

Robert Flynn

Gallery 1.1.1. University of Manitoba

CHANGES

Gallery 1.1.1.
School of Art
The University of Manitoba
October 6-27, 1985

A sculpture of the human figure (Rodin) or an abstract sculpture of the human figure (David Smith) are both a part of the lexicon of art. It seems to me that the principal difference between these and a sculpture of, say, a teapot is one of subject. The issues, problems, etc. remain essentially the same. The interesting thing, however, in using pottery vessels as sculpture, is that pottery carries a substantial level of social and cultural significance which seems to stay with the work no matter how far it strays from the realm of the utilitarian.

Ceramics has always made substantial concessions to the idea of function and utility both technically and aesthetically. Even in today's world where functional ceramics are no longer a necessity for survival, many of these concessions continue to be made out of habit. Where the main function of a ceramic object becomes aesthetic, issues such as fragility, porosity, sanitary glazes, use of non-food-safe materials, become strictly a matter of choice — the choice being made in the interest of aesthetic content.

Having made the change from strictly functional work to that where function is, at best, incidental, I've been able to more freely experiment with non-traditional surfaces and forming techniques. With the new work, I want to investigate the difference between decoration and surface content; also the idea of a ceramic vessel as both personal and contemporary social metaphor.

All my work is now fired between 605 and 1125 centigrade (low fire earthenware range) using commercial underglaze colorants and a kiln and burners of my own design; this in the interest of achieving unique surfaces and colors which are, for me, a more personal expression. Most pieces are fired a number of times at different

temperatures to achieve the various effects. Because of this degree of complexity the pieces are more fragile than would be expected of a utilitarian pot. Consequently any previous guarantees regarding the function and durability of my work are hereby rescinded.

Robert Flynn

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The Manitoba Arts Council

CREDITS

Exhibition Curator: Dale Amundson
Catalogue Essay: Robert Enright
Catalogue Photography: Dan Teichman
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Catalogue Design: Leo Simpens

Kilning Us Softly: *The Art and Aesthetics of Robert Flynn*

In any period artists have the option of doing two things: they can hold on rigidly to the conventions and traditions of the past or they can advance apocalyptically, cutting themselves off from precedent to make a new and radical statement. It should come as no surprise to students of modernism that the art produced in the 20th century has put an apocalyptic coat over some pretty conservative foundation garments. Art in this century has been a series of radical declarations disguising what is turning out to be, in retrospect, a development that is both less disruptive and more linear than we might have thought at first.

I don't see this apparent contradiction as a problem for contemporary artists who now have the advantage of a lengthy look back over the 85 or so odd years of this century. While our romantic disposition may find apocalypse more appealing than accommodation, our practice has been more inclined to reverse the tendencies.

I consider Ezra Pound, the American born and then Europeanized modern poet to be among the most sophisticated aestheticians of the 20th century. His declaration "to make it new" has assumed the weight of a moral imperative and in some circles has seemed to have attached the threatening echo, "or else." There were additional echoes that Pound's poetry and criticism made apparent, even if his strident aphorism didn't. Pound appeared to have sprung full-bodied from the forehead of modernism, but his art extensively used the past, perhaps even to the level of reverence. He took the best aspects of ancient Oriental and European sensibility and married them to the most aggressive

and provocative sides of North American culture. Characteristically, he was abrasive and subtle at the same time, insulting and seducing the reader inside a single poem. It's that combination that seems to be at the heart of modernism and it may be the movement's central accomplishment; the slap in the face and the caress tracing the length of the neck became one and the same gesture.

I've taken time to write about Pound's modernism because I see in the ceramic art of Robert Flynn a continuation of it's most challenging and most problematic aspects. Flynn can also be abrasive and charming and I'm indulging in aspects of his personality only because I think his art manifests exactly those qualities. Flynn's pots are dazzling and infuriating at the same time and attempting to separate out which elements make the viewer angry or pleased is an invitation to go on a fool's errand of some considerable scope and duration.

Flynn is acutely aware of his relation to European modernism and of the ways in which the European sensibility has shaped — and continues to shape — artistic activity in North America. It's a persistent influence with which he has little patience:

"Each time we get a system that starts to work we Europeanize it. We start talking about the delicate aesthetic and the sophisticated nuance of things. I tend to fall back on technical solutions. I'm learning to be an artist and not only a craftsman. We can learn an immense amount from European culture but we don't need its content."

