

Ceramics

Art and Perception

1995
ISSUE 22

INTERNATIONAL

AUS\$12 US\$12 £7 ¥1500 NZ\$17 incl gst CAN\$16





Howard Kottler An Irresistibly Irreverent Iconoclast

Article by Judith S. Schwartz

ALTHOUGH HOWARD KOTTLER DIED IN 1989, HIS influence continues to be felt in contemporary American ceramics. Not fully appreciated while alive, he has, posthumously, received just critical acclaim in response to a number of retrospective exhibitions held in the United States. In addition, the 1994 publication of his biography, *Howard Kottler: Face To Face* (Patricia Failing) has enabled a larger public to become aware of him and his work.

The output of his work was uneven over the 30 years of his professional life, and only savvy collectors (those who sought tips from the inner artists' network) knew enough about his reputation to collect him. It was only in the '80s that he began to work with sufficient intensity (he was a full-time university professor) to produce a body of work sufficient to result in a one-person show. This was held in 1987 at the Bellevue Art Museum in Washington State.

One year later he was diagnosed with lung cancer.

He was, and continues to be, one of the most highly regarded artists and teachers in the United States – venerated among the ceramic intelligentsia. His reputation continues to grow, appreciated now as an artist ahead of his time, a postmodernist who appropriated art historical objects long before it was fashionable to do so, simulated surfaces before pattern and decoration became popular styles, and mixed the hand-made, ready-made and home-made, in ways which both confused and irritated the craft world – much as Duchamp had done several decades earlier. With an eye to the past, Kottler's work was also consistently rooted in the present, producing objects reflective of the social, political and artistic events of the '60s, '70s and '80s.

At the '95 NCECA conference in Minneapolis, Kottler was presented with an honorary award. At that



Covered Jar. 1958. Stoneware, glaze. 25 x 18 cm.



Grand Twist Pot. 1965. Porcelain. 36 cm x 15 cm. Below: Blue Butterfly Lips. 1966. Egyptian Paste. 57.5 x 37.5 x 27.5 cm.



time I gave a short talk about his life and work. I was later astounded by the many colleagues who, over the next few days, spoke to me of the positive effect he had had upon them.

It is not an easy task to convey the essential being that was Howard Kottler. Personality, style, character, intelligence, humour – all the many features which characterised the nature of his being were such an elusive, complex and subtle melange of variables that even though one might use wonderfully descriptive language, or tell an evocative story, there would still always be something missing, something two dimensional about understanding who he was.

What would be missing, of course, would be the experience of the real thing, being there in his presence, being witness to the subtleties of his voice, the ever changing body language, the provocative, sometimes demonic demeanour, the impish playfulness, the charm, wit and truth of his words, the sensitivity and delight with the discovery of a piece of Art Deco Noritake, the passion for work, his lasciviousness, his intelligent interpretations of history, his trust and loyalty to family and friends.

Sometimes it was too much, and for those seeking a narrow range of diversity and complexity in a relationship, such a wide range of passions would be unnerving. Who was this irreverent provocateur, this influential and powerful force shaping and defining the direction and look of contemporary American ceramic sculpture? He was an artist who distinctly separated from the influences of Voukos and Arneson to generate the 'super object' or, to use Kottler's language, 'palace ware' as opposed to 'folk pottery'.

Kottler 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 in those years (the '50s and '60s) with seven full-time faculty teaching every aspect of clay – from technology to ceramic history. Kottler's comprehensive knowledge of the medium was evident throughout his work. He returned to OSU and received an MA in ceramics in 1956 writing a thesis on the waisted cylinder, a form based on 14th and 15th century Italian apothecary jars.

In 1957 he was offered a scholarship to undertake an MFA degree at 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 – particularly Art Deco 'Made in Japan' Noritake fancy ware which subsequently became a significant content issue in his work. After receiving a Fulbright in 1958 to study at the Arabia Ceramics factory in Helsinki, Finland, with the renowned potter

Kyllikki Salmenharra, Kottler returned to OSU to take a PhD in ceramics which he obtained in 1964. His writings were based on a variety of experiments – multi-spouted textured stoneware branch jars, ‘corn cob’ pots of crushed corncob rolled on the surface of moist clay leaving scattered pockmarks after firing, and the *Tear and Repair* series worked in porcelain.

