



Artist's vessels sail on a revolutionary sea

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Chris Gulker/Herald photographer

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By Christopher Knight
Herald art critic

As the bright sun of modernism sinks slowly in the west, a jaw-dropping gasp at the radiance of its sunset colors tends to merge with a certain dread at the approach of darkness. For some, modernism's fundamental source of illumination is claimed to have been snuffed out, never to rise again.

That source was modernism's new historical consciousness: Hoary traditions long set in concrete weren't merely discarded in the collapse of the social order; they were fitfully contested to determine the level of their continuing viability. But now that modernism itself is widely seen as the value set in concrete, a dark and gloomy question is being posed with increasing frequency: Has the ability to perform a salvage operation been lost in the midst of contemporary collapse?

Adrian Saxe's current exhibition, which opened last week at the Garth Clark Gallery, offers evidence that, as with the work of certain other important figures, that mode of historical social criticism hasn't really been lost at all; it's been radically transforming itself instead. The show also presents further evidence that, at 42, the artist is in the front rank of ceramists today.

The reason for Saxe's emergent stature will not simply be found in the territory of spectacular craft and tour-de-force technique, although the artist's gifts in that area are nothing less than astonishing.

(To isolate one example, the combination of stoneware and porcelain fired together in a single piece is no mean technical feat.) Nor is it merely a function of the remarkably perceptive intelligence — often liberally spiced with a wry or devilish wit — that characterizes his finest vessels.

Rather, a certain quality of Saxe's work puts one in mind of the legendary developments in ceramic art that occurred around Peter Voulkos at the Otis Art Institute in the mid-1950s. This may seem an unlikely connection to make; stylistically, a vast and seemingly unbridgeable gulf separates them. Yet Saxe's work speaks with a revolutionary voice that is as loud and forceful as the one heard at Otis some 30 years ago. Importantly, it is in its own way a voice that builds on the revolutionary utterance spoken at Otis, a transformation that has been widely acknowledged as the most fundamentally far-reaching of its kind in this century.

We've not had much opportunity to witness this development in Saxe's art during the past 10 years. He was born in Glendale and attended the old Chouinard Art School, graduating from its later incarnation as the California Institute of the Arts in 1974. He's taught at UCLA for more than a decade. Although his vessels have appeared in many group exhibitions in Southern California — more often than not standing out from the pack — he's had but one solo show of his mature work in Los Angeles, that having taken place three years ago.

If a painter or sculptor of commensurate achievement had endured a similar degree of near invisibility here, it would be widely perceived as nothing short of a scandal.

The current show is a small one (additional work by Saxe will be included in a group exhibition at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, opening Nov. 19), but the nine vessels together provide an experience of compelling interest.

Saxe's work is a mass of contradictions. Unabashed elegance abuts downright tawdriness. The natural earthiness of the ceramic medium collides with hyper-refined artifice. Bluntly physical monumentality wrestles with imagistic pictorialism. Architectonic or mechanistic forms swell with organic vitalism. Erotic sensuality competes with threatening violence. Aristocratic languor coincides with political restiveness. Intellectual seriousness spars with carnal play.

With all these seemingly incompatible elements competing with one another for our attention, it's no wonder that the dazzling technical fusion of lumpish stoneware and delicate porcelain in a single piece took place. It was simply necessary to Saxe's larger conceptual thrust.

It is within that conceptual arena, rather than in terms of stylistic affinity, that Saxe is heir to the Otis legacy. The work produced in the 1950s by Voulkos, Ken Price, John Mason, Henry Takemoto and the rest was itself marked by broad stylistic variety. Whatever the individual approach, the unifying quality of Otis clay was its assault on a traditional canon of Western pottery: the dictate that all features of

the object had to coalesce in harmonious, unitary integration. In a liberating gesture, Voulkos split apart each element of a pot — not simply foot, body and neck, but the whole conception of form and surface — and rebuilt ceramics as a medium in which each element played against the other in a lively struggle for attention. Pitting muscularity of form against fragility of surface, or common two-dimensional shape against idiosyncratic form, Voulkos, Price and the others achieved works with an ambiguous life and personality all their own.

The formal and material fragmentation so essential to the Otis revolution provides the underpinning to Saxe's work, most obviously in the discrete splintering of foot, body and lid (or stopper) in his vessels: A volcanic stoneware base might support an elegant, heraldic body that is itself crowned by a golden stopper in the form of a baby's pacifier. His vessels hit you all at once, but you don't know where to look first; your eye tumbles and careens from place to place, alighting here and shifting there in a futile attempt to find an anchor.

Saxe doesn't stop there. He pushes that fragmentation and competition for attention far beyond the formal and material properties of the object, extending them into the scarier arenas of taste, style, mythology and history. After all, sensuality and violence, elegance and tawdriness are not objective categories. In so doing, he wades into social and cultural terri-

tory that isn't just the home of the object; it's the residence of the spectator as well. Amid its mass of fitfully contested meanings, his work suddenly introduces the audience as a full collaborator in the creation.

Not surprisingly, the door to this particular path was first opened, and then shoved wide, by a member of the Otis crew. Although Voulkos led the charge, the work of Ken Price has proven to be the more fertile territory. In his work since the 1960s, Price has tampered with all sorts of cultural archetypes (and stereotypes), not the least of which has been the whole hierarchy of taste and propriety in the visual arts. For an important precedent for Saxe's work, you don't have to strain to locate "Happy's Curios," Price's "elevation" of roadside souvenir ceramics into a dazzling assault on refined sensibility (the curios were shown in a memorable 1978 exhibition at the County Museum of Art).