Flynn's personal description of his experience with tradition and of the action necessary to free himself from its weight is not only one artist's predicament but strikes me as a strategy necessary for all artists who

are interested in making significant work.

"I had a sense that rightness and proporness in the making of an object was a physical attainment — the end of a rainbow somewhere — and that perfection was something that could be reached. When it broke down for me it broke down pretty violently. I don't know exactly how I did it, I kind of wish I did. But what it left behind was very little I was sure of. The issue became one of getting rid of the proper ways of making things — throwing, glazing, decorating, the structural techniques I started going through these rules and I threw away everything that obviously didn't make sense. There were so many kneejerk responses going into them. I didn't know what was right, so I had to throw away everything I could think of and I'm still finding new things to throw away. What was left over is no longer rigid, avoids any kind of straight line, avoids any kind of traditional technique which is easily repeatable and plays rigid structures against soft structures. So you know the battle of the tension still goes on."

Flynn's response to what he calls "the battle of the tension" has been uncompromising and eccentric. In the last eighteen months he has made few pots that are similar and, in fact, has declared that he doesn't know what his pots are for, and beyond that has admitted that, "I don't know what I'm for." This admission has nothing to do with aesthetic sloppiness — Flynn can make technically superb pots, and can use glazes precisely — but it does have to do with a condition of willed eclecticism, an openness to experimentation and the vagaries of chance. It also indicates a healthy tolerance for failure. In a fundamental way, Flynn is engaged in a continual process of aesthetic self-sabotage.

Flynn is not only fully aware of the

risks involved in his aesthetic approach, but he seems to take a certain degree of comfort in the unpredictability that slips in behind them: "I've definitely got too many irons in the fire, but it's like someone trying to learn ballet by learning one movement perfectly and then moving on to the next movement, it doesn't always work and it never works for me. I would just as soon study six or seven things at once."

It's important to realize that a modernist is by his very nature both sentimental and opportunistic. Put crudely he's the kind of artist who rapes the cultural past and afterwards is genuinely remorseful about the activity. Flynn is aware of that part of his make-up and especially aware that the modernist walks a delicate and often contradictory line between the two conditions. At one point in conversation he's likely to be an advocate of the disruptive: "It's very hard for me to make something cold, coarse and rough. Really hard. I'm addicted to pretty things, I'm addicted to the smooth and the neat and the voluptuous. I have to fight it constantly. I'd like to make some Frankenstein pots." Then later in the same interview he will transform his monster into its benign creator: "I'm always highly cynical about my own motives. I'm going to make it brighter, shinier, bigger, more complex, just basically so its going to get attention. That's just the way I am, but it would be nice to tone it down a little bit because I do like some things that are not loud and obnoxious. I would like to be subtle in my obtuseness, I guess. You know I'd like to put pink and green together but I think gold dots might be pushing it a little bit."

The pots themselves make this spirit of risk and outrageousness clear enough. Flynn is making a variation of ceramic objects: large and small

storage jars, teapots, covered baskets, vases, platters of various sizes and trophies. They can best be described in a term he coined himself "the neolithic baroque." It's a term that perfectly captures the antagonistic impulses that are informing his work. Put simply, the struggle is between aspects of the barbaric and the refined and Flynn himself is not adverse to containing this polarity within a cultural framework, a genesis that begins to indicate the essential eclecticism, not only of Flynn's work, but of the modernist enterprise as well. "I like crude things with beautiful designs on them," he says, "I think it comes out of my Celtic heritage."

It also comes out of the "inspiring technology" of the 20th century, a technology that has found its head office in North America. Flynn is enamoured of hot rod technology and approvingly quotes Tom Wolfe, pop culture's *eminence blanche*, on the pervasive influence of hot rods and neon signs. While he hasn't said so directly, it's safe to assume that were he to envision the second coming of Genghis Khan and his hordes, Flynn would imagine this new wave of barbarism in meta-flake fuel dragsters burning out across the Alps on the neon green light from a National Hot Rod Association "Christmas tree."

