

Red Is Covering The Wheel
Redis

Hodge, Brooke. "Red Is Covering The Wheel." RIDXYZ, Fall/Winter 2013/14.
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What does architecture have to do with pottery? For Adam Silverman, these two seemingly disparate creative practices are inextricably intertwined.

by Brooke Hodge

ADAM SILVERMAN BARCH BB IS DEEPLY DEVOTED—one might even say driven—to make things with his hands. Working with clay is something he has done since he was 15 years old, but for many years it was a hobby, a respite from whatever his primary activity was at the time. Just over a decade ago, he decided to devote himself to making a full-time career of pottery and is now one of the most successful potters in America. How he got from A to C is an interesting story that reveals the special relationship between buildings and pots.

When Silverman started college at the University of Colorado in Boulder, he began taking ceramics classes in earnest. "It was the only thing that I knew I was really interested in," he recalls. "I didn't have any kind of developed aesthetic sensibility as far as pottery was concerned, but I enjoyed the physicality of it."





After three semesters at Boulder, he transferred to Columbia University in New York, where an introductory course in architecture sparked his interest. An academic year spent at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), the architect Peter Eisenman's hyper-intellectual Manhattan think tank, confirmed that architecture was what he wanted to pursue academically, so he pulled up stakes again to come to RISD.

RISD's focus on making appealed to Silverman. He also loved the fact that studying architecture was creative and that it combined art history and academic study alongside the pragmatic, technical side of designing buildings. "I found it very much like ceramics because you're involved in a process of making except that there's a bigger intellectual component. It was very exciting. I felt as if the world opened up for me."

At RISD, Silverman was especially drawn to the work of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn and Tadao Ando, all of whom made (or make) buildings that are strong and powerful, formally sculptural and object-like, as well as somewhat minimal and unadorned. "In retrospect, the work of these architects is an interesting influence to someone who makes small things with his hands," Silverman pointed out recently. "Corb's Ronchamp is a very important building for me. It's one of the best examples of how an amazingly beautiful interior space can be made in a building that is an object itself. It's really about making the inside and the outside simultaneously, just like a pot is made."



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For a recent gallery show, Silverman made monolithic sculptures that combine crudely cast cylindrical concrete aggregate bases—painted in the colors Le Corbusier used—topped with sculptural ceramic forms in earthy tones, with an occasional splash of color.

By studying architecture in an environment that's equally focused on art and creativity, Silverman began to develop his own aesthetic sensibility. "At RISD, I started making things in clay that I liked and kept for the first time. They were things that I thought had a bit of intellectual content or relevance or connection."

After graduation, Silverman headed to Los Angeles to break into the architecture field. After several years of "drafting for dollars," as he puts it, the reality of being a working architect was setting in. He was working for Charles Allen, a Beverly Hills interior designer, when he and **Eli Bonerz** BArch 89, a native Angeleno, hatched the idea of opening a retail business in the city's east side where they "could draft, be architects part-time, hang out, drink coffee and enhance the neighborhood at the same time."

In late 1991 Silverman and Bonerz rented a storefront on Vermont Avenue—on the border of Los Feliz and Silver Lake—and opened a workwear store they called X-Large. With Mike Diamond (Mike D of the Beastie Boys) as one of the original investors and collaborators, X-Large took off as soon as the Beastie Boys released an album that spring. But as the business grew, Silverman found himself forced to focus more on running the business than on designing and making, which left him dissatisfied and in need of another creative outlet.

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Silverman favors physical, intuitive processes that allow him to create work that is sensual, gritty and beautiful. He often adds various chemicals to his glazes, causing them to bubble and foam, and then, once a vessel is fired, grinds down its surface to reveal the pitted, corroded texture below. He frequently layers glazing and firing techniques over each other to create the surface of a single pot: burning, crushing, grinding, dipping, multi-firing.





CLARITY OF FOCUS

In 2002, to address the questions that still plagued him about his interest in pottery, Silverman enrolled in a summer ceramics program at Alfred [NY] University to determine if he should actually consider pottery as a career. His work that summer was simple and clean – bowls, with only two glazes: a beautiful yellow and a blue. But he experimented with different processes, including salt firing and wood firing, and sold his first pot at the end of the summer.

