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Steven Heinemann

NO IDEAS BUT IN MATERIAL



Aerial

By Chiho Tokita

I met with Steven Heinemann and his wife, acclaimed textile artist Chung-Im Kim, at their studio and home near Cookstown, Ontario. His solo exhibition at David Kaye Gallery in November, *somethingiforgottotellyou*, permitted me the excuse to contact him for an interview. I wanted to learn about the new works in the context of his art in general. This article is about one maker asking questions of an established maker.

Considered volume

Walking into his cavernous studio, one is immediately struck by rows of neatly arranged works on numerous shelving units throughout the room. He has about two decades worth of forms, in various states of completion. There is a visual coherence to the sight, indicative of a certain singularity of focus and a willingness to follow an artistic inquiry for the long haul. Steve Heinemann's works are made



Tundra

from slip-cast earthenware. Though slip casting is often used to make exact replicas, he showed me a table of completed vessels with slight variations in their contours. The subtle difference in thickness and slip application results in forms that warp and bend differently. These idiosyncrasies are intentionally mined. As he says, “there’s an array of possibilities once you’ve determined - given yourself permission - that it’s not your goal to produce multiples...so with any given form I can alter manually on removal from the mold, or simply allow gravity to take its course at various states, or prohibit warping and stick with the original formal version.”

Working sculpturally with ceramic vessels, Steve Heinemann’s work reflects his preoccupation with the enclosed inner space, those interior spaces of volume, which he considers to be a formal concept quintessential to ceramics. Always intrigued by the boundaries that distinguish one field from another; we had an interesting discussion about the difference between sculpture and ceramics, in which he noted that sculpture is historically about mass, about material chipped away through a process of elimination, while ceramics is about manipulating the material for enclosure and containment. But this changed in the twentieth

century when investigation of volume began to be considered a basic sculptural precept. Looking at the sculptures of Richard Serra, he explained how Serra’s installation sculptures, like his *Torqued Torus Inversion*, 2006, created boundaries that delineated an inner and outer space, essentially becoming a container, but perhaps not as readily recognizable due to its massive scale. Looking at his maquettes however, one could see that they were fundamentally vessels. I was pleased to think of Serra’s work as a monumental bowl.

Steve Heinemann’s forms have an organic nature, made visually delicate from very thin walls. In its thinness, I almost perceive the exterior wall as a line drawn to mark the contours of the rim. Though in making vessels we are all subconsciously aware of inner volume. In Steve’s work it becomes more conscious as a considered element. Like those who hear the sound of silence, Steve’s work makes explicit, the presence of absence, and thereby makes what is not there, be there.

His work brings to attention the consideration of interior volume as a potentially active and dynamic presence in the vessel form that is particular to ceramics.



1 *Untitled*



2 *Untitled*

No ideas but in material

For Steve, there are “no ideas but in material.” This is his version of the poet William Carlos Williams’ maxim - no ideas but in things. “For me the point of adapting Williams’ quote is to find another way to claim something very obvious but not necessarily spoken: I spend a lot of time with the material, simply observing its behaviour, granting it agency where possible, and ultimately only ‘saying’ what it will allow me to say.” He notes, “craft is about honouring the physical circumstances we find ourselves in: these bodies, this amazing world, this earth....My take on it is that while concept-based art reflects the Western hierarchy of mind over body, craft allows ideas to ‘trickle up’, to percolate up through material from below. In this sense material is implicated from the get-go, not a secondary function following primary concept.” Steve observes the material for the insights it has to offer.

Material is the language of his work and material characteristics are his vocabulary. It then follows that, the greater the depth with which one investigates the material, the greater the range of vocabulary from which to speak. As he notes, “yes, in that sense, knowledge begets fluency.” One can suggest that embedded in his work are in fact conceptual ideas, conceptual ideas which are material in nature.

Allowing for time

Realizing a certain vision often requires a long investment of time to work out the material and technical challenges. Steve notes that his way of working is more ‘evolution than revolution.’ The process of investigating the relationship between form and slip covered surfaces may take multiple firings. Therefore the surfaces are literally embedded with layers of material history and metaphorically with geological



3 *Untitled*



4 *Untitled*

allusions. “In practice many pieces have benefitted from becoming ‘lost’ - i.e. original surface idea as dead end - and eventually regrouping with a new strategy, with the original ‘mistake’ as substrata in the resulting surface.”

Though he readily wishes his process was not so ‘evolutionary’ in nature, it is clear that he gives the work the time it necessitates. Steve notes an insight that he had gained back in high school: “I call this the Dan Stoyles effect. Not many people have heard of Dan unless they happened to be in our Grade 9 art class at Williams High in Aurora. Dan transferred into our school partway through the year when his parents moved to our town. Those of us in the class kind of already knew where we were in the pecking order and some of us may have already gotten a little smug or cocky. There were some smirks as Dan missed deadlines and work did not appear weekly as required. Until one day towards the end of

term he came in with projects that were worked and honed to levels we had never dreamed of. He had taken it upon himself to take the required time to bring his ideas to fruition, despite the arbitrary deadlines and potential cost to grades. I doubt that anything since has more informed my sense of the demands of the creative process.”

Somethingiforgottotellyou

Looking at the works in the exhibition, I was particularly struck by the potential of a simple crack. *Untitled* (works #1-5) and *Aerial* are masterful explorations of cracked slip surfaces. In *Aerial*, I see the pronounced fissures on the surface as the beginnings of a three-dimensional form that move it beyond surface treatment to becoming subtly sculptural. I begin to wonder what would happen if the cracks, currently sitting on thin square slabs, were mined



Wane

further for its three-dimensionality, or became an integral part of a more massive form, like Serra's *Grief and Reason (For Walter)*, two solid rectangles of steel. A ceramic appropriation of sculptural mass seems like a fair exchange. In *Untitled (#1-5)*, I see an interesting dialectic of control and randomness in the cracks. The top layer of the slipped surface is beginning to peel away from the body like skin, sometimes separating at the cracks and sometimes not, creating random pockets of inner space within a space, with edges that reveal the material's natural process of tearing. Not only is there layered material history, the works begin to connote a history of layered volume, of spaces beneath a space.

The works speak of material fluency and conceptual engagement with material. One conceptual idea is the nature



5 Untitled

of material fissures, exploring when a crack in material transforms itself from a two dimensional surface into a three dimensional form. Another investigation is the idea of a skin emerging from the surface, where "the surface begins to claim a physical presence, as though the bowl was in the midst of a moulting."

Steve described the exhibition as a slice taken from the studio. It is a glimpse into the art making process going on now, within the ongoing flow of engagement that has gone on every day. In showing works that are naturally there, rather than making work to be shown, and allowing the work to dictate the time it needs, there is a mindfulness of the making process. I believe this is called the Dan Stoyles effect.