

Spontaneous Response: *The Innovative Ceramics of Don Reitz*

Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art
Westmont College, Santa Barbara, USA
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Written by Nancy M Servis

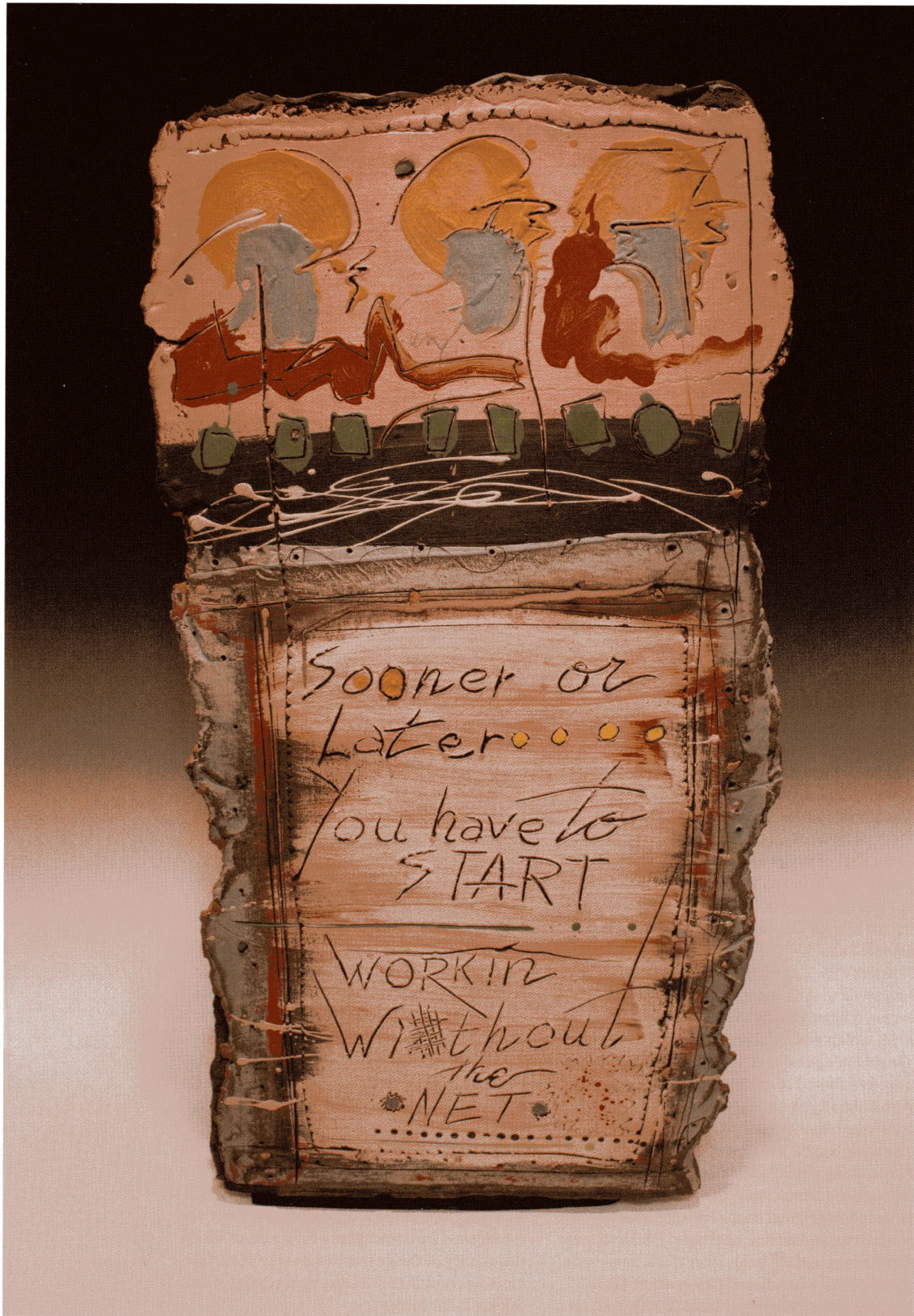
For three months during the fall of 2019, nearly 80 ceramic objects by the artist Don Reitz (1929–2014) were on view at the Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art on the campus of Westmont College, located in the hills east of Santa Barbara in Southern California. Reitz's creative output was represented by a selection of robust sculptures and exuberant utilitarian ware. Towers, teastacks, large vessels, pitchers, jars, and tea bowls illustrated the creative breadth of this prolific artist, who expertly employed wood and salt-firing techniques to achieve painterly surfaces on his varied forms. Also known as "Mr. Salt", Don Reitz successfully revived the age-old practice of salt glazing, advancing the technique with exciting effects. When he felt it was warranted, he used colored slips as a counterpoint to the warm hues rendered by wood-firing. In this exhibition, Reitz is seen as an inventive artist – as both a potter and sculptor – whose lifelong engagement with clay offers a satisfying view into late 20th century American ceramics by a maker who was always on the cusp of change.

