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ADAM SILVERMAN

As artists, Adam Silverman and Ricky Swallow are both deeply committed to their own forms of alchemy—Silverman in ceramic and Swallow in cast bronze. Through a direct dialog with materials, both work to extract a narrative from the limitations of the mediums in which they work. Their friendship and alignment as contemporaries makes sense. Both have found footing within the Los Angeles art community, both pull inspiration from California's cultural history, and both engage the line between art, design and craft.

Over the last five years, Silverman's work has grown in scale to include museum installations and more ambitious site-specific work, while also remaining wholly informed by traditional ceramic and glazing techniques. His pieces rely on a rare faith in the results of experimentation and the tension between the tight symmetry of his forms and the organic, abstract event of his glazes.

This conversation took place one afternoon, over sandwiches, at Silverman's new Glendale, California studio. Both Silverman and Swallow had just returned from art fair season in Miami, Florida, where each exhibited new works.

Writer: Andrew Post
Photographer: Jason Frank Rothenberg

RICKY SWALLOW: We were both in Miami last week and we both worked for several months towards solo presentations down there. I felt like it was nice to be working on my sculptures at the same time as you because I knew that there was someone else under pressure, scrambling to meet the same deadline. You presented 40 pots split between a giant shelf structure that you designed, and a large, low pedestal. For me, there's always a real liberation whenever something leaves the studio, ships, and you don't see it again until it is installed in the gallery, without studio debris or weariness. How did you feel about your installation when you saw it—did it work as you had planned, or in a different way?

ADAM SILVERMAN: It was a pleasant surprise. We mocked it up here, but we didn't have the wall painted blue, and we didn't have the pedestal built. So it was largely an imagined installation until I saw it in Miami. In the context of the design fair, I felt like it was an appropriate response to the audience. The burnt wood and blue walls were risky moves. It ran the risk of seeming decorative rather than an art installation. The booth could have, in theory, been understood as two objects: one wall installation with twenty pots and a pedestal installation with twenty pots. But in reality it was perceived and sold as 40 individual pieces.

RS: Was it cool to show in the same space, under the same roof as some of your peers like Takuro Kuwata and Morten Løbner Espersen?

AS: It was fantastic. I was a little bit nervous about the installation and how it would play in that context, but also about how I would stand up. I've shown a little bit with Takuro in the same galleries, and we're in a lot of the same collections, so I know that our work can coexist. But, this was the first time that I stood alongside those guys in an exhibition context.

RS: The pieces that you made seemed to have gone through a large number of multiple glazings and firings. Is this the first time you've employed

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that many multiple firings to achieve certain surfaces?

AS: No, but what was a first was the opportunity to spend four or five months on one show and have forty pieces finished at the same time to present together. Having that much time allowed each piece to get the attention it needed to feel resolved. The pieces were all pretty worked over for sure.

RS: Can you overload the glaze and overlayer to a point where it just starts falling off the pot?

AS: Yeah, and I can also push the pot too hard. Sometimes I'll fire a pot three or four times and I'll open the kiln and it'll just be in pieces. It just can't take another firing for whatever reason. The glazes, as they expand and contract, pull and bubble and then do it again. Every time I fire, it's at the same temperature. Some people will go lower and lower with different glazes, and I don't do that. I lost a couple of the larger pieces that were supposed to be included in the show in Miami.

RS: A lot of your pots, including the first few that I bought from you, are the same kind of blue. There's a vase I have from you that's just kind of somewhere between high-end Smurf and Yves Klein blue. That colour is one of the things that's consistent throughout the seven or eight years that I've been looking at your pots. Now you're bringing that colour into the pedestals and the walls and it seems like Silverman blue. Is there something about that colour? Does it resonate? Did it come from any architectural fan bases?

AS: That's a good question. I don't know. I think it's actually a version of a really good navy blue.

RS: Is it a colour you've developed or tweaked, or is it readily available?

AS: In terms of the ceramic context it's cobalt. It is what makes all those blues. I've got probably five or six different blue glazes that are cobalt-based with other ingredients that make them react differently to heat. I actually work with a pretty small number of glazes. Outside of the ceramic context perhaps they're indigo-based blues.

RS: In order to try and figure out when we first met, I went to the kitchen this morning and tried to find the earliest thing that I remember acquiring from you. I think the earliest thing I found had the Roman numerals reading seven, which is '07. It's a very small cup and it has your fingermarks shielding the glaze.

