modernism’s cast-outs. My adherence to high craft, to somewhat decadent visual language, and to the use of imagery, among other things, placed me outside the acceptable academy of Modern art. It even placed me outside the ceramic mainstream. Everyone was shoving around tons of clay, tearing holes in it, and splashing glazes on it. They thought me pretty weird and disconnected.

GC With the advent of Post-Modernism, that has changed; the decorative is back in the mainstream. You must be finding yourself dangerously close to the core of the new establishment. There is little difference in the content of some of your pieces and, say, Frank Stella’s *Exotic Birds*. There is the same decadence, the



Two views of Untitled (1979), 14" (35.6 cm) high, porcelain and stoneware. Private collection. Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Allen Laughmiller.

Untitled (1982), 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (54.3 cm) high,
porcelain with raku base. Private collection.
Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Allen Laughmiller.

same decorative vocabulary, the same playfulness.

AS The answer, if there is one, is both yes and no. Certainly the artworld is generally more accepting of what I am doing now than ever before. But even so, I still find myself very much on the borderline. Those who read the work too literally still see only the traditional references and miss the contemporary connections that are the main theme of my work.

GC This contemporary focus seems less disguised in the new, small bowls you have been doing.

AS Yes, they are less concerned with historicism than the other work. In these pieces, I'm drawing primarily from my experience in contemporary art, and so they are less connected with specific historical/cultural plays. But even this work is not free from it entirely; the echoes of the past are still there.

GC I think it is fair to describe you as a student of decorative art. You have delved deeply into the history of the formal structures that have influenced this aspect of art, from the mysticism of the Islamic Sufi tradition to the use of the golden section, Vedic structures, and so on.

AS I have built a vocabulary of shapes, colors, forms, systems of placement, geometric order, color, and patterning and, to some extent, their symbolism. When I compose a surface I do so very much as an assemblage artist might, placing a playing card here, a strip of newspaper there. Except I work in a different vocabulary, more formalized, more conventionalized. And unlike most assemblage artists, I seek to avoid the rawness of reality, preferring to compose in camouflage, in refinement.

I am constantly in search of new material. At the moment, I am working with the problem of interpreting tropical fish for use in oil lamps and I'm studying the Pac-Man grid and pattern of movement as a surface device for my vessels.

GC While it may be difficult to place your work in this or that school, how do you see yourself?

AS Somewhere between Sèvres and Momoyama I suppose. I want to work to get richer, snottier, drawing from more obscure and esoteric sources, while discovering the structures to make them easily accessible. I want to push my intellectual understanding of art as far as possible without becoming academic. I want to push the process as far as possible without becoming pedantic. I want to retain the traditional format I use and yet find an avant-garde edge for it. I want to live in two contrasting worlds. It's a bit like driving with one foot on the brake, the other on the accelerator. It's a tough, urgent way to drive, but if you can afford the rubber, it's one hell of a way to move down the road.

Ceramics by Adrian Saxe will be the subject of two solo exhibitions: at Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles (November 13–December 4, 1982) and at The Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York (January 1983).

Los Angeles-based Garth Clark is a historian, author, and dealer in nineteenth- and twentieth-century ceramic art. His fifth book, American Potters, was published last year by Watson-Guption Publications.



Teapot (1982), porcelain. Photo: Nancy Hirsch.

Bowl with Stand (1982), 11½" (28.75 cm) high, porcelain. Photo: Nancy Hirsch.

