

HOWARD KOTTLER

FACE TO FACE



PATRICIA FAILING

Foreword

It is not easy to convey the essential being that was Howard Kottler. Personality, style, character, intelligence, humor—all his many attributes were such an elusive, complex, and subtle set of variables that even though one might use wonderfully descriptive language or tell an evocative story, there would still always be something missing, something flat about suggesting who he was.

What would be missing, of course, would be experiencing the real thing—the nuances of his voice, his ever-changing body language, his provocative, sometimes demonic demeanor, his impish playfulness, his charm, his wit, the truth of his biting words, his sensitivity, his delight with the discovery of a piece of Noritake, his passion for work, his lasciviousness, his intelligent interpretations of history, his trust, his loyalty to family. Sometimes it was overwhelming. For those seeking a narrow range of diversity and complexity in a relationship, such wide swings in behavior could be unnerving.

Many described him as difficult or aloof, and at times, no doubt, he was. But for me, such quirks were a small price to pay for being in the presence of a unique and unforgettable personality.

What was it about him? First of all, he created a singular visual impact. He was slight in both girth and height, and by wearing black tee shirts and jeans, he always appeared young and boyish. He enjoyed managing a marvelously cascading Fu Manchu moustache. Its lines and curves shaped his silhouette, and indeed, his own profile became a sort of trademark in his work as well as a verbal referent in the titles of numerous pieces.

There was a complex duplicity in Howard. He could be controlled and dignified when delivering one of his famous, thoroughly enjoyable, controversial, informative, and intellectual lectures; or he could skip down a street belting out a song, mimicking Ethel Merman.

In the five years since Howard's death, there has hardly been a day when I have not had some memory or recollection of my friend and mentor. In the thirty-year span of our friendship, I spoke with him often, wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on his satiric work, and saw him several times a year.

I first met him in 1960, when I took an introductory class in ceramics as an undergraduate at Ohio State University. He had just returned from a Fulbright year at the Arabia factory in Finland, and my initial impression was of a most unconventional, serious, and enormously talented graduate student. He was a very private person, but because he loved New York, and maybe because I was fresh from the Big City, we became immediate friends, discussing favorite restaurants, theater, opera, our love for travel, and, of course, art. I had no serious interest in clay at the time, but Howard was so charismatic that I found myself transfixed by his enthusiasm and vast knowledge. I will always be grateful to him for providing my introduction to clay.

He was exacting and meticulous about his work and, as I was later to discover, about every aspect of his existence, from his extremely ordered studio to his carefully crafted Art Deco home. Howard loved order, detail, craftsmanship, and, above all, ideas. He loved dinner parties, too, especially his own, because he could make his favorite chocolate cake and engage in his love for good conversation.

No one person knew the total Howard Kottler. The mysterious aspects of his private life were, perhaps, early learned survival tactics designed to suppress knowledge of his sexual orientation in order to allow him to advance within the academic community. He led many compartmentalized existences, and I think he was exhausted by the extent to which he had to manipulate and hide during those early years of building his career.

Our field is still largely conservative. However hidden Howard's life may have been, Howard's work was always "on the line." He was an influential and powerful force in shaping and defining the direction and "look" of contemporary American ceramic sculpture, and we are all the richer for it.

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