



Adrian Saxe: *Ampersand Antelope Jar*, 1987, porcelain and raku, 21 inches high by 10 inches wide; at Garth Clark.

Adrian Saxe at Garth Clark

The twin triumphs of technical perfection and inventiveness, so unusual in painting today, can be found readily in the ceramics of Adrian Saxe. Better still, intellectual substance backs up the

beauty and novelty of his designs. Saxe creates highly refined porcelain jars or bowls and mounts them upon bases made of raku, a roughlooking earthenware developed by Japanese potters in the 16th century. Firing these substances together requires wizardry at the kiln, but the coupling of disjunctive elements is the essence of Saxe's esthetic.

Saxe delights in conjoining the commonplace and the precious. For example, one jar, *Untitled Antelope Jar, Black and Blue*—whose elegant shape, like many of the other vessels in the exhibition, vaguely resembles a Sèvres potpourri container—is adorned with the black-and-white bars of the Universal Price Code. This computer-age emblem is further contrasted with cryptic, runelike figures scattered in relief all over the jar—mysterious signs that also recall soggy, squashed Alpha-Bits. Saxe also attaches earthy, creaturely forms to his suave surfaces: *Blue Snail Jar* is studded with zoomorphically correct ceramic snails, while slimy-

looking zygotelike forms cover much of *Double Spiral—Cobra Jar*. More than simply creating contrasts, the snail shells' organic spirals echo the fluid, coiling shapes that grace many of the vessels (e.g., the feet of *Untitled Antelope Jar, Blue and Gold* and *Double Spiral—Cobra Jar*). Like the gourds which also inspire Saxe, these hard, hollow objects are nature's equivalent to ceramic containers.

Further dissociative juxtapositions are seen in the jars embellished with worthless bric-a-brac: buttons, thumbtacks, and the kinds of pins, medals and charms that used to come out of gumball machines. Amusingly, these trinkets are coated with glazes of real gold or silver and, as if to compound the joke, are made not of metal but of ceramic material. The viewer has to look twice to see through this illusion.

The biggest and most elegant of the metallic adornments on *Garth Vader* is a fleur-de-lis, an allusion to the ancien régime's favorite collectible, Sèvres porcelain. Saxe has studied and worked at the Sèvres factory. He clearly spoofs this delicate, aristocratic ware, as many critics have pointed out, but he unquestionably pays a heartfelt tribute to it as well—something critics have routinely failed to see. If one studies Sèvres porcelain, it is nearly impossible not to be moved by its total, self-conscious submission to artifice and its deep, exquisite feeling for form and decoration; it is later bastardizations that have given these Rococo confections a vulgar reputation. In the end, Saxe's vessels are even more non-utilitarian than Sèvres ware, and only slightly more affordable.

One of Saxe's favorite motifs, which contrasts neatly with the references to privilege and luxury, is the ratchet wheel. Gilded, bronzed and silvered, the wheels appear on *Garth Vader* and the *Antelope* and *Cobra* jars as knobs. (By gripping these or the various animal and vegetable finials, one can actually pull off the lids. In theory at least, all of Saxe's vessels are functional.) These wittily transformed industrial gadgets figure even more significantly in Saxe's bowl series, where the gear shape is molded into a hemispherical form resembling the cuplike bottom of a broken egg. Each sleek-bodied, sawtooth-rimmed bowl is treated to a precious-metal glaze and is affixed to a porous, coarse raku

base. These earth-toned supports can suggest arrested heaps of flowing lava, but sometimes look too much like that banal fixture of seaside decor, driftwood. Interestingly, Saxe has grafted together two types of modernist forms—industrial and ruggedly natural—but, unfortunately, the clash here is too extreme, the juxtaposition too facile. Without their raku bases, I

believe the gear-bowls would develop much more eloquently. Saxe's central theme: the union of the ordinary and the rare.

—Amy Fine Collins