

Adam Silverman's Unearthly Pottery

By **HUGH HART**

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"I'm proudly analog," says Adam Silverman, and the Los Angeles architect-turned-fashion-designer-turned-potter isn't kidding. Where most modern travelers might fuss over laptops, tablets or smartphones during their airplane flights, Silverman obsessed over an entirely different kind of luggage during recent trips from Fort Worth, Texas.

There, to create pots honoring the 40th anniversary of the Kimbell Art Museum's Louis I. Kahn building, Silverman excavated clay from a construction site for its new Renzo Piano wing. "I'd put a couple of scoops of clay into these giant zip-lock bags and bring two super-heavy carry-ons to the airport," he says. "And sometimes I'd carry a log, because I also cut down trees and brought back wood for the kiln. I carried the craziest stuff, and every single time I got checked by TSA inspection. I kept the tags as souvenirs."

Silverman has been producing strange cargo since 2002, when he quit the hipster-friendly X-Large clothing label he co-founded to focus full time on the kiln and pottery wheel he'd set up in his garage. "An increasingly loud voice in the back of my head said, 'Just do this as your job and stop messing around with clothes,'" the Los Feliz resident says.

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The 50-year-old father of four enjoys a midcareer survey of his gritty, glittering ceramic pieces by way of the new picture book "Adam Silverman Ceramics" (Skira Rizzoli Publishing). Additionally, the Laguna Art Museum is presenting "Adam Silverman: Clay and Space." Running through Jan. 19, his first solo museum show features recent pieces made from seaweed, ocean salt and clay that Silverman baked on Laguna Beach fire pits. (His larger pots sell in the \$1,500 to \$2,000 range at Heath Ceramics in Los Angeles.)

At first glance, Silverman's surreal vases, encrusted with blisters, scratches, scars, bubbles, globs and strips, bear little resemblance to the modernist masterpieces he idolized as an architecture student at the Rhode Island School of Design. Yet French Japanese minimalist Tadao Ando, for example, remains a key influence. "Ando is geometrically pure in terms of squares and volumes, but the surfaces are perfect puffy concrete," he explains. "If they didn't have the puff, the buildings wouldn't be as interesting."

Silverman spent a month in 2006 throwing pots and absorbing centuries-old craftsmanship in the ancient Japanese "potters town" of Mashiko. His rough-meets-smooth aesthetic builds on a timeless foundation of organic shapes. "My basic formal vocabulary is referential to pure geometric things like eggs or spheres or torsos," he says. "I wouldn't glaze this crazy on a wonky form because then it would look too hippie-ish."

ART: Can you guess the high price?

Works by the late California pioneering potter Peter Voulkos and his students, John Mason and Ken Price, also contributed to Silverman's conception of ceramics as a purely artistic medium. "They were all influences not so much stylistically but more as forces of energy that I emulate," he says.

During a good day at the potter's wheel, Silverman notes, "you sort have this physical dialogue with the clay: How tall does it want to be? Which way does it want to go, how fat does it want to be on the bottom versus the top, what's the swoop like, what's the shoulder like, how small is the hole on top? All of those questions are in play as you go."

These roughly textured objects sometimes resemble archaeological artifacts from a distant planet. To achieve that alien-yet-familiar effect, Silverman glazes, then glazes some more until the layers come together. "If I unload the kiln and it's not right, that doesn't mean the piece goes in the garbage," he says. "It just means I keep going. I might grind off some of the glaze and apply



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another glaze on top. In most cases I have no recollection of how any given pot got to where it is. In that sense, they really are one of a kind."

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