That's when we met, and that's when I started looking at and collecting your pieces. You were making a lot of small tea bowls, which felt very reminiscent of the Japanese tradition that you were interested in. So much has changed in your work over the past seven years, but which kind of things have remained consistent, and which things in the work and the forms, glazes or the scales do you feel you've worked through? What kind of other changes register in the pieces themselves?

AS: It's funny that you're using that cup with the fingermarks—that's where I learned it, from the guy who made that cup [referring to a cup that Ricky is using to drink tea during the conversation]. He taught me that technique of the fingermarks, which has continued even into my larger work. What I like about it is that it's not just a decorative motif. Literally, the easiest way to glaze an object is to hold it without fussing about the fingermarks left on the pot. So I think that's a consistent thing in terms of whatever the scale is or whatever the shape is—it is a record of the processes that it went through to make it.

RS: When that technique is used in Japan, is it sort of a replacement for a signature, given that a lot of Japanese tea bowls are not traditionally signed?

AS: Yes, the fingermarks are better than a signature in a way, they are really yours, your fingerprints. I can remember several instances when Japanese people have looked at my work, and they'll pick it up, and they'll look at the fingerprints, specifically, and really appreciate it or try to understand which hand was where, or how the pot was held while it was glazed.

But back to your question about those little bowls and the cups. There were two things that were driving those. Most importantly, it was an exercise in honing my basic skills. Trying to make a really good bowl, through repetitive practice, making literally thousands of bowls and cups until the basic elements come together and begin to feel right.

RS: Were the smallest bowls thrown off the hump?

AS: Yeah, they were all thrown off the hump. Dovetailing with that was the fact that people weren't spending a lot of money on my stuff, so it needed to be small and quick and accessible. That's evolved, clearly, over the last few years. I think when we met, and when you got that piece, I was working on a show for Larry [Schaffer, owner of OK Store] that was called *100 Bowls*. That was a moment in time where I made a lot of little things for one place in LA and they wound up all around town.

RS: The thing I liked about the small-scale pieces is they allowed one as an admirer or collector to obtain a set of things relatively easily. Seven years later it seems to me that you don't use those glazes anymore or you're not so finicky about the feet of the pots.

AS: The thing about that small-scale stuff, and particularly simple forms like a bowl or a cup, is that it's only really about the foot and the lip, and the swell of the hip or the shoulder. It's the most fundamental form making. It's like making a traditional Doric or Ionic column—there are the three basic parts that have to work perfectly together, otherwise it's off balance. At that time, I was really trying to make things that were formally balanced. If I make wonky forms with more aggressive surfaces, it becomes a whole other thing. It becomes a little too hippy—less rigorous or something. The aggressive surfaces need a strong geometry to work with and respond to. The importance of strong geometric forms is something that has stayed with me throughout the years.

RS: So when you talk about those three elements or any elements of traditional pottery, is that something that you learn? I know you spent time in Japan, after you'd already been making pots seriously for a few years. Did you ever do any formal pottery training or is it just from your own practice?

AS: That's actually something that I learned through studying architecture, and being trained in the modernist tradition. You can use that same formal vocabulary to describe a building—where it's reduced to the most abstract, fundamental, compositional elements. To apply that to bowls or pots was an easy leap.

I've never been in a lecture or a history of ceramics class where someone talks about the foot and the lip and the swell of the hip or that kind of thing, but I'm sure they do, I just didn't have the opportunity to formally study ceramics.

RS: Yet looking at pottery here in LA, going to LACMA and looking at their collections. That also seems like a good way to inform oneself.

AS: Totally. What's been nice for me, since I didn't really become a student of ceramics in earnest until my mid-thirties, is that it allowed me to go back to school in my head, go to places like LACMA and have a whole second wave of being a student. I didn't have a teacher to guide me through it, but at that point I was educated enough that I could guide myself.

I've been making pots my whole life, but '02 is when I left my garage, got a studio and said, "I'm going to treat this as my career and see what happens." Fall of '02 I rented a space and got a business license.

RS: So if I had a piece of pottery signed '02—that would be zero hour?

AS: Yeah. As far as selling pots goes, 2002 was the beginning. To be super OG you'd have to have one that says 1978, but I think only my parents have one of those.

