

David Shaner - A Quest Worth Sharing

Jack Troy

Reflective Energy

Dave Shaner is throwing a teabowl. Seated at a Randall wheel in studio #2 at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, in Gatlinburg, Tennessee on a Friday afternoon in September, he is one of 5 presenters working simultaneously at various locations, as part of a conference entitled, "Utilitarian Clay." His presentation, "Teapots, Teabowls, and Taking Care of Yourself," has drawn dozens of participants. If he weren't here, he might be seated at a Randall wheel near Bigfork, Montana, making a teabowl. It is hard to imagine an hour of the day or night when a Randall wheel isn't turning or someone isn't holding a Shaner teabowl.

The gaze he directs at the clay has entranced a bowl into being, his hands just guiding that magic. The wheel's momentum paces his words. He works and talks easily: "The amount of energy you put into the pot reflects out." (He ought to know — having absorbed for at least 40 years the energy radiating from an eclectic assortment of favorite pots). "I always feel good when I make teabowls. I don't make anything I don't enjoy making."

Shaner's lucid declarative sentences aren't gussied-up with polysyllables — they are the verbal equivalent of his strong, direct pots, described by Garth Clark as "reductivist." Though his speech and manner are casual, his words are as carefully chosen as his working methods; he is as self-editing with language as with clay:

"Make friends with yourself. Always watch what the clay gives you. Work patterns flow into a whole life. An artist must be like a sponge, soaking up all the influences and perceptions and making them part of a working vocabulary. We must participate in our own landscape and make our own pots that grow from our own environment."

Even after a big lunch, the group is with him in easy repartee. He respects the fine line between didacticism and being preachy; never smudging the boundary, still, his words have an authority born of conviction. That same conviction fuels a high productivity Shaner has maintained over the years. It might be enough, offering us only his pots and sculpture, but in teaching sessions like this one, he shares human values that impel the work while simultaneously residing in it. Emerson was right on the money when he said, "The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression."

He kicks the wheel again, squeezes up another future cup, and eighty eyes watch what we all know is going to happen. Perhaps the quality that has consistently brought hundreds of potters into Shaner's company at workshops over the years is the bottom-line believability — integrity— so obvious when I first saw him at a SuperMud conference at Penn State University in the 70's. The implicit message in those days was that if you made enough clay frogs riding dirt bikes you might become successful as a ceramist, and perhaps graduate from a person to a Personality or a Persona. Shaner's soft-spoken straightforward style seemed anachronistic to the prevailing showmanship of the era, which included one artist pulling a bra out of a ball of clay he'd centered on the wheel. It was probably the closest a ceramics-oriented audience has yet come to expecting stardom from a peer-professional onstage, and

it was Shaner's lot to be booed during the course of his presentation when he mentioned that his health insurance happened to be covered by his wife's policy. (Ann is an elementary-education teacher). He just continued working, absorbing or ignoring the nonsense until it passed. He might have pondered the event on the long flight back from State College, though by now the incident must lie deep within his subconscious compost heap, where such things moulder.

The crux of Shaner's message that day hasn't changed fundamentally: making the best pots you can possibly make needn't be an entry-level position in ceramics — something success in the field will someday mandate that you jettison. His daily life demonstrates better than language tells, that it's possible to link vision and hard work to the escalating support in our country for quality ceramics. We, too, might be accommodated on the vehicle gaining momentum. He told us that "the public taste" isn't fixed on the lowest common denominator; that well-made, well-priced pots can find good homes. (Even cowboys might enjoy drinking bourbon from a teabowl if the price is right). And what we read between the lines in the 70's is as true today: loving what you do is a valid, essential, and powerful gift-force. We'd be fools to ignore it if we found it alive within us to any degree.

Living with Shaner Pots

From the corner of my porch hang sixteen thrown, flattened stoneware spheroids, one above the other, strung on fine braided stainless-steel wire. They arrived a few years ago, unannounced, in several boxes from Bigfork, like the six day lily plants Frank, the UPS man, brought today. Each spheroid was numbered with masking-tape, and when hung in sequence made a kind of vertical abacus, employing from bottom to top, the colors of earth's interior, then they read upwards through components stained like granite, culminating with clays body-stained to sky-hues — pinks and blues. It is a 40-pound idea, hanging in mid-air. I have seen it stop in his tracks a man weighing five times as much, when he observed this cross-section through earth and atmosphere, documented with material from our favorite planet.

Much of what David Shaner makes has the same arresting quality. It was evident in the first cups of his I saw over 25 years ago during a Christmas show at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. There were six of them, and one had a classic shape — like 2/3 of a goose-egg, on a semi-Sung foot. Stoneware, it had been slathered in an unctuous porcelain slip, the striations gauzy as mummy-wrapping, under a thin tenmoku glaze. I drank tea from that cup all winter, reading it as I would a map, relishing its visual depth; getting a sound lesson about one potter's notion of what a cup could be on a given day — perhaps #5,280 in one of the miles of cups a potter makes but never measures.

