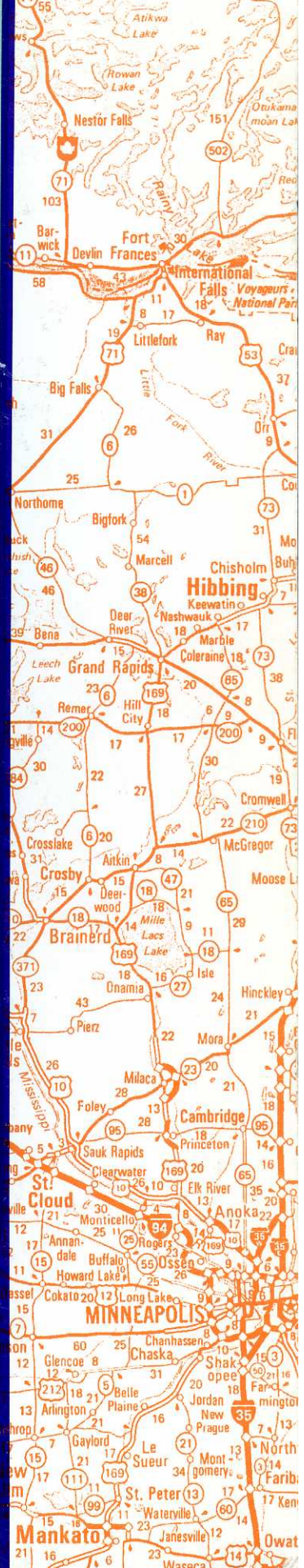


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Posthumous Honors Presentation to Howard Kottler

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It is not easy to convey the essential being that was Howard Kottler. Personality, style, character, intelligence, humor — all the many nuances which illuminated the essence of his being 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 understanding who he was.

What would be missing, of course, would be experiencing the real thing, being there in his presence, being witness to 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 Art Deco Noritake, his passion for work, his lasciviousness, his intelligent interpretations of history, his trust, his loyalty to family and to friends. Sometimes it was overwhelming, and for those seeking a narrow range of diversity and complexity in a relationship, such wide swings in behavior would be unnerving. Who was this irreverent provocateur who was an influential and powerful force in shaping and defining the direction and “look” of contemporary American Ceramic sculpture over the past thirty years? He was

an artist who distinctly separated from the influences of Voulkos, and Arneson, to generate the “Super Object” or using Howard’s language “Palace Ware” as opposed to “Folk Pottery” where issues of craftsmanship, originality, mass production, and the sociology of the ceramic world commingled.

Howard was born in Cleveland in 1930. As an undergraduate at

Ohio State University, he considered pursuing a degree in optometry; but after one class in clay, taken during his final semester, he switched to Ceramic Art. OSU was a special environment with seven full-time faculty teaching every aspect of clay technology and ceramic history. Howard’s thorough and supreme knowledge of clay was evident throughout his lifelong pursuit of his personal style, which manifested in a significant body of work.

He returned to OSU and received an MA in ceramics in 1956, writing his thesis on the waisted cylinder — a form based on 14th and 15th century Italian apothecary jars designed to maximize shelf space while still allowing the hand to easily slip between them to remove them from the shelf.

In 1957, he was offered a scholarship for an MFA at the The Cranbrook Academy of Art. It was there that he met and studied with Maija Grotell, a teacher and artist who profoundly influenced his ideas about art and education. It was also through Grotell that he developed a special appreciation for Art Deco —



Joe Bova and Judith Schwartz

Clara Blakey

particularly Art Deco "Made in Japan" Noritake fancy ware which subsequently became the significant content issues in his work — trompe l'oeil, illusionistic effects, use of lusters, high art low art interplays, and virtuoso craftsmanship.

After receiving a Fulbright in 1958 to study at the Arabia Ceramics factory in Helsinki, Finland, with the renowned potter Salmenharra, Howard returned to OSU for a Ph.D., which he obtained in 1964. His writings were based on a variety of experimentations — multi-spouted textured stoneware branch jars; "Corn Cob" pots of crushed corncob rolled onto the surface of moist clay, leaving scattered pockmarks after firing; and the "Tear and Repair" series worked in porcelain. This last series was an expressionist approach inspired directly by Peter Voulkos in which the vessel was torn open and filled with slabs of clay. The process or action of the artist is notably visible to the viewer.