While his earlier work as a student had been rooted in the studio potter sensibility inspired by his reading of the history of ceramics as well as his instructors, his dissertation established his strong aesthetic commitment to clay as a sculptural medium. He joined the faculty at the University of Washington in the mid-’60s and taught there for 25 years. He never cared for the Pacific Northwest, not being the outdoors type, but it did become a place where he could work and develop a style influenced by Bay Area Funk and Pop art as well as beginning explorations of raku biomorphic vessels and chalices.

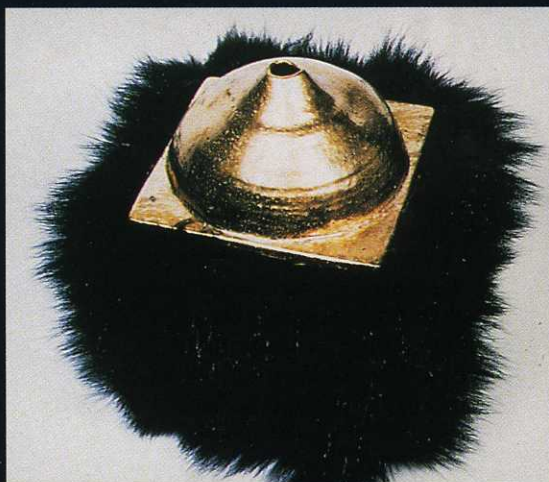
He later investigated the self-glazing clay known as Egyptian paste. He loved the bright acidic colours and the bizarre patterns that could be created; this love ultimately inspired a personal collection of more than 300 Hawaiian shirts. The bold patterns and outrageous colours positioned these objects on the fringes of good taste commingled with fecundity... 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 lustres and were given provocative titles which psychologically engaged the viewer.

In the late ’60s and early ’70s he experimented with commercially available ceramic decals, using them as ‘wallpaper’ to cover coloured glazes or opaque lustres for surface embellishment or camouflage. The forms were inspired by his knowledge of and love for the Art Deco period. Typical of these motifs was the use of the Deco waterfall in such works as *Royal Paisley Pot* and *Radio City Pot*.

Another series explored the industrial process of using plaster moulds to slipcast functional cups, but with a twist. He created ceramic moulds with the vessel trapped in the mould – never to be used. Or, as in *Precious Cup*, he made the sprue hole in the mould twice as large as the thimble-sized cup which, to accentuate the concept of preciousness, he gold-lusted.

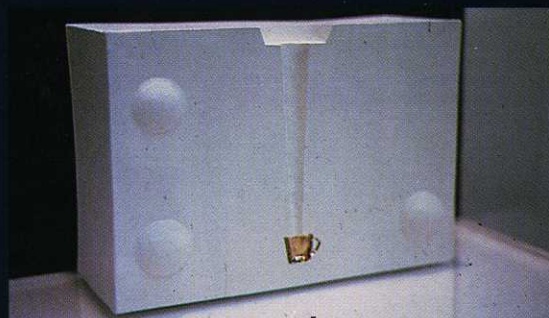
Other ideas within this series involved the illusion between two-dimensional and three-dimensional surfaces. In *Mug Shot*, for example, a three-dimensional ceramic toy gun is juxtaposed with two dimensional ceramic decals of the same image over the walls of the cup. The cup is camouflaged by the decals of the toy



Charged Box. 1967. Stoneware, glaze, lustre. 27.5 cm/h.



Above: *Guilt Feeler*. 1967. Stoneware, glaze, fur. 40 x 25 cm. Below: *Precious Cup*. 1973. Stoneware, glaze, lustre. 17.5 x 17.5 x 12.5 cm.





Above: *Hole Grabber*. 1967. Stoneware, glaze, lustre, decals fur. 32.5 x 30 cm. Below: *Radio City Pot*. 1967. Stoneware, glaze, lustre. 32.5 x 12.5 cm.



gun and a three-dimensional bullet is floating outside the wall of the cup although no hole is present.

But it was the production of the multiple series of decal plates which established Kottler's reputation as the supreme satirist and decalomaniac. In these series, he used wit and satire to lampoon a variety of topical subjects: 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* and completed between 1967 and '70. The store-bought plates were elegantly housed in white leather pouches embroidered with the title of the plate. The series was made during the time of the social unrest in America created by the Viet Nam war and he satirised these events by disassembling the flag decal and repositioning the stars and stripes in a variety of thought-provoking ways. The titles were themselves marvellous satiric puns and double entendres: *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 to create the maximum visual/verbal effect. The idea enabled him to combine Surrealist methods of image manipulation with social satire. The work had multiple ramifications; it changed our view of an honoured work of art while focusing our attention on the painting's multiple interpretations. Using contemporary language, his titles become stigmata of hilariously religious irreverence: *Out To Supper* (Christ figure is removed), *Reservation For 13* (all the figures are removed), *Da Vinci'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).

