

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

INTERVIEW WITH GARTH CLARK

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The ceramic world has in the past five or six years enjoyed an unprecedented amount of attention from the fine arts world, and Garth Clark has been one of the figures who has worked hard to bring this about. He has written five books on ceramic art since receiving his masters degree in ceramics from the Royal College of Art in London in 1976, but his greatest contribution to the field was the exhibition he organized with Margie Hughto titled *A Century of Ceramics in the United States*. This and the accompanying text attempted to provide "roots" for contemporary ceramic art in the United States. This lineage, although somewhat dubious, enabled ceramic art to begin to shed its status as the bastard child of the fine arts. It worked, and the boom has begun. There were some in the ceramics world, however, who started to entertain serious doubts about the academic objectivity of Garth Clark's writing when he became an active ceramics dealer in 1982 (he now has galleries in Los Angeles, New York, and London). He has continued to organize exhibitions and symposia, deftly juggling his dual roles as dealer and historian. Lately, though, many feel that the views of writers like Clark on what is significant in the field should be accompanied by what Jack Troy calls a "Surgeon Generals Warning: A writers enthusiasm may be directly proportional to anticipated market trends" (*Ceramics Monthly*, June 1985).

Garth Clark's enthusiasm for ceramic art, both as writer and entrepreneur, has in the past been important to ceramics and its struggle to gain entry into the more celebrated world of fine arts. Whether or not he will be able, in the future, to maintain credibility while exercising these dual roles is altogether another question.

RB: The ceramic world is beginning to merge with the art world, and ceramic art is becoming financially viable now. To what do you attribute this movement from university patronage to the art marketplace? What are the dynamics of that?

GC: It's difficult to actually pinpoint the transition. It started to take place about five years ago. My feeling is that it really has to do with quality. All art has to do with quality in one degree or another. But an unfashionable art activity has more to do with quality; it relies more upon the quality of individual pieces than an area, which is, perhaps, more fashionable and rides on the hype and energies that surround it. What started to happen was that a number of major ceramic artists began to produce exceedingly mature work. Some very bright, young-minded collectors started to collect it. And it became apparent that there wasn't that much around. Competition developed for the work and the marketplace began to suddenly take hold. You began having \$10,000 Rudy Autio's and \$35,000 Peter Voulkos'. Of course, what happens is that the art market, no matter how much it denies it, values things by dollars. To some collectors, things just under a certain amount of money just simply are not worth collecting. So when these prices started to rise, a lot of collectors who ordinarily wouldn't have thought of ceramics began to look at it more closely. I'm not saying that they bought it simply because the prices were going up, but I am saying that they looked at it closely because the prices were going up. What we have found is that when we started, perhaps 40 to 50 percent of our clients were what you could call traditional clay collectors, people who either collected only ceramics or who considered themselves part of the craft

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milieu. Now we find that that has changed and that perhaps 25 percent of our clientele can be described that way. The rest are as likely to go off and buy themselves an Ed Paschke or a David Salle or whatever. They are buying art, and from time to time they buy clay art.

RB: What exactly caused Rudy Autio's and Peter Voukos' work to become so expensive? It seemed like you started at the point where people began to collect it because it cost \$20,000. What caused it to reach that particular point in the first place?

GC: Several factors contributed to that. One is that the art market has become rather ravenous. There are all of these galleries and all these collectors, and there's a tremendous need for "product." I'm not using the word unkindly – perhaps a little cynically-but nonetheless, the art market, as it gobbled up this and gobbled up that, began to range out on the fringes and pick up the ceramic works. Another of the reasons that the market for ceramic art has grown as fast as it has is that it isn't so expensive. Ceramic art is a bargain.

RB: Only in relationship to painting.