Another piece — a stoneware slab, about 16" x 20" — has earned a place of continuing attention hanging in my living-room. It is a masterpiece of complex simplicity: wax trailed over a clear glaze, Mashiko slip over that, followed by more slip-trailing of chrome-green glaze. The effect is of looking off a bridge at eel-grass wafting in a slow stream. One of a series, it embodies the dynamic imprint of our medium, when the human and material coalesce. As in so much of what David Shaner has done best, it exemplifies the work of one who has mastered the temptation to master the craft, by using glaze as naturally and directly as if it had come from a gland and flowed off his fingertips.

Then there is the porcelain teabowl with a most intriguing and maddening surface — iridescent crystals all chockablock on a ground of sandblasted black velvet. Easing off the lip during the last hours of firing, the glaze has thinned out to amber, freckled with iron-specks, and at the juncture of bare clay and glaze near the foot has formed a pencil-line gold halo. Hassling my preconceptions about how ceramic materials "ought" to behave, while mysteriously hyping those neurons triggering an aesthetic response, this pot keeps me from saying, "Glazes aren't supposed to do that!" Such a pot, perceived directly, enlarges my appreciation for the ones I'll enjoy in the future.

Paul and Louise Heberling, Huntingdon friends, own a Shaner piece I enjoy visiting. Woodfired, it evokes the shape of an ancient stone scraper, adze, or bishop's hat. Barely reflecting light, its surface and color mimic the crust of freshly-baked French bread. The outlines of airborne birds have been cut from an inner-tube and rolled onto the gutsy Helmer clay, then peeled away, leaving an irresistibly tactile, low relief — as accessible to the blind as to the sighted.

A Sense of Place; a Sense of Being

Until I turned off Highway 35 for the first time, in 1976, and stood in Shaner's driveway, I had only a limited sense of the work itself, but everything changed after that visit, and has kept changing with each return trip, for it has become increasingly important for me to ground the origins of pots in a specific environment. Until that happens, I can never be certain just what it is that I'm beholding. (Only after touring the logging museum in Humboldt County, California, could I truly comprehend San Francisco's oldest remaining redwood structures).

Gardens — the bounty of over 30 years of composting. Boulders and river-stones by the ton. The sky that seems to begin at knee-height. Family centering everything. The closer we get to Bigfork, the more idyllic Shaner's life and work appear; yet, facts elbow their way into our comprehension until we understand what the writer William McIlroy meant when he said, "You only grow under pressure." Varieties of pressure, including a wildfire that very nearly destroyed the studio and home, have brought almost unlimited opportunities for "growth" in the Shaner family, whose resilience has been severely tested, strengthened, and re-certified on a regular basis over the years.

I could write about Shaner's devotion to gardening as a metaphorical aspect of his work in clay but it is too obvious. (Having cultivated over 100 varieties of exotic day lilies, he has more than a passing interest in the subject). My sense is that his work springs from and simultaneously reflects uncommon unity, the gist of which was revealed once during a workshop I attended. A questioner remarked on how rewarding it had become over the years to recognize Shaner teapots and still have the sense that each is different: "How do you manage to explore the same form; to bring forth and discover that newness?" As if the question had pressed on his forehead, Shaner sat up straight at the wheel. He chuckled. "Well, I guess the answer to that one is similar to why I've been married to the same woman for so many years." Love for family and love from family actuates the gardening, claywork, and personal identity.

The world sees what it deserves to see of Shaner pots, but there are others, as there ought to be, special enough to be kept home from the marketplace. In spite of being a full-time potter/sculptor for nearly

40 years, he has reserved certain pieces for sons or daughters, while others are traded for contemporary or historical pieces to join the extended family of pots-to-be-lived-with, enlivening the home. As Lewis Hyde has written, "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection." This "feeling bond" was evident to Shaner's teacher, Daniel Rhodes, who recalled his student's preference for pots rather than money as payment for occasional work.

If Shaner has an agenda, it is authenticated in the materials he works with, rather than existing apart from them, as doctrine, myth, or abstraction. At the same time, he supports environmental, peace, and human-rights issues with the same passionate dedication he brings to the studio. Compassion and empathy, said to be important components in the making of strong functional pots, are equally active in Shaner's sense of himself as a family member and global citizen. "David Shaner, Potter," his return address labels read up until recently, when they were revised to read, "David Shaner, Clay Artist."

Another ceramic artist, Robert Brady, has written, "I would like to encourage people to attempt to make things from a basis of honesty, love, and trust for that which they feel and believe is most essential, while making thoughtful choices and decisions directed at clarifying their intentions." Putting those values to work without wearing them on his sleeve, is, in large part, what David Shaner stands for and stands behind.