

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

MICHAEL CARDEW

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Garth Clark has managed to accomplish what institutions like the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery and the American Craft Museum have been either unable or unwilling to do. That is, to give Michael Cardew, one of this century's most eloquent and articulate potters, the largest retrospective exhibition of his work yet shown in the United States.

Cardew had been a potter for 60 years when he died in 1983. Through his writings, lectures, and his work over that period he became not only a source of inspiration, but also a role model for young American potters struggling to survive in a field that clings to the title of craft but that refuses to admit those who actually make craft objects, like pottery, into its museum collections or survey exhibitions. Cardew studied with the influential British potter Bernard Leach early in his career, but developed his own strong ideas about the aesthetic potential of pottery and how one ought to set about realizing it. It was Cardew, for example, who introduced Leach to traditional English slipware and it was Cardew, who is largely responsible for the revival of slipware techniques in England.

It was Cardew's slipware which stood out in this exhibition. The uncalculated yet self-assured air of the fluid, slip-trailed decoration is what first strikes you and draws you into a closer examination of the sturdy, thick-walled plates, bowls, teapots, and tankards. Cardew's slip-trailed decoration on the Winchcombe earthenware was never pretty or superfluous and always managed to vibrate, suspended between the merely decorative on one hand and clumsy inappropriateness on the other. While it is hard to imagine any of these pots without the decoration – the vast majority of Cardew's pots are decorated – the decoration never overcomes the overall premise of a piece. This kind of integration of form and decoration stems from Cardew's belief that, "Pottery in its pure form relies neither on sculptural additions nor on pictorial decorations, but on counterpoint of form, design, color, texture, and the quality of the material, all directed to a function." The directness and urgency of Cardew's less-than-graceful forms manages to express the kind of rustic elegance more common to folk pottery than modern art pottery. Cardew, however, was not a folk potter, but an intellectual with a degree in ancient literature and philosophy from Oxford who worked in the genre of folk pottery. This is an important distinction that has to be kept in mind when looking at Cardew's work.

Cardew the artist saw in the vanishing folk pottery tradition "a vitality which makes the products of our own aesthetic forcing-houses look unsubstantial and unconvincing." It was artistic vitality rather than technical proficiency that was the standard by which he measured pottery. Cardew felt that pottery with this kind of poignancy did more than just hold coffee: "Its presence will fill the gaps between sips of tea or coffee at those moments when the mind, not yet focused on activity, is still in an open and receptive state; and it will minister quietly to the background of consciousness with a friendly warmth, even perhaps on some occasions with a kind of consolation." This is a lot to ask from a piece of pottery or any piece of art, for that matter, but it was his *raison d'être* for making pottery. Cardew was a passionate and inquisitive artist who stretched the boundaries of his art and enriched its language. We feel when we look at Cardew's work that we are not, as Ruskin said in *Modern Painters*, looking "at a specimen of a tradesman's wares. of which he is ready to make us a dozen to match, but at one coruscation of a perpetually active mind, like which there has not been, and will not be another."