GC: Of course. But everything is relative. It is a very different kettle of fish when a person suddenly finds that in order to stay in the painting field he's got to come up with perhaps \$40,000 a month to get the hotter names in town. But to buy a major Autio he needs only \$10,000. So even with the greatly increased prices, which have gone up tenfold and twentyfold in the last five or ten years. ceramic art is still very reasonably priced. Many people argue that it's tremendously overpriced. I think a lot of collectors are buying quite feverishly at the moment because they feel that we haven't seen the top of the price yet. A few artists are rising very strongly still, but I think that we've reached a bit of a plateau. I think that that's true of the arts in general. I don't think there are spiraling price hikes all over town. What got energies going was a number of things. I think that we had something to do with kicking it off, and when I say we, I'm referring to Margie Hughto and myself. In 1979 we organized an exhibition called *A Century of Ceramics in the United States*. It was the first time that ceramics had ever been brought together cohesively on a historical and particularly an art-historical basis. We organized a major symposium, which brought, among other people, Clement Greenberg on our side. A book was published which, while not a major work, is really the only text that exists. The show went on tour through the country for three years and was very, very well received in Washington, New York, Chicago, and the other cities it went to. It really ignited interest in the medium on many levels. People, first of all, began to understand that ceramics had roots-that in fact it wasn't found in a box underneath an orange tree in 1970, but that it was a whole evolution of different people trading ideas. They began to find that the way clay was used was very surprising and very intriguing. Interestingly, hanging around the exhibitions and listening to people talk, I think what surprised us most was that people knew so little of what had been done. Two or three dozen very serious collectors had their interest ignited directly as a result of the *Century* show

RB: At that time, in 1979, had you started your gallery?

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GC: No, the gallery didn't begin until 1982.

RB: What prompted you to become an active dealer in an area that in the past you had just written about?

GC: Well, a number of things. I think I have never really seen myself particularly as an academician. I've always seen myself as an impresario. I like that kind of role. It has a lot of freedom, it gives one a lot of adventure and fun. Before the gallery, I spent 12 years functioning on a purely academic level. Nobody was dealing in that area then, there were no specialists writing about ceramics. The writing about ceramics was done by other ceramists which I thought was very unhealthy for a number of reasons. I mean, if all art criticism was done by other artists, and in particular by your friends, it does not make for a good critical environment. I also began to realize that the university circuit had become very sterile, that if a new energy was going to come out, it was not going to come out of academia; that was beginning to turn around and run down hill. I think in particular of a long discussion I had with Richard DeVore, and Richard and I discussed the whole thing, and Richard said, "You know, if you really want to be effective, you have to get into the commercial arena because that's where one can now make the difference." Because you're dealing directly with collectors and museums, in a much tougher manner than when one is writing articles and lecturing at universities. It just seemed like the next logical step. It wasn't something that was very clearly thought out and it wasn't a very mercenary move, because at the time we made it, I wasn't sure that something like this could function. Subsequently it has worked very well – L.A. has been successful, New York has opened and been extremely successful, and we have just opened a London office. We take ourselves very seriously; we're a computerized organization (laugh).

RB: There is a lot of criticism of you and your writing that has not been voiced publicly. The feeling is that your being both a dealer and a writer presents a kind of conflict of interests, or at the very least clouds the credibility of your writing.

GC: That came up yesterday. I was at the Rhode Island School of Design giving a lecture there and the same question was asked. I try and be as good about it as I can. For instance, I represent Adrian Saxe. There was recently an article published about Adrian (*American Ceramics*) which I was involved in, but it was an interview and I feel that with my own artists I can do something like that. In an interview you allow the artists to speak for themselves. The interviewer doesn't have the same leverage that one has when one is writing a purely critical article about something. I don't write about our artists on that level, I will not review the work of any other artist who is involved in another gallery that might be in a competitive situation to us. Indeed, I won't write critically on any contemporary work with exceptions where, perhaps, I am asked to write about one of our artists in an exhibition catalogue, which is perfectly acceptable; this is done frequently. What I am very actively involved in are shows that have a historical basis. I have been commissioned by a museum to go to Italy and try to bring back a very intriguing exhibition of Italian works from the '20s and '30s that are in a couple of private collections. I am doing an exhibition for the Gardner Museum in Toronto on the work of Hans Coper. I feel that Hans Coper is

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really part of public domain; anything I say or don't say about Hans Coper is not going to change things. I am working on an exhibition on George Ohr, and I don't deal in George Ohr's work.

RB: But at one time you did.

GC: No. I have never in my life sold a single piece of George Ohr's work.

RB: That's strange because I seem to remember seeing an ad for your gallery to that effect. [Editor's note: This interview took place on March 21, 1985. Mr. Clark has informed us in a letter recently, "Since speaking to you a colleague asked us to sell a group of seven small pieces which we did. So my comment, completely true at the time, is not true today. Neither I nor the gallery have ever owned a single piece of Ohr, and, except for the seven inexpensive pots, I have never made any profit from Ohr at all. We do list Ohr in our advertisements together, with 40 other artists in which we have an interest. Partly it is because we see Ohr as part of the stable in a spiritual sense – he's my favorite American potter – and partly it's because I am looking for a great piece of Ohr's work for my own collection."] That's not necessarily the problem though. Going back to your earlier statements about the inbred environment that existed among university ceramic departments where friends wrote about friends, essentially the self-interested trading of articles. What's so different about that and you writing about your gallery artists? That is what I think confuses people.