Finally, the art form that he had turned to as a hobby started to seem like something he could devote himself to professionally. All the ingredients were there – working with his hands, the physicality of a process he could control himself, and the lineage he recognized between modern architecture and modern pottery. Most importantly, he felt a visceral connection to pottery that he hadn't gotten from architecture, at least professionally.

Ambitious and focused, Silverman set the goal of making enough work for an exhibition less than a year after finishing the Alfred program and beginning to work as a potter full-time. He named his studio practice Atwater Pottery after its

location on Glendale Boulevard in LA's east side Atwater Village neighborhood. In the early 2000s, there weren't many people doing ceramics in LA and it would be a number of years before the DIY craft revival would take root. But Atwater Pottery immediately took off after his first small exhibition and a favorable review in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Adam Silverman is an intense, contained man. Even though he is engaged in messy work, there's little that's actually messy about him as a person. Lean and wiry, alert and nimble, he has a vast reserve of energy that he taps expressly for his pottery. When he's throwing a pot, he's relaxed and at ease, yet physically active, shaping wet clay with his hands, spinning the potter's wheel, constructing his pots.

The tattoos covering his arms are his only extraneous "decoration." Each of them marks an important event in his life, including the births of each of his four children. His tattoo of Le Corbusier's well-known *Open Hand* motif is an acknowledgement of his deep admiration for the architect and his work, perhaps reminding him of the importance of the hand to both architecture and pottery.



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Highly articulate, with a quick (and at times cynical) wit and a keen visual sensibility, Silverman continually looks at the world beyond his pottery studio. Cards, photographs and clippings of what inspires him – from the work of Donald Judd to Louise Bourgeois to *Comme des Garçons* to Viktor and Rolf and Alexander McQueen – are arranged on a floor-to-ceiling magnetic wall in his studio. Photographs of Ronchamp and Angkor Wat are nestled among dozens of postcards of pots he's collected on his travels or received from friends.

AS THE WHEEL SPINS

In many ways, Silverman sees making a pot as like making a building, just at a smaller scale. As the wheel spins, he forms both the inside space and the exterior shape of a pot or a bowl. Recently, he has been seeking a more explicit connection between pottery and architecture in his work and as a result, some pieces have been getting much bigger as he reaches for more of an architectural scale.

In 2008 Silverman collaborated with another RISD friend, architect **Nader Tehrani** BArch 86, on an installation called *Boolean Valley*. For each of the three museum sites where it has been installed, they developed a specific configuration derived from Boolean logic to create a topography of 400 cut clay objects placed in each gallery as an undulating, striated landscape.

Boolean Valley was the first time Silverman had worked collaboratively on a large-scale project composed of individual objects, yet the installation shows how he thinks about his work in a larger, more theoretical field or landscape. While he was in Texas installing the work in the Nasher Sculpture Center's Garden, he made a pilgrimage to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, which was about to embark on an expansion designed by the architect Renzo Piano. The Kimbell, Louis Kahn's iconic and much-revered art museum, is located very near the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth by Tadao Ando.

In collaboration with architect **Nader Tehrani** BArch 86, Silverman has shown *Boolean Valley* (above), an installation that makes use of Boolean logic to create an undulating, striated landscape using 400 clay objects.

