

LOS ANGELES

November 27, 2012

Adam Silverman: A Feeling for Clay Julie Lazar



Since [Atwater Pottery Studio](#) opened in 2002, I have followed Los Angeles-based Adam Silverman's progressive, maturing mastery of clay. Then in 2009, we had the opportunity to work together on a new collaboration with Nader Tehrani for the [Montalvo Arts Center](#).

Following the tradition of Californian clay artists like Peter Voulkos, John Mason and Ken Price, Adam Silverman has expanded his pottery making into the domain of contemporary art while maintaining his commitment to producing functional handmade pots.

Artbound invited Adam Silverman to discuss what lead up to his creation of new pots and sculptures that are currently on view at the [Edward Cella Gallery](#) through December 29.

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Untitled (2012). New sculptures on cement pedestals using Le Corbusier colors created for Edward Cella Gallery exhibition.

Julie: You've been devoted to handling clay since your teens yet only became a full time potter and artist after working as an architect, then as a successful clothing designer/entrepreneur in Los Angeles, and initiating a family. What attracts you most to working with your hands, spinning a pottery wheel, using earthly materials and traditional processes?

Adam: They are pretty closely related. I like the idea of working with my hands as an abstract notion but I'm not a particularly handy, hands-on guy beyond the art studio. I've done other things like turn wood or blown glass in my youth, but clay and the pottery wheel are the only things after building buildings and making clothing that ever felt right to me. Ultimately sitting at the potter's wheel as the focal point of my professional life is the only thing that has felt deeply meaningful and correct. The results of the act of doing this make sense in the world to me.



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Untitled (2012) by Adam Silverman. Photo credit: Adam Silverman.

Julie: Your sense of aesthetics continues to grow and change. What architects and artists interest you most at present?

Adam: My aesthetic core was established 10 or 15 years ago, and I feel that it is maturing not evolving. I've returned to some of the same people over the last 20 years to influences like Le Corbusier. At the moment, I've been looking a lot at Lucien Freud's paintings. Because of the Pacific Standard Time program, I spent time last year with Southern California influences; people like Charles Eames whom I've studied my entire career. I've looked more meaningfully at Peter Voulkos and [Ken Price](#)--the clay artists from the 1950s and 60s. The goal of anybody making stuff is that at the end of the day all those who have influenced you disappear, he or she become mute. I hope I'm working my way there.

Julie: You've mentioned that a pot has to feel just right to you in terms of its weight and balance or you won't release it from your studio. And you acknowledge that dancers and choreographers have informed how you understand spatial relationships between objects. Who and how?

Adam: Dance and choreography are very closely related to architecture and to what I am doing. It's the simple notion of creating an object or skin that holds space. In the case of architecture when you make a building, you are making both an object and space. With dance choreography you are starting with the human body in a space and then you create new shapes in that space, or new spaces within the space. I look at dance, or still photography of dance to see incredibly new or unseen forms, spatial relationships or negative spaces between bodies that create their own form. More than any single artist, the giants of the dance world influence me. I've also seen lots of alternative, lower east side New York dance in my youth; the ambitious, alternative naked people with no music kind of dance, to full on ballet, to Merce Cunningham. It's more how a choreographer uniquely operates in the world, which I see as related.

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Untitled (2012) by Adam Silverman. Photo credit: Adam Silverman.

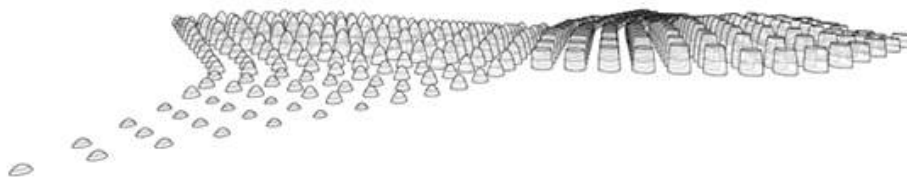
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Julie: Your sense of place strongly impacts the objects you create. As a departure from smaller scale pots made early on, you have undertaken two larger, challenging art projects and by doing so have addressed some unique qualities about both locales that you created them for. In 2009, you collaborated with architect/designer, Nader Tehrani (whom you befriended while studying architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design) to produce an installation I commissioned for the Montalvo Arts Center in the hills near Silicon Valley that you named Boolean Valley. Co-creating something was a departure for you. First, describe some of the ideas the two of you exchanged in deciding what to do.



