

STEVEN GLASS **CHANCE AND CONTROL**



BY PAULA OWEN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE POCKLINGTON

When the American artist Steven Glass was invited last year by the British artists/scholars Edmund de Waal and Julian Stair to exhibit in their studio gallery across from the Camberwell College of Arts, in London, he responded with work that moves the long discussion of British-Japanese-American ceramic history and theory a step further. In the exhibition, which Glass titled "In and Out of the Flame," he coupled vessels fired in an electric kiln with similar wood-fired vessels. The 58 works demonstrated where he currently stands in his search for the link between making and meaning.



All works are stoneware.
Cerulean Rendezvous, 2003,
polychrome slip painted, glazed interior,
oxidation fired, 11 by 9 by 9 inches. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Seclusion*,
2004, glazed interior, Anagama wood fired, 10 by 8 by 8 inches.

Resident potter at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, since 1982, Glass was known for flamboyant, sculptural vessels with colorful, painterly surfaces, but in 1995 he returned to making simple, functional pots. As a young man he had been one of a generation of potters who in the 1960s and early 70s ascribed to the ideals of the “ethical pot” espoused by Bernard Leach, ideals that aligned with his own and that era’s sociopolitical and aesthetic movements. But while studying with Myrna Krasnik in Paris in the late 70s and Nino Caruso in Italy in 1986, Glass became infatuated with experimentation and art world trends. The resulting stylized vessels fused elements of cosmopolitan fashion with tongue-in-cheek references to courtly historical objects, a world away from the influences of his formative years.

A paper he delivered in 1989, “The Torpor of Tradition, The Fear of Change,” at a craft conference in Virginia, however, revealed that the competing impulses of tradition and experimentation remained. His paper presaged his return to functional pots and to a personal code of ideals as the basis for meaning in his art. “By its very definition, tradition is not inchoate but complete; it is a nice round sum,” he wrote. “Tradition comforts, it does not challenge. . . . But in the rush to get to the gates of fine art acclaim, something has been lost.” Some 10 years later, in an unpublished essay, “The Potted Word,” he wrote, “If we continue to tilt in the direction of intellectual rhetoric and marketing savvy, it will not be long before we see self-indulgent, vainglorious works supplanting those of superior skill and content.”

Glass is candid about his aim to “imbue the simple with a sense of purpose” and about his belief that *why* an artist works is fundamental to the outcome. Because he also writes and performs music, he likens his perspective now to his continuing preference for the “raw emotion of Bob Dylan” to the overproduced recordings of Nashville. But while he has returned to functional pots and traditional principles, Glass’s recent straightforward jars, bottles and teapots reveal as well a renewed attention to the underlying complexities of ceramics, technically, culturally and aesthetically.

In the London exhibition Glass presented simple vessels to compare the results of two firing methods, one modern and thermostatically controlled, the other primitive and uncertain. But more important, he set out to examine his personal encounter with the aesthetic and technical adjustments inherent in the two firing methods. Glass is, in fact, most interested in the attitudinal shifts one must make in situations of greater or lesser degrees of control, what he calls—maximal and mini-

mal—and how they are essential to the creative process. He notes that going back and forth between the wood and the electric firings puts him in contact with the act of creating in a deeper and more conscious way, enabling him to observe the mental and physical modifications he must make according to the technical conditions imposed by each method. By challenging himself to examine the formal and self-conscious aspect of creating and its reverse, the luck-fate-karma of it all, he has achieved, he says, a new awareness of the reciprocity between maximal and minimal control in art and in life.

While “In and Out of the Flame” had an underlying conceptual argument, it also succeeded on a visual level, avoiding value judgments or radical visual contrasts. The works, whether kiln- or wood-fired, are not antithetical. They are simple yet animated—rather more like siblings with similar genetic makeup, but different personalities. It is, in fact, their similarities that compel us to look more closely and think more deeply about the relationship of process and product, certainty and risk, culture and value, humankind and nature.

Nevertheless, there are obvious differences. The surfaces and shapes of the wood-fired pieces evoke the unrefined, improvisational process. In these, Glass eschews ornamentation and accentuates their earthiness with broad, “melting” bases. He has invited the heat and smoke to leave a permanent record as surface embellishment. In the electrically fired pieces, which seem loose and fluid except in comparison to their wood-fired siblings, the controlled conditions invite confident brushwork, energetic mark-making and the rich color that is central to their surfaces. Many of these pots sit on delicate feet and glow with layered pattern and color. Overall, however, the intentionally humble and spontaneous forms in both bodies of work display equally articulated surfaces.

The embellishment of the surface by the artist and the kiln is unusually apparent in the following pairings of, respectively, an electric-kiln-fired and a wood-fired piece: *Cerulean Rendezvous* and *Seclusion*; *Ballad in Plain G* and *Amnesty*, and *Held for Questioning* and *Sanctuary*. The interplay between manipulation and accident is especially noticeable in these six works, reminding us that both are at play in the world and in art. When seen side by side, as they were in this show, wood-fired and electrically fired pots become metaphors for the dynamic dialectic of chance and control, tradition and innovation, which is likely to ignite artistic imagination and idealism far into the future. ■

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OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Amnesty*, 2003, glazed interior, Anagama wood fired, 12 by 8 by 8 inches; *Ballad in Plain G*, 2004, polychrome slip painted, glazed interior and exterior, oxidation fired, 10 by 7 by 7 inches; *Sanctuary*, 2004, glazed interior, Anagama wood fired, 12 by 8½ by 8½ inches; *Held for Questioning*, 2003, polychrome slip painted, glazed interior and exterior, oxidation fired, 14 by 9 by 9 inches.