The show, curated by Chris Rupp, ranged from Reitz's early modernistic vessels, with which he established a forward-thinking aesthetic, to his large, graceful teastacks, and concluded with tabletop assemblages, all interspersed with creative periods of vessel-

making. Enlarged historical photographs of the artist, whether at the pottery wheel, conducting one of his many workshops, or pictured with a particularly important work he made, were also featured. The show presented Reitz as an innovative and fearless ceramic practitioner whose makership over a lifetime – only a portion of which was on view in this intimate exhibition space – fashioned meaningful insight into an artistic life that encompassed nearly 60 years. Reitz's individual works speak of his creative drive and artistic verve; collectively, they narrate his episodic life. Although displayed pieces are inanimate objects, they reveal Reitz as a compelling storyteller, documenting with artistic virtuosity both personal heartache and enduring vitality.

The selected works were assembled mostly from the artist's personal collection, pieces that Reitz himself retained over the years. A few others were supplied by friends and collectors. Displayed in the museum's wide entryway gallery and adjoining moderately sized exhibition space, *Spontaneous Response* depicted Reitz's wayfinding in the functional and fine art world of ceramics, ultimately blending the two aesthetics into often-charged personal statements. "[T]he sculptural aspects of clay, of pottery," he said, "I've never made a separation between them. That's what made my pots unique to me, the sculptural quality of them."¹

Once You Accept Life is Difficult It Isn't/ Figuring is Too Hard Knowing is Real/ Sooner or Later You Have to Start Working Without The Net.
(verso) not dated, slip painted, carved and glazed stoneware, 4 1/2 x 21 x 7 in (105.5 x 53.5 x 18 cm). Image courtesy of the Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art.



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Reitz's vessels from the 1950s and early 1960s, echoing modernists tenets of the day, were positioned at the gallery's entry. A large punch bowl with twelve serving cups, titled *Punch Set for Mom*, 1961, and a small selection of other slightly earlier utilitarian bowls laid the groundwork for Reitz's climb from a searching potter to the mature artist that we know today.

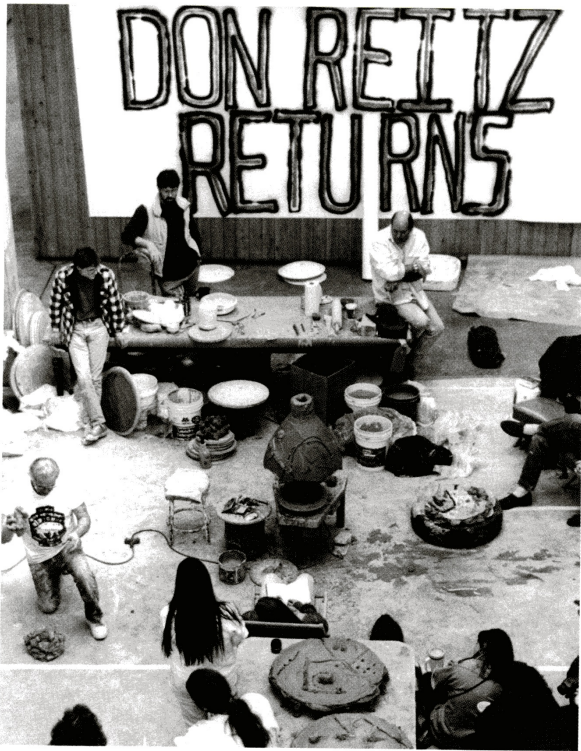
He arrived in 1960 at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University as a married man and father of two. By then, he already had accrued a lifetime of experiences, among them working as a butcher in New Jersey, an undersea salvage diver in the United States Navy, and an art teacher in the Dover, New Jersey, public schools. Once set on pursuing an art career, from 1953 to 1957 he attended Pennsylvania's Kutztown State Teacher's College (now Kutztown University) on the G.I. Bill. In the summer of 1960, he made the move to Alfred University, where he studied with Val Cushing and Robert Turner. It was during this period that his experience instructing undergraduate students laid the foundation for his lifetime of teaching ceramics. Upon receiving his MFA in 1962, Reitz went on to teach ceramics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, from 1963 until 1988. His many workshops, especially at Penland School of Craft in North Carolina, fed his hunger for audience engagement and artistic flair.