Boolean Valley at the San Jose Museum of Art in 2009. Photo credit: Julie Lazar.



Computerized site plan of Boolean Valley at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center Gallery in 2010. Photo credit: Office dA (used by permission).

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Adam: There was a lot of back and forth during several charettes when we spent day and night brainstorming and sketching, trying to figure out what we were going to make. He got excited about making tile--one of the first things that came to his mind when he thought of clay as an architect. Eventually we talked about the making process and how it should relate to our individual practices as well as the conditions at hand. The mandate we gave ourselves was that, even though the piece was going to be installed in Silicon Valley first and birthed there, when the installation travelled to different venues representing Montalvo, formally it would transform in response to the spaces that it occupied. Boolean Valley would take on its own life wherever it went. We decided to make one cone form 24 inches tall by 12 inches at its base. The cone represents most of the forms that a potter can make on a wheel. If you turned the cone upside down, it was a vase shape. If you cut it in half it could be a bowl or a plate. The notion was to take this one form, repeat it 200 times and cut each in half at different heights to produce 400 pieces of varying sizes. To determine the location of the pieces within each space, Nader used a computer and composed a series of different landscapes.

Julie: After exhibiting Boolean Valley at The Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center, the installation traveled to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Why did you elect to site the piece in the sculpture garden's reflecting pool?



Boolean Valley installation shot at Nasher Sculpture Center, (2010). Photo credit: Julie Lazar.

Adam: The Nasher Museum is a small Renzo Piano building--one of his best--with beautiful sunlit galleries. The garden is an extension of the building where an incredible collection of sculpture is permanently installed. A couple of outdoors artworks are pure

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rectangles; one of them is a Barbara Hepworth piece that juts out into space. There is a reflecting pool sitting between a James Turrell skyspace and a Richard Serra tilted arc. I first considered putting Boolean Valley in water to make use of the potential of its reflection; so that the cut pieces might become visually whole again--although differently than they ever were originally--into a kind of egg shape. The installation had been exhibited in three white boxes before being shown in Dallas. The Nasher staff liked the idea from a practical point of view because we identified a programmable space that they hadn't used before. In the end, Boolean Valley looked so unbelievable there, like it was made for the space.

Julie: While in Dallas, you were introduced to Malcom Warner, Deputy Director of the Kimbell Art Museum whose iconic building in Ft. Worth was designed by Louis I. Kahn. The timing of this encounter was important because a 90,000 square foot building expansion designed by Renzo Piano was underway. Across from the Kimbell resides The Modern designed by Tadao Ando. What did you propose doing as a self-supported project and why? What were some of the key challenges of producing Reverse Archeology?

Adam: In olden days, a potter would move to a town that existed because someone had discovered a large deposit of clay in or near the place and set up shop. Then other people would follow and over time you eventually had a village with 200 or 300 people. Those towns were where specific design vocabularies developed because of the local materials, and certain potters became established enough to take on students. So you have pottery towns all over the world that have recognizable names, and are populated by famous people. My idea was to go to a place and make works from materials gathered at the site, not because the materials are necessarily "good," but because the materials are culturally significant. I was visiting the Kimbell Museum and heard that the Renzo Piano expansion had been approved and they were moving ahead; it clicked that this was the spot to attempt this project. The Louis Kahn building was particularly influential to me at the beginning of my architecture studies. Tadao Ando was one of the most important architects to me then, too. Both of them are valuable to me aesthetically in making pots or sculptures today (and always will be). Since the Kahn and Ando buildings were there facing each other, and Renzo Piano was setting up shop and building right there, it meant the ground was going to be opened up and could be a source for clay. For two years, until just last month, I travelled back and forth regularly (since groundbreaking) gathering materials: trees, gallons of water from the fountains in the Kahn and the Ando buildings, extracting 8,000 pounds of clay from the ground, rocks, acorns, leaves, anything from those sites that could be burned or potentially turned into a glaze or incorporated. I brought all of that to LA and tested it to figure out what the materials could do, if anything. Just because there is clay in the ground doesn't mean that it's clay that can be fired, or that it can be fired hot enough to be of use. There are a whole bunch of technical, practical questions. If another potter set up shop for real on that site and did all the tests that I did, he or she would have packed up their bags and gone to another site because the clay is not very good. So there would be no pottery town in Ft. Worth.

