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ADAM SILVERMAN

THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF RISK by Kathleen Whitney

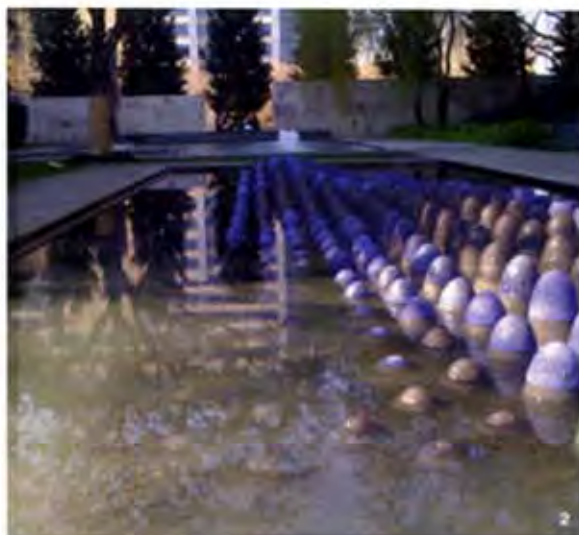


In 1968, woodworker David Pye described the concept "workmanship of risk." This idea expands the notion of craftsmanship by severing it from the previous severely constrained definition of the handmade. The "workmanship of risk" refers to the process of making one or many objects that can be ruined by a slip of the hand, a momentary distraction, or a mechanical failure. This phrase is a perfect description of Adam Silverman's work process, one that has become increasingly experimental, pushing the boundaries of ceramics' basic materials.

It took Silverman slightly over 25 years to take his involvement with ceramics seriously; in 2002 he stopped being a serious amateur and opened Atwater Pottery. Since that time, his work has been

widely exhibited in the United States and Japan. His work will also be the subject of a Rizzoli monograph published in the fall of 2013. Before he became a full-time potter, Silverman was an architect and then a clothing designer. All three careers are interrelated and combine his interests in how things are made and how objects (houses, clothing, pots) interact with their users. The inspiration for Silverman's work is drawn from a variety of sources, including the works of Hans Coper, the Natzlers, Peter Voulkos, and his deep connection to mid-20th century Modernism.

Silverman's Atwater Pottery work attracted the attention of Heath Ceramics, a northern California-based pottery firm established by Edith Heath in 1948. In 2008, he became the studio



director of Heath in Los Angeles. At that time, Silverman moved Atwater Pottery into Heath's Los Angeles location; Heath now functions as retail store, small on-site factory, and personal studio space. Silverman also curates in-store exhibitions of other ceramic artists and craftspeople and sponsors various community events such as 2012's *Home Plate Dinnerware Exchange*, a collaboration with the Skid Row Housing Trust.

Silverman has an unusual arrangement with Heath's owners, Robin Petracic and Catherine Bailey; he is a quasi-independent employee/junior partner. This arrangement resembles the Scandinavian system that encourages craftspeople to work independently within the business. Silverman designs his own line for the com-

1 Installation in the front gallery at Edward Cella Art+Architecture, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Tracey Landworth. Courtesy of Edward Cella Art+Architecture. 2 Boolean Valley, collaboration with Nader Tehrani, installed at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas, 2010. 3 Reverse Archaeology, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. December 2012. 4 Installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in Los Angeles, California. Courtesy of LACMA.

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pany and also works for himself. To underscore the difference, his own work continues to be produced as Atwater Pottery. Silverman considers his work at Heath, and his independent work, aspects of a single practice, thinking of himself as a potter who makes both functional and decorative objects.

The ware he makes for Heath is a hybrid; it's based on vase shapes originally designed by Edith Heath but is transformed by Silverman's glaze designs and techniques for creating texture. Using Heath's factory clays, these hybrid vases are slip-cast and fired to cone 02 in oxidation. The vases typically have a band of textured glaze placed between a smooth, colored upper and lower band. Silverman chooses new colors for the hybrid twice a year so collectors can continue to buy new ones. In 2012 Heath made 1500 *Hybrid Vases* in four shapes and eight colors. The number of each shape in each color is less than 50, and each one is unique due to the glazing pattern. Further differences are due to the fact that the decorative bubble glazes on each piece are individually ground down, revealing the clay body and leaving behind smoothed holes and craters in the surfaces. These are sold in all the Heath stores, online, and have been wholesaled to a few select stores.

Silverman's Atwater work is fired in oxidation to cone 5-6. He does multiple firings with blister glazes that are high in silicon carbide using a dark clay body such as Laguna's B3. When glaz-



5 Installation in the second room at Edward Cella Art+Architecture, stoneware, concrete, steel, acrylic paint, 2012. Photo: Tracey Landworth

6 Untitled, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware with opalescent glazes, 2012. Photo: Roger Lee. Both images are courtesy of Edward Cella Art+Architecture



ing, he employs brushwork and gestures strongly reminiscent of abstract expressionist painting, an aesthetic that reflects his interest in process, intuition, and inconsistency. The surfaces look tessellated, covered with tiny bits of glazes that have fragmented as they crawled. The highly textured glazes stand in stark contrast to the sensual shape of his pots.