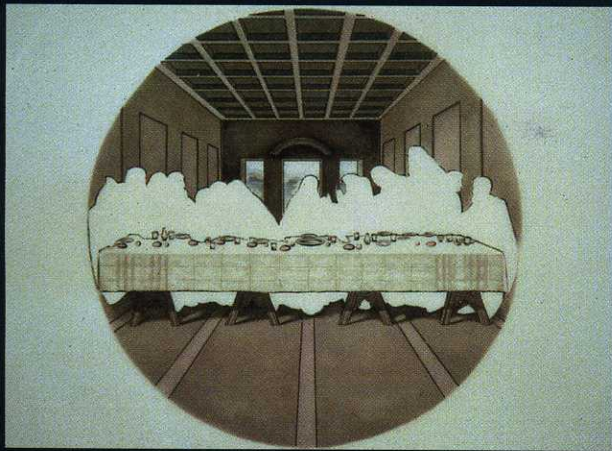
Using a store-bought clay object as a vehicle for the presentation of artistic concepts caused great controversy and debate in the crafts area in America. The *Old Bag Next Door Is Nuts*, a work described and pictured in *Ceramics Monthly*, provoked, according to William Hunt, its former editor, the longest running letters to the editor debate. Right and left wingers of the craft world slugged it out every month for more than two years. At the centre of the controversy was an outraged subscriber objecting to Kottler's signing his name to the work because he used Duncan moulds to create most of the object. Even the title was not original. All Kottler did was to have the idea. Kottler's response was a gem: he admitted he was a sinner.... yes, he had used Duncan moulds and the artist who made the mould 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."



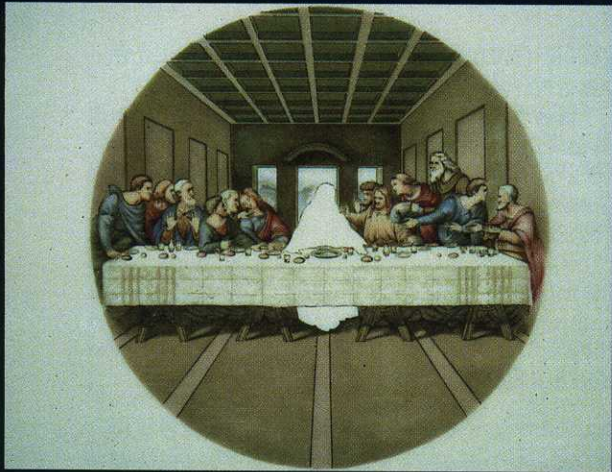
American Supperware. 1969. Porcelain. 26 cm.



Above: Drip Dry. 1969. Porcelain, decal, lustre. 26 cm.
Below: Mug Shot. 1973. Stoneware. 17.5 x 17.5 x 12.5 cm



Above: Reservation for 13. 1970. Porcelain, decal, lustre. 26 cm.
Below: Out to Supper. 1970. Porcelain, decal, lustre. 26 cm.