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Excavation site of the Kimbell Art Museum's expansion--a building designed by Renzo Piano. Clay collected here was used in the creation of Adam Silverman's *Reverse Archeology* project (2010 - 2012), an installation of three pots produced expressly for the Museum's 40th Anniversary. Photo credit: Adam Silverman



Examples of clay culled from the Kimbell Art Museum's excavation site during testing phase of *Reverse Archeology* by Adam Silverman. Photo credit: Adam Silverman.

Julie: You named the project, *Reverse Archaeology*, which gives a good sense of what you were working towards, and you set yourself very strict parameters during the making process. Can you explain more about them?

Adam: The single parameter I set was that I would add nothing to the materials taken from the site no matter what kind of clay I found. Being true to Kahn's way of doing things is to ask, "What do these materials want to be?" Maybe six months into testing the material it became clear that the clay was very challenging. I have five different clays because every time I went to Texas, workers were at a different location and at a different depth at the site. Some clay is radically different from another even though they were found only 50 feet apart. It was a question of testing each sample, then a combination of the clays. At some point along the way, it became clear that most of the clay was pretty crappy. I could have added some clay from elsewhere to make it do what I wanted it to do. Even though it was a difficult process to remain true to, having a really strict

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parameter that I couldn't control was a great thing to learn from. What I delivered to the Kimbell for the 40th anniversary of its Kahn building were three large pots that I installed in the interior courtyard. The context is unbelievably beautiful and powerful, though the pots are extremely crude. They are very real representations of what I can do with their clay, between my abilities and the clay's abilities. The pots were made specifically for this context: in a certain scale with rough dimensions that were determined by the museum's courtyard. I made decisions appropriate for the space so I produced big pieces-2 1/2 feet tall, which is large for clay that's not too good. People appreciate the idea, effort and connection to the fact that the pots were made up of what came out of that ground and are now sitting inside their museum, and they really sprung out of that Louis Kahn building.

Installation shot (partial view)
of *Reverse Archeology* (2012) by
Adam Silverman at Kimbell Art
Museum in Forth Worth, Texas.
Photo credit: Adam Silverman



Julie: Your exploration into making site-specific projects has motivated you to continue making other kinds of artworks out of clay. The new pots and sculptures you've just created for your Edward Cella Gallery exhibition are exquisite, and from my point of view represent a turning point in your career; more like a breakthrough for you. Do you agree?

Adam: The exhibition has two bodies of work that are deeply connected. One room displays new pots, and another presents ten freestanding sculptures. The pots are displayed in an unconventional way on a table designed by Kulaput Yantrasast. For the sculpture room, the objects are much bigger, more ambitious and are displayed on colored, cement pedestals. They are very controlled in some ways but they are also much less controlled. I challenged myself to make everything for the Cella show "museum worthy".

Sometimes I think being trained as an architect or designer can be a hindrance. When too much of my design brain is at play it makes me keep things cleaner and tighter. Sometimes I want to loosen up, to be as fearless as possible. But the work wouldn't come

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simply with that desire; it would look contrived like I was trying to look like someone saying "loosen up." Whether it is because I am older, more confident, capable or expressive in a way that that doesn't feel forced, I am able to take the next step in the making process. If everyone said, "oh this sucks you should go back to making pretty pots," I would go home and think real hard for a long time. But when people respond strongly and positively, then it feels like I'm moving in the right direction.



2012 pot created for Edward Cella Gallery exhibition.



Adam Silverman was born in New York, raised in Connecticut and educated at The Rhode Island School of Design from which he holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Architecture. He moved to Los Angeles in 1988 and practiced architecture earning his California Architects license in 1993. In addition to a brief career in architecture, Silverman also worked in the fashion industry for almost nine years as the co-founder of X-Large and X-Girl clothing labels. During this time, he also attended

UCLA Anderson School of Management and earned a Master of Business Administration in 1997. From High School onward, Silverman continued to make pots as a hobby until he opened Atwater Pottery in 2002 and became a professional potter. In 2008, Silverman became a partner in, and the studio director of Heath Ceramics--a 62-year old California maker of dinnerware and tile. Adam Silverman has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and Japan.

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Top Photo: 2012 pot created for Edward Cella Gallery exhibition.

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