RS: The medium of ceramics is having a kind of extended dalliance with the contemporary art world and also a sort of extended market right now,

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which we've both observed and discussed. It's something I see as refreshing but also problematic. I think placing a pot on a pedestal doesn't necessarily make it a sculpture but, as a singular object, it does force a more sustained looking. I don't think that's a new idea, but what is a new idea is people being more open to the medium coexisting without the need to question its craft or art status. That seems to be a growing trend. John Mason, who we both know, has always said that you should just look at the thing itself, and that it should be judged on the merits of its character, regardless of craft. What does this mean to you and your practice, particularly in view of the attention surrounding the medium right now?

AS: I try not to worry too much about that question because I get paralyzed if I overthink the position of clay in the art-design-craft hierarchy. Or if I even accept that as a valid hierarchy or separation of disciplines. I try to take John's advice and just focus on making the work. Then once I decide to let it out into the world, the object has to stand on its own merits. That being said, I am certainly benefitting from and enjoying the brighter spotlight on clay at the moment. And I hope that the "more sustained looking" you mentioned will create a bigger audience for the long haul.

The nice thing about calling myself a potter is that I don't have to say, "I'm an artist" or "I'm a designer" or "I'm a craftsman." I just say potter, and that allows me to float between those disciplines, and to try to claim some real estate in each, in the cracks in-between, or the areas where the three bleed together. At least that's the illusion that I like to live with.

I guess the other obvious thing about working in clay, and how it does or doesn't relate to the art world, is the question of function. If I make something out of clay and it's got a hole on the top, it's considered a vase in most people's minds. For some people, it doesn't matter if it's a vase—they see no difference in terms of its inherent or monetary value. For some people it is judged on its own merits, as John would say, but for others it's always going to be a vase, and as such, live in the craft or decorative art worlds.

Of course, this is very different in the US versus say Japan, China or Korea. If you look at auction results that come from Asia, the highest prices at auction, any season, are almost always for ceramics. They're always objects. They're almost never two-dimensional work. And I think it's just a different way of looking at value in art. Somebody will buy a $50,000 teacup and use it, and someone else will buy a $50,000 teacup and keep it in a box, wrapped up safe somewhere. It's the same thing with the 'vases' that I make. Some people will put flowers in them and put them in the dishwasher, others will leave them, packed safely away in a box or glue them to a shelf.

RS: That idea of utility—anything with an aperture becomes a vessel.

AS: Right.

RS: It seems like more recently there's been an attempt to kind of close off the vessel, and you've been making these orbs, or extended egg forms where that idea of functionality is, literally, caulked or stopped over. I remember reading something about Hans Coper making similar decisions, where he still wanted things to have the sensibility of a vessel, but he really wanted to close up the top, or cut and compose things in a way that you couldn't legibly think of it as traditional pottery.

AS: It took me ten years of working full-time to actually close the top. The first piece I ever closed the top of was a tiny little piece. It was actually a scary moment because I felt like, "Okay, this is crossing the border into sculpture; am I ready or qualified to do that?" And then you just have to say, "Fuck it, don't take everything so seriously," and just do it.

And what happened was I made this one little piece and closed the top. Tomio Koyama came to do a studio visit and he was looking at all