GC: I generally don't write about the gallery artists. I sometimes will in a newsletter: again. I don't think there is any conflict in that. I mean, we're publishing our own material, everybody knows where it's coming from. When I do write, I write mainly about historical figures even if we deal with them – like Bernard Leach, but as I say, figures, which are very much in the public domain in a way that a young contemporary artist is not, where we are still trying to decide, who is this person and what is their contribution. Bernard Leach, for instance, people love him or they hate him, but we all know where he came from, and we know what his contribution is. So I can work in that area as a historian. The people it seems to bother most of all are gallery owners.

RB: Well, sure it does. You have a certain presence, which you've established over a period of time and a reservoir of credibility based on your scholarship. In the "Echoes" conference and exhibition you organized, for example, you were dealing with your scholarship in an historical area and relating it to contemporary work. You were in a sense providing legitimization of the contemporary work by relating it to the historical pieces. And when an inordinate number of people you represent were included in the exhibition, people began to wonder what was going on and if they could trust relationships you were drawing between the historical and modern work. That's what the criticism turns on.

GC: This is fine. I think that I can understand other people's problems with this. I am least sympathetic, though, when the criticism comes from gallery owners, because I feel they are in the position to do exactly the same thing if they want to put in the work. I sit up until two or three in the morning working on articles after I have been working until 7:00 that day on ordinary business. It's not easy to keep the

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writing going, but I write for the same reason that lots of people write, I have to write, if I haven't written anything for three or four months I get really edgy, and I've got to get back to it. At the same time, I get requests from museums and public spaces to write for them. These are organizations that are perfectly aware of ethical considerations and yet they still choose to ask us to do these things for them.

RB: Because basically there is a shortage of writers about ceramics?

GC: Yes.

RB: Why is this shortage there, what's behind it?

GC: I recently discussed this with Jeff Perrone and Peter Schjeldahl. Both are extremely sympathetic to ceramics. Adrian Saxe and I to an extent were instrumental in getting them involved. They have difficulty remaining involved, however, because they say that it's such an uninspiring environment intellectually. Now and then they read something that they can at least disagree with intelligently if not find some positive attributes, and that's it. Thereafter, the writing is so paltry, the intellectual constructs are so slender that as intellectuals they have great difficulty in retaining a cerebral edge in ceramics. It lacks the stimulation for them, which they find in abundance in painting, sculpture, and photography, where the whole level of scholarship is much higher.

RB: Who are the good writers on ceramics now?

GC: There's a young man by the name of Ed Lebow; he's lazy and should work harder and write more, but he does write well. Jeff Perrone has done some very interesting writing. He is not a specialist in ceramics per se. He used to write for the *Village Voice*, he writes for *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, occasionally writing on ceramics. But there's just not very much there.

RB: Both of these people are outsiders to the ceramic world to a certain degree.

GC: To a certain degree (pause)... Ceramic writing tends to be promotional writing; it also tends to be emotional writing where somebody likes somebody's work for a number of reasons, perhaps out of friendship, or perhaps just out of a passion for the work, and they set out to write something to share how much they like it. It sounds like such a good intention, but it makes for the most dreadfully syrupy and uninspired writing. That's what the field suffers from to a great extent. It's not unethical, it's not that they're just trying to paddle a friend's canoe; it's just that it is written without any kind of tough historical or aesthetic basis. I'm sure that if you took many of those writers and grabbed a few of their phrases out of the publications and said, "Okay, what does this mean?" they wouldn't be too sure. If you took several of them and said "What are the three major dynamics of the vessel aesthetic?", they probably wouldn't be able to tell you. Now you can ask those sort of questions of painting critics and ten-to-one they've got answers – very well thought out, well-defined aesthetic views about painting and how it functions. You don't find much of that intelligence in ceramics. It's understandable, we're a small field.

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If you take our masters you can, perhaps, assemble 20 or 30, that's it. And if you take the amount of money that's being spent in ceramics, it is minuscule compared to what's happening in, say, painting. So we can't expect to have the same political clout or the same academic coverage, it's not possible. I think that's one of the reasons why it's important that I and any other person in my position should keep writing. One has to be careful, one mustn't be too self-serving, but the people who can write and say something must keep doing so because there just isn't enough of it.