Reitz's lifelong practice of encountering clay on its own terms, even early on in his career, is illustrated by the small piece, *Chunk*, 1965, which was displayed near his celebrated *Ovoid Baroque Form* from the same year. This unconventional coexistence of material force with animated finesse sets the tone for the consistent duality ever present in Reitz's work. The sculptural flourishes of *Ovoid Baroque Form*, along with the richness of the salt-fired stoneware surface, show the artist's ability to summon original shape with sculptural confidence and technical insight. Its curvilinear elements resurface in his later work, as seen on the suggestive handles of *Celebration Vessel: Melting Snow* (1995) and *Vase* (2003) both on



view in this exhibition. *Chunk* testifies to Reitz's use of primitivism and elemental force. As Reitz recalled in an interview in 2006, "[T]here's one little piece in the show about this big. It was a piece of clay that was on the wedging table, and I went to wedge it and thought, wait, wait, wait, wait. It's already there. I'm not going to make some damned pot out of it. So I just hollowed it out and made it."² Viewed together, these works document the artist's spirited confidence and creative openness to the medium, which he sustained throughout his life. Curator Jody Clowes describes this dichotomy as "a fine balance between technical mastery and expressive spontaneity."³

Response to shifts in Reitz's personal circumstances often led to the development of a different body of work, like the *Sara Series* from the 1980s. Five pieces in the exhibition chronicled a dialogue between Reitz and his niece, Sara, both of whom were in the midst of a severe health crisis. In 1982, Reitz barely survived a truck accident, while Sara at age 5 was battling cancer. During Reitz's prolonged convalescence, the two shared drawings to aid in their mutual recovery. Sara's drawings were adapted by Reitz and compiled with his own in colorful wall-mounted narratives addressing survival, hope, and familial strength. They also established a distinct genre for Reitz, in which the quality of the drawn line by way of surface incising combined with the torn edging of the thick, planar forms.



Opposite:
Chunk, 1965, salt-fired stoneware, 5 x 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in (12.7 x 17 x 14 cm). David and Julie Armstrong Collection, Promised Gift to the American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, California. Image credit: Nancy M. Servis.

Above:
 Don Reitz Workshop, c. 1990. Image courtesy Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art.

Right:
 Don Reitz with **Ovoid Baroque Form**, c. 1965. Image courtesy of the Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art.



While he viewed color as healing, he also favored drawing on the clay, saying, "A quickly drawn line with a fat curving movement is combined instantly and spontaneously with the form, they have become one, frozen in time."⁴ Reitz's automatic drawings, along with expressionistic construction, once again achieved artistic duality, giving voice to psychological inquiry. Reitz continued message-laden *sgraffito* in the wood-fired jars from 2001 and incorporated this practice throughout the course of his work. Not long after the *Sara Series*, Reitz turned to making large vessels of dark black clay marked by minimal bright engobe strokes.

Associated with Don Reitz's work was his friend and transformative artist, Peter Voulkos, who is recognized for his boundary-breaking willingness to assault clay in pursuit of alternative form. They often worked together, and Reitz was freed by Voulkos's complete retooling of pottery into ceramic art, forever influenced by Voulkos's adage: "There are no rules – only concepts." Bravado, which characterized Voulkos's artistic trajectory, also characterized Reitz, who developed an Abstract Expressionist approach, evident in his wood-fired platters, jars, and tall vessels. Don Reitz pursued his own innovations and found personal resolve in his later work.

The exhibition featured several large teastacks that possess key features of Reitz's aesthetic: sculptural realization through vessel development, commanding form, and expert firing, while integrating painterly effects onto textural surfaces. *Torqued Teastack* embodies these features and more. This confident work from 2003 exemplifies Reitz's sculptural strength. The glazing and coloration emphasize the lower flare and the neck's upper thrust. Its rigorous poise, perhaps self-referential, is both energetic and elegant. Reitz often declared, "My pots were and still are great metaphorical symbols for me."⁵ He confidently undertook a familiar vessel form and morphed it into an enticing sculptural object resonating with energy, retaining its vessel origins while also asserting the vitality of figuration.

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The physicality required to make large-scale ceramic work becomes unrealistic in an artist's later years. For many engaged in this weighty medium, their works become smaller and more manageable, though no less noteworthy.