Because Silverman is interested in the way objects affect their environment, he pays as much attention to the siting and presentation of his work as he does to making it. In a 2012 exhibition at Edward Cella Art & Architecture Gallery in Los Angeles, he displayed two different groupings of vessels, all untitled, all completed in 2012. One installation consisted of a dramatic, seemingly precarious, arrangement of wooden shelves displaying 25 different pots. The second group of pots were tall and elongated, each joined to a concrete cylinder painted in colors that contrasted with and enhanced the pots. They look a little like '50s futurism and also recall Brancusi's *Bird in Flight*. The sizes of these pots vary from 16 to 30 inches in height; the concrete supports add an additional 2 to 4 feet in height, creating objects that are both playful and imposing.

Although most of the pots in this exhibition used Silverman's distinctive blister glazes, many were decorated with thick, runny and transparent glazes applied with gestural brushstrokes. All the pots have such a small sliver of a foot that they seem to float. One

of these ovoid forms has pearlescent white and pink blister glazes that have dripped down the pot's underbelly, concealing the foot within a thick vitreous fringe.

Silverman's interest in site-specific work has resulted in the ongoing project, *Reverse Architecture*. To commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Louis Kahn-designed Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Silverman collected materials from the site of the museum and the construction site of the new Renzo Piano pavilion. The materials collected included several different clays from the grounds, water from the Kimball fountains, wood ash from fallen tree branches, cedar shavings, acorns, iron oxide from rusty metal found on site, concrete, and travertine. From these crude elements, Silverman made three large pots that were placed in the museum's southern interior courtyard. Because they are made from the site itself, the vessels are metaphorically a part of the building. The irony is that they came about in reverse order; they are of the building, but after it in time. Their contrast with the crisp geometry of the courtyard dramatizes their low-tech origins. Because of the influence Kahn's work had on him, Silverman made these pots as an offering to the courtyard, the museum, Louis Kahn, and Renzo Piano.

In 2012, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art invited Silverman to design an installation in conjunction with their exhibition, "California Design, 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way." The ceramic multiples he fabricated for the exhibition represent his admiration for the art and architecture of that period. The three-part installation consists of 25 slip-cast, white, vase-like objects; 25 framed photographs of the vases; and a stack of postcards documenting the design and fabrication of the pots. The interiors of the vases are glossy white, the exteriors roughly brushed with a thick, matte white slip, and the casting mold lines were left untouched. The white forms were presented in five rows of five in a white wood cabinet accompanied by 25 framed photos in five rows of five in an adjacent black cabinet. When a pot is purchased, the buyer also receives the photo and postcards.

Silverman enjoys the challenge of working in collaboration with other designers and craftspeople and has made one-of-a-kind collaborative pieces with artist Alma Allen. For this project, Silverman created a number of black or vivid blue glazed bowls and jugs and gave them to Allen to create a turned and burnished wood top or bottom for each. Silverman did two sets of these collaborations with Allen, one shown at Heath in 2010 and another exhibited in Japan in a 2011 show entitled "Taking Turns."

In 2009, with architect Nader Tehrani, he produced and designed *Boolean Valley*, an installation of 400 small, sliced, cobalt-blue pots whose placement is determined by Boolean logic. Because of the arced arrangement and range of sizes, the installation resembles a sculptural landscape. This work has been exhibited at several museums but most spectacularly at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. At the Nasher, this work was displayed in one of the pools, adding the extra dimension of changing light, wind, and reflections.

All Silverman's fabrication techniques put his pots at risk for failure of some sort; the glazes themselves aren't entirely control-



7 *Taking Turns*, collaborative work with Alma Allen, 8 in. (20 cm) in diameter, iron wood and stoneware, 2011. Photo: Roger Lee. Courtesy of Heath Ceramics.

8 *Heath Hybrid Vases*, dimensions vary, 2011. Both photos: Roger Lee Courtesy of Heath Ceramics.

lable and the ware is vulnerable to breakage or some kind of aesthetic failure since the post-firing completion involves grinding. Many pieces are completely enclosed, in itself a risky proposition. He experiences a fair amount of loss when making these Atwater pieces, often the glazes shiver off the surfaces or the pots break in the kiln. Yet, it's precisely this lack of control that inspires him conceptually.

The desire to take risks distinguishes Silverman from many other potters: he keeps his practice open to change and chance and is continually inspired by the results. Silverman retains Modernism's design restraints: each pot, regardless of its coloration or thicket of glazes, balances form and surface so they enhance rather than overwhelm the other. Because Silverman is challenging himself, it's difficult to predict what direction his work will take. That potential is not only intriguing, it gives his work an incredible vitality; whatever comes next in his work will be as surprising to him as it will be to his audience.

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