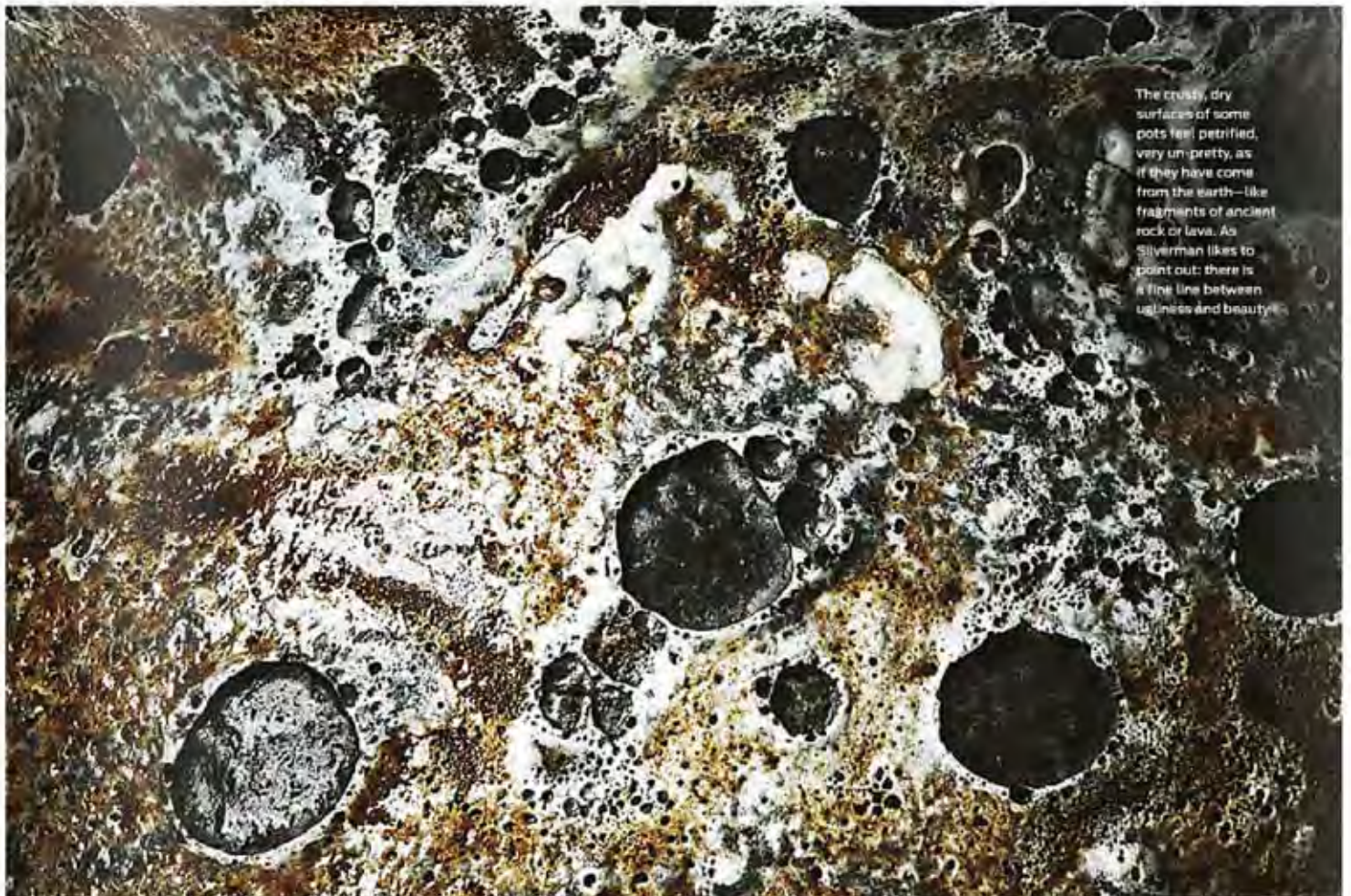




The convergence of buildings by a triumvirate of his personal heroes was an architectural perfect storm that gave Silverman the idea of harvesting the materials from the Kimbell construction site. In *Reverse Archaeology*, a two-year-long project, he gathered an amazing range of materials from the site, including five distinct types of clay; bits of oak, elm and cedar (he burnt the wood for ash to use in glazes); water, rust, rocks and acorns. Ultimately, he harvested thousands of pounds of clay from various stages of the museum's excavation process and worked with each of the five types to find out how they would perform when wheel-thrown, slip-cast or hand-built.

Building on the experience of *Boolean Valley* and *Reverse Archaeology*, Silverman has been inspired to make larger work in his studio—work that is bigger and taller and can be displayed outdoors but that isn't conceived as part of a specific installation or project. Ultimately, pushing the limits of ceramics (and himself) is what he enjoys most. Just 12 years after committing to a career in ceramics, Adam Silverman is a potter with an impressive body of work that challenges the fundamental notion of what ceramics can be and redefines the connection between architecture and pottery that is at its very heart. ■

*Brooke Hodge, director of exhibitions and publications at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, writes frequently about architecture and design for major publications. This text is excerpted from a longer essay in the new book *Adam Silverman Ceramics*, published this fall by Skira/Rizzoli.*



The crusty, dry surfaces of some pots feel petrified, very un-pretty, as if they have come from the earth—like fragments of ancient rock or lava. As Silverman likes to point out: there is a fine line between ugliness and beauty.

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