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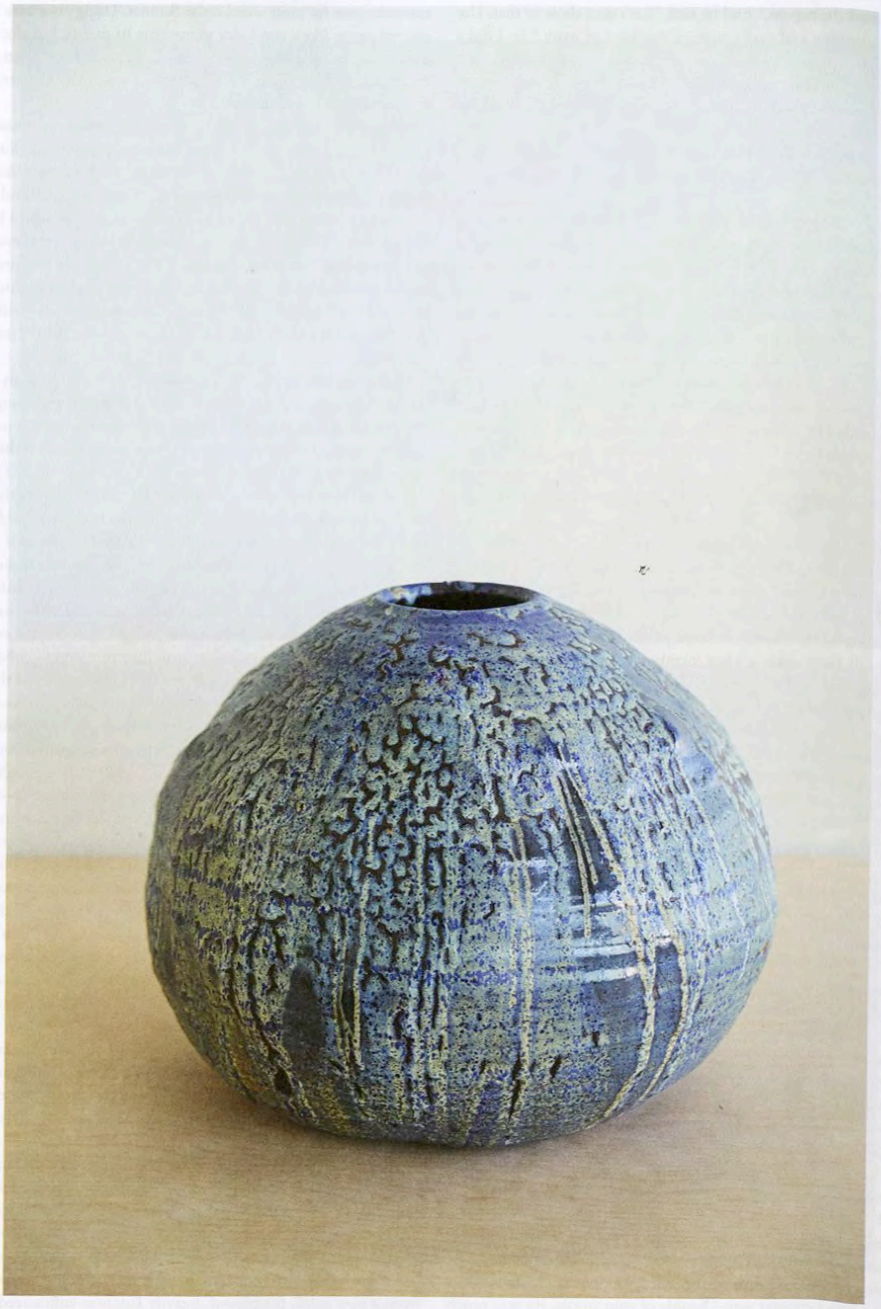

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the pots and then he was like, "What's that?" And I said, "That's the first piece I've closed the top on." And he said, "Let's do a show of that. Use this as the beginning and make more of this kind of work." So I did a show with him in maybe 2010 or '11 without one functional piece in it. It was a real breakthrough moment that allowed me not to be so scared of doing that kind of work. So now, it's not a conscious banning of the flower, per se, but...

RS: No, but maybe it is about just gleaning confidence in these things as forms, regardless of what people do with them.

AS: Right, it's true.

RS: You were a partner in Heath Ceramics for six years from 2008 to 2014, and during that time you were able to introduce a lot of new artists to Californian audiences both from here and Japan. Akio Nukaga is one that stands out as someone we're both really passionate about. I think of Akio as being really conscious of the Japanese tradition of pottery, but also interested in modernism—especially certain British modern figures. I remember when we met and it was probably the time I was first nerding out on Hans Coper. You had just made a suite of works that were almost homages to him. Do you see a parallel with how you and Akio work?

AS: We have radically different backgrounds, educations and practices. Yet we share some sort of DNA that makes our work very comfortable together. Perhaps it is that we are both descendants of the British modernists who you mentioned, like Coper and Rie. Akio and I met in 2005 or 2006.

RS: During your residency in Japan?

AS: Yes, I was there working for a month or so, and met him in the very beginning. I saw a postcard with an image of one of his pieces on it and that lead me to track him down at his home and studio in the woods. It was an epic time in my life, and it was important in terms of the community that I built there. Akio is a key member of that community. In the ten or so years since we met, Akio's work has evolved a lot. He had a very small, formal vocabulary when I met him that was rock solid. He was just nailing these shapes beautifully—beautiful surfaces and beautiful glazes.

RS: And was there a consistent market for what he was doing?