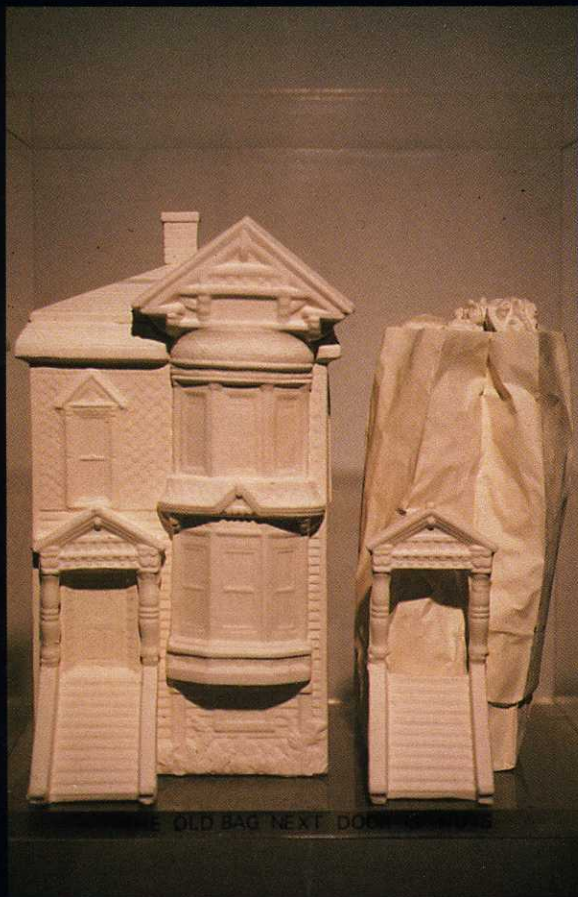


What was it about him? Well, first of all, he presented a unique physical and visual impact. He was slight in both girth and height, and by wearing black tee shirts and jeans, he always appeared young and boyish. He took great care in managing a marvellously cascading Fu Manchu moustache and enjoyed the lines and curves which formed the shape of his silhouette – so much so that his profile became

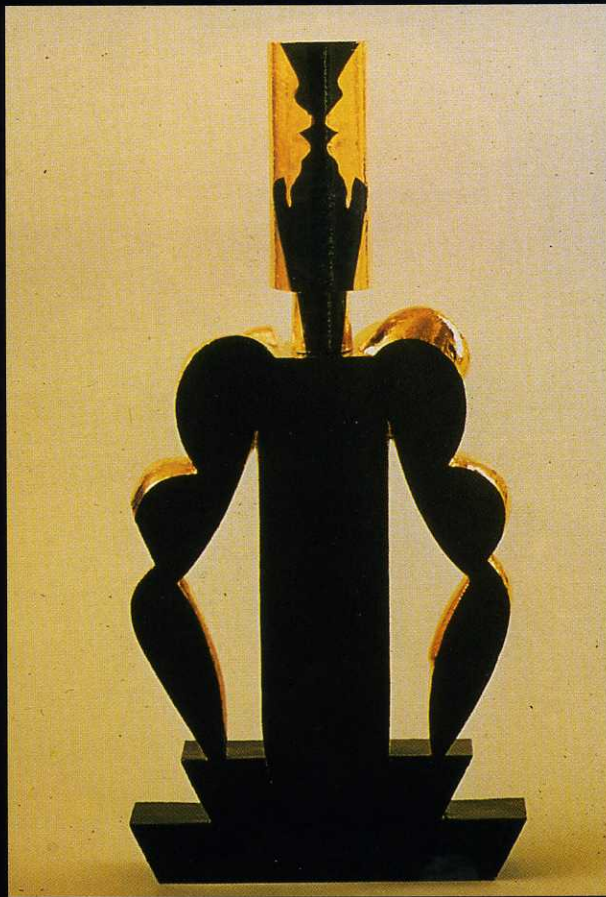
a trademark for his later work: *Portrait*.

During the last few years of his life Kottler 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 six years since Kottler's death, there has



The Old Bat Next Door is Nuts. 1976. Slipcast earthenware. 32.5 cm/h.



Kottler Posing as a Cubist. 1987. Stoneware, glaze, lustre. 1 m. x 40 x 17.5 cm.



Double Identity Vase. 1989. Stoneware. 1.2 m. 1.5 m. 35 cm.

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 an influential teacher as well. Many of his students have become prominent artists: Michael Lucero, Irvin Tepper, Joyce Moty, Jacquelin Rice, Nancy Carman,

Joanne Hayakawa, David Furman, Anne Currier, Anne Perrigo and Mark Burns to name but a few.

Many have described Howard Kottler 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. His superior intellect, comprehensive understanding of ceramic and art historical references, coupled with his irreverent penchant for using artifacts of popular culture long before it became chic to incorporate such themes, was evident in the content, breadth and depth of his artistic endeavours.

Dr. Judith S. Schwartz is Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Art and Art Professions at New York University. She also directs the department in Sculpture/Crafts and teaches courses in ceramic sculpture. Her research emphasis is upon contemporary American Ceramic Art, and she is currently curating the exhibition, *New York, New York: Clay*, organised for the Rogaland Kunstnersenter in Stavanger, Norway. She is President of The Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, is on the Board of Studio Potter magazine, and is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics. She is writing a book, *Noritake Art Deco Porcelain*, and is a co-trustee of the Howard Kottler estate. Caption title page: *Tongue Twister.* 1986. Stoneware, metal, gold leaf. 1.8 m x 2.25 m. x 60 cm.