

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

BETWEEN POINTS IN CLAY

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When I had my first solo exhibition in 1976 at Marroniere Gallery in Kyoto, I titled it "Between Points in Clay." The title had its origins in a conversation I had had with my teacher Kazuo Yagi many months before. In an effort to explain to me what separated pedantic and indifferent ceramic art from the kind of ceramic art that makes us to reflect on the very nature of our existence, Yagi held up his index finger and pointed it straight up. This represented, he said, the predictably beautiful. Then he turned his finger 90 degrees, parallel to the floor and said that this position represented what we all commonly think of as ugly. The two positions he said have a tendency to be fixed in culture, but – and he moved his finger to a position 45 degrees between those two points – it is here, he said where real ART takes place, vibrating between the beautiful and the ugly. This was my introduction into the philosophical world that surrounded ceramic art in Japan. Since then, I have essentially been absorbed in exploring that space between what Yagi described as predictable beauty and its opposite the unaesthetic or homely.

During my stay in Japan, I worked on this problem using fairly recognizable Japanese forms. Many of the objects I made revolved around the Tea ceremony. There are a number of reasons for this, one is that many of the historical works that I found so provocative, were rather ordinary objects that had been elevated by Tea masters to the status of aesthetic icons. Another was that the conceptual nature of Tea seemed remarkably similar to many aspects of Western modernism. Take John Cage's insistence, for example, that noise was as capable of producing moments as sublime as those created by a violin or piano. The sound of water bubbling in a kettle, the ruffling of silk kimono, the opening and closing of a *fusuma* (paper door) and the sound of the *chasen* (bamboo tea whisk) against the tea bowl as it beats the tea into a green froth, have historically been thought of as the "music" of Tea. Tea, as it was practiced 300 or so years ago, in fact, seemed to me more like a serious, contemplative version, of the kind of museum happenings of the 1960s, rather than the staid, prescribed ritual it has now become. More than that, Tea seemed like a logical intellectual point of departure as well as a successful example of a context in which ordinary crafts objects, like plates and bowls, had the chance to realize their full aesthetic and communicative potential.

When I returned to the United States in 1978, however, Yagi's paradigm took on new meaning for me. I began to think about the space between Eastern and Western cultures' attitudes about art. It was the space, I felt, in between both cultures' notions about correctness and inappropriateness where basic human feeling and emotion operated unhindered by those cultural prejudices. I started trying to reduce my work to elements that somehow seemed mysterious, provocative and believable from either perspective. It was during this period that I started looking for some irreducible kind of truth that would explain pottery's ability to communicate to people from a variety of cultures. I realized that the single element that made pottery special was its usefulness. I had always taken "use" for granted, but now I started to think of it as an active element in the aesthetic equation. The works I have made over the years with large cracks might appear contradictory to the everyday notion of use. Even the unglazed surface of the woodfired work appears at odds with ordinary ideas of usefulness. What actually keeps us from using any of these pieces; however, are our own cultural prejudices, not any structural or formal aspect of the work itself. And why is it important to use them as opposed to merely putting them on a

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shelf in the classical Western manner as “objet d’art”? John Dewey in his collection of essays written in 1931, titled *Art As Experience*, offered that “When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life experience.” Use, I believe, can be an antidote to the kind of isolation of which Dewey speaks, by making the owner or user an important and active part in the aesthetic life of the object.

I don’t want to mislead anyone into thinking that I am trying to compete with K-Mart in providing useful everyday objects. My goal has never been to provide America with a good \$2 mug. Rather, it has been to make a mug that compels one to be aware of every aspect of the act of drinking and hopefully to transform that commonplace act into the kind of rare aesthetic experience that has a life beyond that fleeting moment. This may not, to some, be a very ambitious goal. But it is in this very private and domestic part of our lives, I believe, where art’s ability to help us cope with the hardships of life, has its greatest potential.

A few years ago, I attended the Mountain Lake Symposium and was heartened by Donald Kuspit’s talk titled, “The Good Enough Artist: Beyond the Mainstream Avant-Garde.” Kuspit argued for “good enough art”, art, which helps us, adapt to the mundane, given world and that attempts to restore the generic human purpose of art. The good enough artist, he said, stands in sharp contradiction to the avant-garde artist whose outrageous and grandiose acts, he feels, have become nothing more than academic strategies for marketing themselves as artists rather than any manifestation of a sense of artistic destiny. He went on to say that, in contrast to the alienation from society that avant-gardism is predicated on:

“...the good enough artist attempts to re-construct, as it were, his sense of both self and world, in however cautious and tentative a way. He does not regard himself as better than the world and/or better than other selves, but in the same existential dilemma and difficult worldly relation as them. With other selves, he shares the vicissitudes of the world, rather than claiming superiority to them, or the ability to use the power of art as a springboard to a position of privilege above them, and the world. The good enough artist does not appoint himself as the avant-garde artist-leader of the world and other selves, a megalomaniac fantasizing a superior knowledge and affect than them.”

I felt like Kuspit’s good enough artist must have been modeled on some of the potters I know, who have struggled over the years to communicate their philosophical and aesthetic concerns in an idiom the mainstream avant-garde finds inconsequential. Their ideas and work, though, offer our culture one way to address the radical separation that currently exists between art and everyday life. It is my belief that pottery capable of this kind of expression, positions itself, to use Yagi’s paradigm again, somewhere between the extremes of the highly mannered and purely visual stance of art pottery on the one hand and the trite, cloying, sanitary air of commercial, mass-produced dinnerware, on the other. It manages, somehow, to be both traditional and modern, useful and aesthetic, critical and accepting, in other words it reflects its makers as well as its owners humanness.