

Art

Saxe's four-part harmony

Ceramic sculpture makes art of &

By Christopher Knight
Herald Examiner art critic

The sweat-inducing tensions in Adrian Saxe's art are thrilling. As his show at Garth Clark Gallery attests, he just keeps cranking up the outrageousness, squeezing in one more pound of aesthetic pressure after another, despite the already precarious per-square-inch stress. It hasn't gone bust yet.

The show includes four different bodies of work: exquisite golden bowls on lavalike pedestals, which Saxe has been making for several years; florid teapots, each in the shape of an ampersand; multipart works in which each ceramic pot supports one letter of a word; and exquisitely glazed, gourd-shaped vessels studded with phony, but glittering, jewels.

The ampersand teapots display Saxe's formal and conceptual mastery. An ampersand — which is a sign for the word "and" that looks like this: & — is made from a sinuously curving, almost baroque line. When seen as a teapot, the shape uncannily traces in your mind the fluid motion of liquid pouring from a vessel's swollen body and out its upturned spout.

The sign has a familiar use, too, as does the teapot. An ampersand is a connector that links things together, which wittily underlines the intimate sociality of teatime.

And — or & — this shape is a key



"Shirley's Friend" by Adrian Saxe is celadon-glazed porcelain encrusted with cubic Zirconium and topped with a mystery crystal.

to Saxe's style. From the precedent of Peter Voukos, he learned to distinguish emphatically the separate parts of a pot — lid & body & handles & foot — and to make each compete against the others for attention. From the precedent of Ken Price, he learned to play with the hierarchies of both crafts and art, high culture and low. Saxe's ampersand teapots have utilitarian Chinese bases & high-flown French baroque handles & down home cac-

tus-topped lids.

The sign quality of the ampersand is further explored in the multipart works, where each ceramic pot supports one letter of a word. Depending on which way you line up the vessels, they spell GOD or DOG, SUMAC or CAMUS. (Remember Yma Sumac, the Inca songbird, who turned out to be just plain Amy Camus) The corny jokes are spelled out on vessels so richly glazed with exquisitely miraculous, dusty-bronze

If these pieces just miss, it's only because the pot as pedestal for a letter of the alphabet seems a trifle forced.

hues that surely only Ivana Trump could afford to buy them.

Note, too, the baby-pacifier lids, which heighten the hysteria of these witty rejoinders to cultural pretension. If these pieces just miss, it's only because the pot as pedestal for a letter of the alphabet seems a trifle forced.

Throughout, Saxe's technical mastery of his medium is astounding (in the 1960s he studied with Ralph Bacerra, a techno-wizard of the kiln). It's being pushed even further in his most recent work: bulbous, oddly anthropomorphic vessels cast from gourds, which are studded with sparkling bijoux.

"Shirley's Friend" is a fat, sassy, self-satisfied Buddha whose celadon glaze is mesmerizingly encrusted with pseudo-diamonds.

In the last several years, Saxe has emerged as the great ceramist of his generation (he's 45), to my mind heir to Ken Price's mantle. His principal, fecund source has long been 18th-century Sevres porcelain, as much for the social role it played in modern history as for its exquisite formal embellishments. For the mad aristocratic addiction to this opulent, even decadent, rococo porcelain finally bankrupted the government of France, an event that lit the fuse of insurrection.

As the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution is being celebrated, and as the art market coincidentally spirals into the stratosphere and out of sight, this elegantly vulgar work gets even more compelling. Saxe has fashioned a smart and extraordinarily powerful aesthetic of excess in which every element is privileged.

| | |
|-------|------------------------------------------|
| What | "Adrian Saxe: Ceramic Sculpture" |
| Where | Garth Clark Gallery, 170 S. La Brea Ave. |
| When | Through May 31 |
| Info | 939-2189 |