AS: Yeah, he has a really strong following as a functional potter. His work was very, very reasonably priced. The next wave of stuff that you were referring to, dealing with the more ambitious forms are newer, and in the last three years have become even more ambitious. It's nice to see the change.

RS: Do you think some of the development in Akio's work has been prompted by these shows in California?

AS: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's been a real expanded opportunity. It's a new and different audience. It allowed him to get out of his comfort zone. I think coming to California for the first time about five years ago, everything really blew his mind, quite literally.

RS: And now you're doing this small project with him—it seems like a kind of analog text message conversation or something.

AS: It is very primitive. I did a version of it with Alma Allen before—the same 'tops and bottoms' concept. It's fun. It's just like a really dumb version of exquisite corpse. Analog texting is a good way to put it too.

RS: I noticed you made those works just after your big Design Miami deadline. Was the collaboration a nice way to just do something else, with less pressure?

AS: Yes, I did all of those in two or three days. It's just like sketching. It's super fast and satisfying, and as spontaneous as one can be with clay that you have to fire over and over again.

RS: One thing that seems worth noting is that your pottery really inhabits your life in a very pervasive way. Outside of your studio, it's very much part of your home and family life. Your children have all grown up eating from it, plants fill pots in your garden, and you recently made custom cassoulet pots for your wife Louise Bonnet. Using your own functional pottery seems like a good way to measure its merits, but also looking at pots in a more domestic environment alongside other objects is a rewarding ritual—at least for me as a collector. I have such different thoughts at home versus the studio.

AS: Functional, domestic pots are the foundation of any potter's training and practice. I have evolved from making primarily that kind of work, but I like returning to it from time to time, as an exercise like sketching or life drawing—honing the skills. I also like living with and using pots in our life at home. We have pots from other potters who I like, as well as pots that I have made, in use at home. I eat my cereal every day out of a bowl from Mashiko. I've had it since 2006, so I've probably had over 3,000 breakfasts out of it. That's a pretty amazing thing to think about. What a personal and important relationship I have with that bowl. Someday it will break. Knowing that is part of the thrill of using it every morning.

Part of my courtship with Louise was making her cups and bowls, instead of mixtapes I guess. And she has always been so supportive of my work that it is very rewarding to make pots for her to put her food on or flowers in. It is strange in some ways to look around the house and realize that we have so much of my work everywhere, but I guess since our house is so full of other stuff, it sort of blends in without calling too much attention to itself and seeming too egotistical. At least I hope that's the case. Also, when I produce work for Louise, it is very casual and personal. She may say something like, "We need more medium sized bowls for soup," and that is something that becomes a pleasure for me to make for her, rather than a burden like a commission from someone else would be. Another thought is, even though my work has evolved a lot, and is now presented in galleries versus furniture stores—where I had my first three shows—there is still an inherent domesticity in the scale and materials of the work. The fact that the pots I make now can still, for the most part, be carried by one person and put on a shelf or table—moved around. The fact that they are clay. Those things connote something different and may only make reference to domesticity through their form. It is true that making good, functional pots—working pots—presents its own challenges, and rewards when done well. It is not easy to do. A really good bowl is very hard to make. So I think it is good to stop and make a bunch of bowls every once in a while; assess their merits, but also try to make something that someone would want to have 3,000 meals out of.

RS: Working as a potter here, there must be an awareness of the history of California pottery. It's a deep resource and history for you to be attached to, or to follow. I feel like there's the shadow that Peter Voulkos, and those who studied under him, cast over this world. But prior to that, or even at the same time, there was a lot of very formal pottery going on that could be seen as less radical but no less important.

People like Glen Lukens or Laura Andreson working and teaching here in LA. Harrison McIntosh and Rupert Deese working in Claremont. Marguerite Wildenhain at Pond Farm in Northern California, right? And the Heinos and the Natzlers. Do you feel pressure to participate in or recognize that history, or to completely mess with it?

AS: Earlier in my career, when I was just focusing on bowls and very basic shapes, the Natzlers were super important to me. Gertrude was just such an elegant bowl thrower, and Otto was such a great glazer—that was sort of the focus of my early self-education. At that time, Voulkos scared the shit out of me. But then I got to a point where I could open my eyes to his work and try to understand what he was doing—how he evolved from a very solid, functional, heavily Japanese-influenced potter to a punk abstract expressionist.