While his earlier work was vested in the "studio potter" sensibility inspired by the history of ceramics, his dissertation established his strong aesthetic commitment to clay as a sculptural medium and established him as an "artist-potter" with roots in modern art. He joined the faculty at the University of Washington in the mid 60's, where he taught for 25 years along with his colleagues, Robert Sperry and Patti Warashina. He never cared for the Pacific Northwest as he was not really the "out of doors" type, but it did become the place where he could work and develop that irreverent personality, at first influenced by Bay Area Funk and Pop art. Clay readily lent itself to his beginning explorations of Raku biomorphic vessels and chalices with pinched and twisted handles and bodies.

He later investigated forms in the self-glazing clay known as Egyptian paste because he loved the bright acidic colors in the clay which ultimately inspired his personal col-

lection of more than 300 Hawaiian shirts. The bold patterns and outrageous colors positioned these objects on the fringes of good taste. . . . ideas he always played with. Titles such as *Blue Butterfly Lips*, *Hot Cross Buns*, *Madame Chiquita Pot* and *Blue Nibble Tips* became obvious word puns and sexual references to body orifices. Lips of pots were elongated, bodies stretched so that the works became titillating suggestive references by innuendo. Other works such as *Hole Grabber*, *Guilt Feeler*, *Muff Pot* and *Charged Box* combined fur with low fire lusters and were given provocative titles which psychologically engaged the viewer as objects of desire.

In the late 60's to early 70's, he experimented with commercially available ceramic decals, which he used in a wallpaper fashion over colored glazes or opaque lusters to not only embellish the surfaces but to camouflage the forms as well. The forms were inspired once again from his great knowledge of and love for the Art Deco period in the decorative arts and architecture. Typical of these motifs was the use of the Deco "waterfall" in such works as *Royal Paisely Pot* and *Radio City Pot*.

Another series explored the industrial process of using plaster molds to slip-cast functional cups, but with Howard's intervention the process was turned inside out. He presented ceramic molds with the vessel trapped in the mold — never to be used. He titled them with his usual verbal/visual puns such as *Precious Cup* in which the sprue hole in the mold is twice as large as the tiny thimble sized cup at the base. To further accentuate the concept of preciousness, the cup was gold lustered. Other ideas within this series involved the illusion between two-dimensional and three-dimensional surfaces. In *Mug Shot*, for example, a three-dimensional ceramic toy gun is juxtaposed with two-dimensional ceramic decals of the same image over the walls of the cup. The cup is camouflaged by the decals of the toy gun, and a three-dimensional bullet is floating outside the wall of the cup although no hole is present. Howard was a master of making visual verbal puns and creating a strong bond between the title and the object.

But it was the production of the several series of decal plates which established Howard's reputation as a supreme satirist and decalomaniac. He used his wit and satire to lampoon a variety of topical subjects such as fine art, politics, sexual mores, religious dogma and the divergent paths of the studio potters and artist potters. His most famous works from this period were the "dinnerware" series titled *American Supperware* completed between 1967 and 1970. The store-bought plates were elegantly housed in white leather pouches with the titles of each plate em-

broidered on. They were made during a time of great social unrest in America during the Vietnam war and depicted light-hearted punning of the flag by cutting up and repositioning the stars and stripes. The titles were themselves marvelous satiric puns and double entendres such as *Charming Lyre*, *Drip Dry*, *Exhausted Glory*, *Made in the USA*, and the *Do It Yourself Flag Kit*.