If you look at one of Flynn's large trophies you get the idea: pedestals playing leap frog, piled one on top of the other with four coils of clay that look like nose rings for a multi-coloured bull in the China shop of traditional ceramic expression. The surface of the pots is likely to offer a confusion of rich neon colour — pinks, blues, purples and magentas — the kind of high-tech iridescence you get when you mix gasoline and water. "They're high-tech, like dragsters are high-tech," Flynn says, "It's like taking a 200 horse-power mass-produced engine and turning it

into an 800 horsepower monstrosity, with gold and chrome and pin-striping. That interests me."

It's this fascination which distinguishes his work from the traditional objects of European and, particularly, Oriental culture: "I constantly play with the god in the machine. And the Koreans would say that to me 'Your pots look like you love machines' is roughly the way it would translate. Their pots looked like they loved the earth. My pots look like I loved the machine."

(It's worth noting in passing that Flynn is contemptuous of the "humble-worker-in-play" aesthetic that has been the stock-and-trade of ceramicists for centuries "My teacher used to say that he was nothing but a humble craftsman. Well, that humble craftsman sold teapots for \$350 in 1965. That didn't seem very humble to me." At the same time, he is a strong advocate of sophistication emerging from unexpected sources: "The fact is the people in this culture are not aesthetically illiterate. I get farmers' sons in class and they know a lot about what's right and wrong when you put visual things together." Flynn is a bit of an iconoclast here and the images he's breaking are as much his own creations as any he's inherited from the ceramic tradition. He comes from a blue collar management background; he is patiently and humbly building from scratch a rare motorcycle and has himself been successful in the "pot market," although his refusal to stay with any of the good things he's discovered has made him an inconsistent market presence).

The new pots could easily change this inconstancy. They are so quirky — and I mean this as praise — and so intriguingly decorated that I can imagine them appealing to the most advanced post-modernists, those rummagers

among the attic graces and basement hauls of history's aesthetic styles. While Flynn's work has nothing about it that aspires towards the monumental, I think of it as being perfectly complementary with the the best excesses of an architect like Micheal Graves or with the less turbulent characteristics of Kenny Scharf's customized appliances.

Flynn is unerringly contemporary and his pots look most right, if the statement doesn't seem too perverse — when they look most wrong. The work has a quality that makes you respect it even when you don't like it. Flynn likes to piece things together — pots, motorcycles, even aesthetic theories — and he likes not to hide the various parts and their visual relationships. When they work well, as do his teapots, his difficult platters and finally, his winged pots — they are completely convincing. One of the winged pots looks as if The Victory at Samothrace had decided to change herself into a pot. It's a disarming transformation and somehow an appropriate one. The mind's eye picking up echoes from the past, re-thinking them, making them new.

*Robert Enright,
September 1985*

Robert Enright was the Western Correspondent for *C.B.C. Stereo Morning* from 1980-85. He currently edits ARTS-MANITOBA, contributes regularly to *Canadian Art* and *Maclean's* and works as a freelance art critic and curator.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert K. Flynn

PERSONAL

Born August 12, 1944 Teaneck, New Jersey
United States citizen
Canadian Landed Immigrant

EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Associate Professor, University of Manitoba,
1978 — present Chairman, Ceramics Dept.
1975-76, 1978-79, 1981-82, 1985-86

Guest Lecturer, Kyung Hee University,
Seoul So. Korea, June-July 1982

Resident Craftsman, Archie Bray Foundation
1979-80 sabbatical Visiting Lecturer

Rhode Island School of Design
summer 1975

Visiting Lecturer, Red Deer College,
Red Deer, Alberta, summer 1977

Resident Potter, Archie Bray Foundation,
Helena, Montana

July 1972 to September 1973

M.F.A. ceramics

Rhode Island School of Design, 1972

B.F.A. ceramics

University of Massachusetts, 1970

GRANTS

Manitoba Research Council Grant, 1973

Manitoba Research Council Grant, 1977

EXHIBITIONS

Canadian Clay Elm National Invitational
— Calgary, 1984. "Reflections on Three Plates"
— National Juried Show, Winnipeg, 1984

