





# REALITY CHECK

I have a difficult time separating an artist's personality from the work he produces. While some critics would say a work could stand by itself for critical analysis, for me, an artist and his art are in continuous symbiosis—one reciprocally informing the other. Knowing an artist's motivations, personality, lifestyle, mind-set, and social and physical milieu are, to my way of thinking, inextricably woven into the fabric of creativity.

My interest in Richard Shaw developed when I first saw his work in the mid 1970s. The work was so unconventional and ambitious, so intelligent and delightful, so elegant and yet absurd—that it captured my attention from the very start. And in those thirty plus years since, he has not peaked—still finding clay his muse in the creation of outrageous still lifes and assemblages that are as fresh, believable, and meticulous as ever. Whether it be the unexpected juxtaposition of an ocean liner sinking into a sea painted on plump ceramic sofa cushion, or a stick figure of a walking man with inverted tin can head, his objects are filled with paradox and surprise. Whether rendering fish, birds, leaves, books, and twigs or a tongue-in-cheek *trompe l'oeil* envelope on a plate embossed, to my astonishment, with my address—there is always some painstaking illusionistic surface that stops you in your tracks.

What makes the work so compelling and timeless? Shaw's reality is not contrived or indiscriminate but a humanistic realism that forces one to re-think, re-contextualize and recall situations or events in a renewed light.

At first glance one feels they are familiar objects...a pipe, a coffee cup, a piece of corrugated paper...but then one begins to see reality as Shaw wants one to experience it. He takes the mundane and enchantingly replays our memory of these objects, restoring their value while aesthetically challenging our senses. With idealistic vision, sympathetic yearning and a twinkle in his eye, Shaw enlightens and informs that which we take for granted and normally dismiss.

In his book, *Intelligence Reframed*, social scientist, Howard Gardner, expands his pioneering work on multiple intelligences. He now includes a naturalistic intelligence that underlies people's propensity for making, understanding and appreciating art. Naturalistic intelligence refers to, among other things, the capacity to notice—the ability to discern subtle changes in hue and tone, and to identify patterns and relationships in the environment.

Surely Shaw brings this intelligence to his art in its highest form, delighting us with sculptural tableaux, illusionist painting, Dadaist collage—and all with marvelous wit and ambiguity of incongruence. These musings are the inseparable part of his reality.

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*Blue and White House of Cards*, 2006  
Glazed porcelain with overglaze decals  
14 x 9.5 x 9"



