

THE NINTH SAN ANGELO CERAMICS COMPETITION

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The question that one is inevitably asked after jurying an exhibition like this is, "Why did you pick that!?" Of course *that*, more often than not, refers to work that the questioner finds strange or objectionable, either because it appears unlike anything they have references for or because it seems so ordinary, like something they themselves (or worse, their children) could do.

There is an unfortunate tendency these days (shared by ceramic artists as well as the public) to believe that for a piece of ceramics to be "important," it must appear to not only be technically intricate, but also visually complicated. The type of work that inevitably elicits responses from viewers like "how did they do that" or "that person really has an unusual imagination." I, on the other hand, tend to agree with the late English potter and writer Michael Cardew, that vulgarity in art can be defined as the means of expression outrunning the content to be expressed – technique outrunning inspiration. No area of ceramic art is free from this annoying obsession with technique – not ceramic sculpture, the gallery vessel or pottery.

Significant ceramic art has to do more than show off an artist's technical virtuosity or be a vehicle for expressing their psychological hang-ups and emotional angst. It does more than titillate the eye, it stirs the soul and causes us to reexamine the attitudes that keep us from realizing our full potential as human beings. I am not suggesting that all of the pieces in this exhibition have achieved this aim (there is only a small amount of art of any sort that actually succeeds at this), but out of the some 1,500 slides I looked at, these works seem to, in one way or another, be wrestling with this problem, and that is what makes them interesting to me.

The three prize winners, Wes Truit's *Sarajevo Sidewalk* (1st prize), Randy Edmonson's woodfired vase (2nd prize), Steve Davis-Rosenbaum's platter (3rd prize) and Jeff Filbert's tile piece *Doves: Maze* (best tile), were chosen because the communication of ideas and feeling was clearly the most important goal of their works. If in *Sarajevo Sidewalk*, for example, ceramic technique had been the most important aspect, he might have used a more luscious, vibrant blue glaze, and the tiles would have been perfectly formed and shown no trace of warpage or cracks. The result, though, would have been well a crafted piece that was totally devoid of emotional tension and the evocative quality of the title, which helps make this piece so poignant, would have been completely irrelevant. It is the seeming imperfections and the stark simplicity of this piece that make it so mysterious and moving.

Steve Davis-Rosenbaum and Randy Edmonson, who both work within the pottery idiom, seem to share the same sensibility. Randy Edmonson's vase is typical of much woodfired pottery in only one sense; it bears on its surface the melted ash glaze that mark it as such. The feeling of the piece, however, was not typical of the aggressive nature of most American woodfired work. The spiraling line that ran in an effortless and assured way around the outside of this simple and uncomplicated shape contrasted with the off center neck. Its diffident presence draws you into its world until you start trying reconcile its contradictions. Finally, we begin to see that these contradictions are not unlike the ones we face every time we examine aspects of our own lives.

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Steve Davis-Rosenbaum's platter is not unlike Edmonson's vase in that it appears on the surface to be rather simple and artless. Rosenbaum's platter also has about it a sense of incompleteness. I do not mean to suggest that it is unfinished, rather that the incompleteness is purposeful, designed to allow the viewer room to maneuver and participate in the aesthetic equation in the most obvious manner available to them – use. I do not refer to the mindless utilitarianism to which we subject our machine made (albeit often expensive) porcelain. This platter is not so accommodating, its thin salt glazed surface, the poured glaze decoration and its somewhat narrow base are not only the aspects of the piece that we find aesthetically pleasing, but also are the elements that make it difficult to easily use. It requires us reexamine our notions of use and beauty and shows us that they are not mutually exclusive.

Jeff Filbert's tile on the other hand was designed to be read as ceramic painting. His use of plain white commercial tile as a background made sure that we would focus on his painting. What I found intriguing was the messiness of his technique and how that purposeful messiness not only made us look closer to decipher his imagery, but also allowed us to imagine for ourselves what other more abstract elements in that imagery might be. It could have been a trite and cloying subject, but instead it was compelling and personal.

Finally I must confess that I did not feel the pressure some jurors feel to make the exhibition appear "broad based." I accept, without reservation, the idea that significant ceramic art can and does occur in all types of expression. The simplistic notion that certain areas of ceramic art like the gallery vessel or ceramic sculpture hold exclusive claim to so-called art status, is a fallacy that I trust will be laid to rest soon. Each form of ceramic art has a unique language it uses to communicate feelings and ideas. None of these languages is inherently more eloquent or expressive than the other. To expect that pottery will reveal its message to you in the same manner that figurative ceramic sculpture does is akin to someone who understands only German saying they prefer German poetry to Spanish poetry. The bottom line is, of course, whether or not an artist is able to move us to a higher level of understanding and awareness. I believe art should, as the late English critic Peter Fuller said, be "...a means of revelation and celebration of that which lies beyond the reach of sense."