"Tour Du Canada" — National Invitational,
Montreal, 1984

Teapot Invitational — Rubyal Gallery,
Calgary, 1983

Lindor Gallery, Winnipeg

Featured Craftsman, 1982

Gallery One One One, Winnipeg

3-man show, 1982

Archie Bray Invitational,

Helena, Montana, 1982

Manitoba Crafts Council Invitational,

Winnipeg, 1981

Yamalo House, Lenox, Massachusetts

one-man show, 1980

Lewistown Art Gallery, Lewistown, Montana,

One-man show, 1980

Bulte-Silverbow Gallery, Bulte, Montana,

one-man show, 1979

Dahod Art Gallery, Northampton, Massachusetts

Invitational, 1979

Atelier Ladywood, Manitoba,

one-man show, 1978

Manitoba Craftsmen, Winnipeg,

Invitational, 1977

Ellis East Gallery, Toronto,

one-man show, 1976

National Ceramics Exhibition, Calgary,

June, 1976

Faces of Canada, Montreal

Invitational, 1976

Young Designers Gallery, Winnipeg

two-man show, 1975

Potters of Western Canada, Burnaby,

Invitational, 1975

Gallery One One One, Winnipeg,

one-man show, 1975

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg,

Invitational, 1975

Manitoba Theater Centre, Winnipeg

Invitational, 1974

Ian Cameron Gallery, Winnipeg,

one-man show, 1974

Kettler Gallery, Bozeman, Montana,

one-man show, 1973

Archie Bray Foundation, Helena,

Montana, one-man show, 1973

Crafts and Craftsmen, Russell Gallery

Great Falls, June, 1973

Northwest Craftsmen Exhibition,

Seattle, June, 1973

Russell Gallery, Great Falls,

June, 1972

THINGS, Brockton, Massachusetts

June, 1972

National Student Clay Today, Iowa City,

June, 1972

Southern Tier Crafts, Corning, N.Y.,

June, 1972

Supernud Invitational,

Penn. State University, 1971

New York Crafts, Ithaca,

Juror's Award, 1971

Crafts Gallery, Leverett, Massachusetts

one-man show, 1971

Providence Art Show, Providence,

June, 1971

Providence Junior College Exhibit,

Providence, R.I., June, 1971

Crafts Gallery, Leverett, Massachusetts,

Invitational, 1967-69.

COLLECTIONS

Mills College Collection,

Oakland, California

C.M. Russell Museum,

Great Falls, Montana

Ian Cameron Gallery,

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Archie Bray Foundation

Helena, Montana

University of Manitoba,

Winnipeg, Manitoba

WORKSHOPS AND LECTURES

Bank Center, Banff, Alberta, 1985

Red Deer College, Alberta, 1985

University of Delaware, Newark,

Delaware, 1983

Gonzaga State University, Spokane,

Washington, 1983

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg,

Manitoba, 1983

University of Montana,

Bozeman, Montana, 1983

Archie Bray Foundation,

Helena, Montana, 1982

University of Saskatchewan,

Regina, Saskatchewan, 1982

Chosun University,

Kwang Ju, Korea, 1982

Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea, 1982

Konyung University, Daegu, Korea, 1982

Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea, 1982

Phine Clay, Winnipeg, 1982

Alberta Potters Association, 1982

Art Centre, Brandon, Manitoba, 1981

Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, 1978

Red Deer College, Alberta, 1977

Faculty of Architecture,

University of Manitoba, 1976

Archie Bray Foundation,

Helena, Montana, 1973

School for Arts and Crafts,

Detroit, Michigan, 1973

Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, 1973

**CATALOGUE
REPRODUCTIONS**

- Figure 1
Teapot, 1982, 20 cm.
- Figure 2
Tripod, 1984, 33 x 49 cm.
- Figure 3
Covered Jar, 1985, 55 cm.
- Figure 4
Jar, 1985, 47 cm.
- Figure 5
Teapot, 1983, 20 cm.
- Figure 6
Covered Jar, 1985, 55 cm.
- Figure 7
Plate, 1984, 40 cm.
- Figure 8
Covered Jar, 1985, 55 cm.
- Figure 9
Tripod, 1984, 32 x 49 cm.
- Figure 10
Bottle Form, 1985, 24 x 49 cm.
- Figure 11
Trophy, 1984, 52 cm.
- Figure 12
Covered Jar, 1985, 27 x 43 cm.



Figure 12.