The idea of the Last Supper series was to again take an available commercial decal, but this time change it through the process of *eliminating* areas: to alter the decal with the simplest change to create the maximum visual/verbal effect. This idea enabled him to combine Surrealist methods of image manipulation with social satire. This work had multiple ramifications; he changed our view of an honored work of art, the view of a previous status given the work, and the aura surrounding the real event while focusing our attention on the paintings' multiple ramifications. Using contemporary language, his titles are hilariously irreverent — *Out To Supper* (Christ is removed), *Reservation For 13* (all the figures are removed), *Da Vince's Revenge* (all figures and table are removed), *Space Supper* (background removed), *Lost Supper* (table removed), *Fellowship* (bodies removed), *Personalities Plus* (faces are removed), *Vanishing Vanity* (only the heads remain), and *Signals* (only the hands remain).

Using a store-bought clay object with which to present ideas caused great controversy and debate in the crafts arena where "making" the object was considered basic to the art form. *The Old Bag Next Door Is Nuts* is a work which, according to Bill Hunt, editor of *Ceramics Monthly*, had the longest running "letters to the editor" where the right and left wingers of the craft world slugged it out every month for over two years. At the center of the controversy was an outraged subscriber objecting to Howard's signing his name to the work because he used Duncan

molds to create most of the work. Even the title was from someone else. All Howard did was to have the idea! Howard's response was a gem; . . . he admitted he was a sinner . . . yes, he used Duncan molds and the artist who made the mold was unknown. In fact, he said "the only element that is mine was the concept for the sculpture and hopefully you will permit me this one small glory."

Many described Howard 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. How rare it is in a lifetime to experience a truly marvelous, mysterious, and exciting being.

What was it about him? First of all, he presented a unique physical and 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 took great care in managing a marvelously-cascading Fu Manchu mustache and enjoyed the lines and curves which formed the shape of his silhouette — so much so that his profile became a trademark in this later work and was referred to in many titles such as *Portrait Vase HK*, *Double Identity*, *Face Vase*, and *Kottler Posing as a Cubist*. The interplay of figure ground was just one of the many interesting and complex issues in this series of works.

During the last few years of his life, Howard had started on a new and brilliant direction. He began to incorporate Art Deco themes and Cubistic influences into monumentally scaled objects using himself or kitsch objects as references such as in pieces titled *Devil Walk*, *Tongue Twister*, and *Waiting for Master*.

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 30-year span of our friendship, I spoke with him often, wrote a doctoral dissertation about his satiric work, and saw him several times a year. He was a great and influential teacher. Many of his students have become prominent artists such as Michael Lucero, Irvin Tepper, Joyce Moty, Jacquelin Rice, Nancy Carman, Joanne Hayakawa, David Furman, Anne Currier, Anne Perrigo and Mark Burns. His superior intellect, comprehensive understanding of ceramic and art historical references, coupled with a penchant for using artifacts of popular culture long before it became chic to incorporate such themes into work, was evident in the content, breadth and depth of his artistic endeavors.

It is with great pleasure that I announce art historian Patricia Failing's new biography published by the University of Washing-

ton Press titled *Howard Kottler: Face to Face*. She interviewed Howard during the final months of his bout with lung cancer, and the book contains many direct quotes on his views on just about all aspects of his work. As one of the trustees of his estate, I am also pleased to announce that I have organized four exhibitions of his work to open almost simultaneously across the country during the month of April. His sculptures will be shown at the Habatat Shaw Gallery in Pontiac, Michigan; his cups at the Garth Clark Gallery in L.A., his plates at the Clark Gallery in New York; and his early work at the Northwest Craft Center in Seattle. Finally, I want to tell you about the scholarship fund in ceramics at Cranbrook established in his name, and the endowments he established at the Renwick, Everson, American Craft and the Seattle Art museums to buy the ceramic art of emerging and mid-career ceramic artists. Kottler died on Saturday, January 21, 1989, at the age of 58. I would like to thank the Board of Directors of NCECA, and you, its members, for honoring Howard Kottler and his contributions to our field. Thank you.

Judith Schwartz is an artist, critic, curator, and Professor of Ceramic Art at New York University. She is a trustee of the Howard Kottler Testamentary Trust Fund, which has awarded \$75,000 each to: the American Craft Museum, New York City; the Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York; the Renwick Museum, Washington, D.C.; and the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington, to purchase work of emerging and mid-career ceramic artists.