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RS: It's interesting, I know when Shoji Hamada came out here in the 50s or early '60s, he did a series of throwing demonstrations. Harrison McIntosh writes about the mutual respect between Hamada and Voulkos despite their radically different forms. There was something of an appreciation of the discipline in each person's respective craft.

AS: In my mind, I always compare Voulkos to Picasso. Before Picasso began doing abstract work he was an incredible draftsman, and the only reason that his abstraction is so powerful is because he was such a solid painter first. It was the same with Voulkos. To tear apart pots and rip holes in them—if you don't know how to throw beautifully to begin with and you don't know how to fire properly, it's just rookie stuff that anyone can do. Another thing I like about Voulkos' art, and what makes me feel connected to him is that I still sit at the wheel and throw every day. No matter what the stuff winds up looking like, that's the core of the thing. Where Mason moved off the wheel, Voulkos really stayed until he went into bronze and steel. But even those—the big, assembled works—for him are all wheel-based. That's a really specific decision, whether you're on or off the wheel.

I got super lucky in the context of that historical arc, because that time—the '50s and '60s—was so rich and incredible. This may sound disrespectful, but in the '70s and '80s, things just sort of went fallow. I mean, of course, there was Peter Shire doing his thing, and Ralph Bacerra and a few other guys, but I feel like that was kind of a dormant period. Then in 2002, when I sold my first pot and decided to commit full-time, there was just no one around. I had this kind of void where I could look back at that history quietly without people paying too much attention or really caring about how or where I fit in. Now there's a much bigger context of people working—there's so many potters in LA now, and more people paying attention to the history. Suddenly everyone knows about the Natzlers and the Heinos, or Voulkos, or even your boy Doyle Lane, who is having a huge moment in the sun. Whereas ten years ago no one was really paying attention.

RS: *Pacific Standard Time.*

AS: *Pacific Standard Time* played a big role, absolutely, and that was great and really important I think. I'm really happy to be considered part of that historical legacy actually; I don't feel any need to fuck with it.

RS: I know you met Harrison McIntosh who's turning 100 this year. Did you ever meet any of the other people we're discussing?

AS: I met Otto Natzler and I met Otto Heino, both of whom are now dead.

RS: When you met Natzler, was he still making anything?

AS: No, towards the end of his life, he was just doing yoga and staying alive.

RS: Did he give up any of the glaze recipes on his deathbed?

AS: No, apparently he took them to the grave, which seems silly to me—but it's his decision. The story goes, from people I know, mutual friends we had, that he wrote all the glaze recipes in German, and always left one ingredient out that he would commit to memory, so no one would be able crack it.

RS: Is it true that the Natzlers would have these sales of their pots where they would open the kiln and let people into the studio? Have you heard those stories?

AS: I haven't, but traditionally that's how most potters operate—they have kiln openings. When I fired in Japan, we'd fire for, like, three days straight. You're up day and night, drinking beer and by the end you're exhausted; then word goes out.

RS: Is this a firing situation where you're stoking and controlling it?

AS: Yeah, you have the old guy who knows the kiln the best. It's mostly

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controlled by ear, a little bit by vision, but you're sensing or feeling the whole process. He's taking peeks at things, and you're stoking and stoking and stoking; he's listening and pulling bricks out; peeking in to see how things look and sound and smell—using all of his senses to understand what's happening inside the kiln.

In the end, in the country at least, everyone knows when there's a kiln firing because the smoke is up all over the town. You can see it. Once the smoke stops, they start showing up—24 hours later when they know the kiln is cool. So by the time we started unloading there were all these people there just standing and waiting. And every time a piece came out and got set on the table, people were standing there watching and talking about each pot, one by one.

RS: Wanting to witness the process, or actually wanting to purchase the pieces?

AS: Both. Some of them were just fans. It was a thing to do; like, "Let's go out to so-and-so's kiln opening." For other people, it was about having the first crack at buying pieces.

RS: We touched on this before, but were they high-price things, for utility or aesthetic?

AS: Their work was all functional and not very expensive. Mashiko is a functional pottery town. They have two ceramic festivals a year, one in the fall and one in the spring, and that's where a lot of the potters make most of their money. Thousands of tourists come—they make that festival their vacation.

RS: That idea of the annual sale in ceramics. Peter Shire does his annual Christmas sale, and leading up to that point he takes a break from commissions or sculptural stuff and funnels energy into preparing work for it. Up until Michael Frimkess' father, Lou, passed away, he used to organize annual sales too. So there are pieces that are now highly valued objects in galleries that were originally sold as part of the tradition of pottery.

AS: Yes, and that goes back to the story that you heard about the Natzlers. I think that really was or is the traditional potter's way of making a living and also connecting directly with his or her collectors. I did an annual holiday sale for three years I think. I had this bookkeeper who also did the books for Peter Shire, the Natzlers, the Heinos, Beatrice Wood and others. He was the potters' bookkeeper and talked me into doing the annual holiday sale. He told me that all of the potters he worked with did one, and that for many of them it could represent half of their annual income.

RS: One of the things I appreciate about you is that you're involved in your own pottery on different levels. You're doing commissions, you're doing this collaborative show with Akio and you're doing shows in galleries. How do you balance and weigh up all those things? I know you're trying to do fewer commissions.

AS: Well, I'm trying to do commissions that are more like larger scale art installations, rather than single pot commissions. In the last year I've done some interesting, architecturally scaled projects where the clay object becomes almost like a brick or a building unit. I enjoy it, and at this point I'm trying to only do projects where I connect with the people involved and am personally compelled by the project. Right now I'm working on my first public art commission, which will also involve the largest pieces that I'll have made. It's for the exterior of a new building in West Hollywood. At the same time I am making some small plates for my friend's restaurant Trois Mec, vases for the Chateau Marmont, starting new work for a show in Tokyo this spring, and working on a book with Tamotsu Yagi and Dung Ngo about a collaboration I did this year with Kohei Oda, a plant grafting master from Hiroshima. I am lucky to have such a nice variety of work.

RS: I feel like there's a naivety regarding how much time a commission takes and how much they can pull you out of your regular studio groove. It's kind of like, "Can you just do this?" and often it's a much bigger deal than that. But there's also a point where a commission presents a certain problem that elevates what you do to a different scale. I'm thinking of some of the early John Mason doors that he did for houses. There were so many technical problems involved and John was already working at a big scale, but really rose to the engineering challenge of some of those commissions.

AS: That is the flip side of the commission. I have had some great commissions recently from great clients and collectors, that have really allowed me to try new techniques and work at new scales. I guess it's all about trying to choose the right people and the right opportunities regardless of the scale. Some small commissions that I have done wound up being way more work than the large ones because the people needed so much hand-holding or wanted the piece redone several times. Commissions are a slippery slope. In a really basic way, they put you in the service business rather than in the art making business.

RS: One of my pet peeves about potters or ceramicists is that there's a lack of editing or individual critique on a pot-to-pot basis. Given that pottery is by nature serial in its production, how, within this framework, is it possible to slow down your looking, as things are coming up off the wheel or out of the kiln?

AS: I agree completely. That is a real challenge for any artist working in any medium, but potters in particular I guess. I used to sell almost everything I made just because I felt like I had to—to feed the kids. Now I am much more discerning and think, "If I don't feel good enough about this, I shouldn't put it out into the world."

Also, if a piece is not strong enough on its own, before it is glazed, then I have to smash it. I used to try to glaze my way out of a bad form, but that's idiotic because if the glaze turns out well, the pot is still shit and it becomes that old lipstick on a pig thing. And if the glaze turns out badly on an ugly pot, then you just wasted more time making something doubly ugly.

I play this game with myself where I'll make something and if I'm not sure about it I'll think, "If somebody who I really like and respect made this, does that make me like it?" Then I'll pretend somebody who I don't respect made the piece and think, "Is it bad just because they made it, or is it still good, even though they made it?" But mostly I am pretty clear about if a piece is in or out. Worthy or not.

RS: I have this game with Lesley [Vance] that if a painting's not working for her I say, "Okay, you walk into a cafe and this is in a show, in a cafe—is it still a good painting?" Sometimes it works.

A related question: as you were preparing the body of work for Design Miami, how did you determine whether something was included, left to work on, or totally scrapped?

AS: Miami was the biggest and most important stage that I have been on in terms of audience numbers and caliber. The bar was very high and my goal was to present the 40 best pots that I have ever made. There was a clear line for me in terms of what would be included, but I am lucky that I was trained in such a rigorous critique-based program, so I'm a very good self-critic. I really try not to let anything out of the studio that I don't think is good enough. And if I don't let it out, I smash it, so it doesn't find another way out.

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