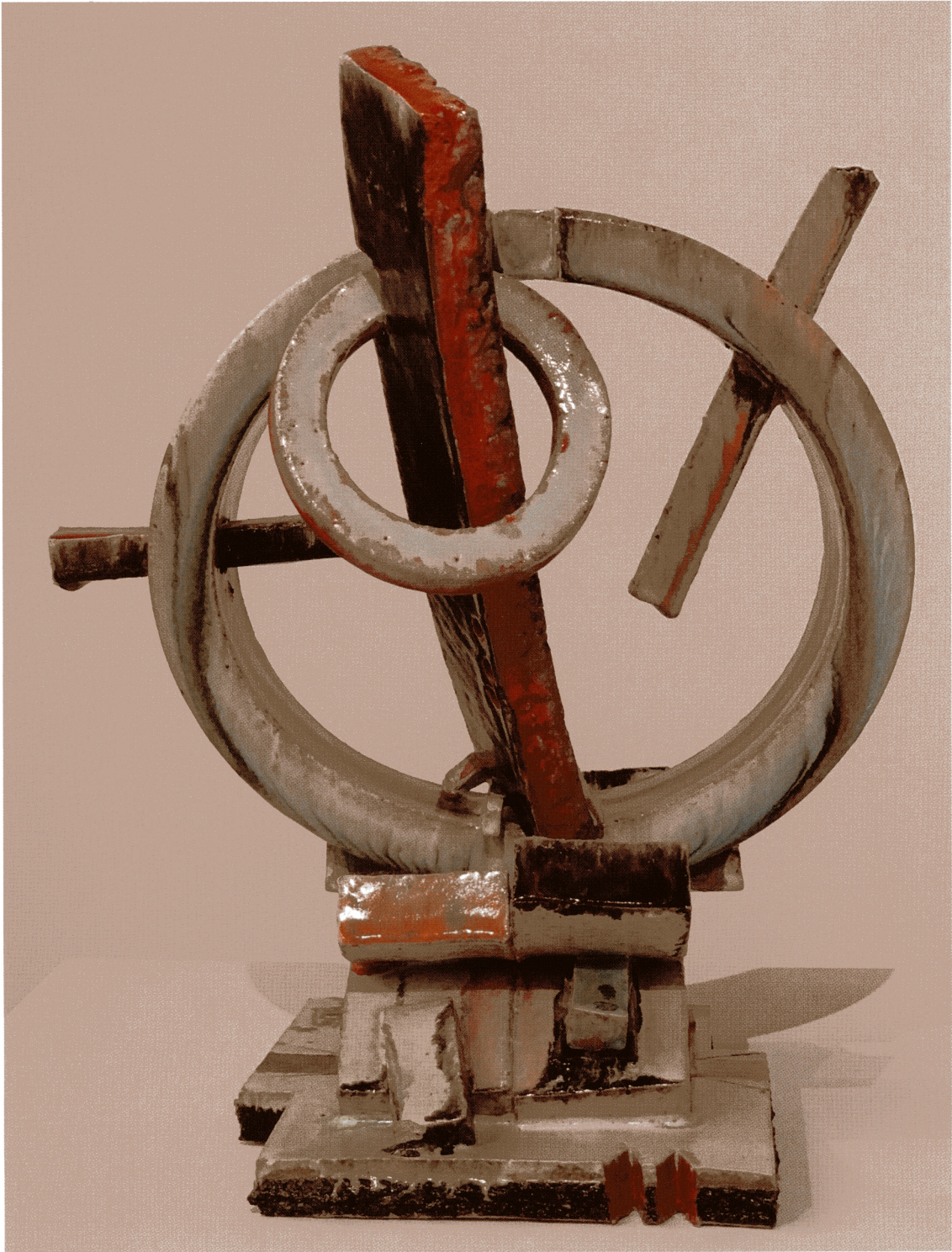
Reitz's *Ring Toss with Bar*, a tabletop sculpture from 2012, possesses the sculptor's signature physicality with cut, torn, and reassembled fragments. Emotive colorations using engobes are heightened by the use of positive and negative space, which are reminiscent of his early baroque pieces. This form speaks to Reitz's satisfaction toward the end of a long artistic career. The characteristic restlessness that spawned much of his work has been quieted here, inviting new considerations. The artist's use of cylindrical rings references the large-scale pre-made cylindrical ceramic pipe produced by Mission Clay in Phoenix,

Arizona, where Reitz was an artist-in-residence in 2009. He approached the 8-foot columns with vigor – scratching, painting, and at times, carving into the towering form. Sometimes, they were colorfully painted with glaze and incised with messaging; at other times, Reitz left them unglazed and modestly addressed. One such monochromatic sculpture by Reitz stood as a harbinger to the show in the museum's entry courtyard. The later tabletop sculptures, ikebana vases, and the figural kachinas reveal how Don Reitz sustained his lifelong enthusiasm as an artist, harnessing artistic experimentation with technical finesse. Today, we are left with his legacy of pottery and sculpture, which pushed the parameters of clay while autobiographically documenting the life of one of its most avid practitioners.

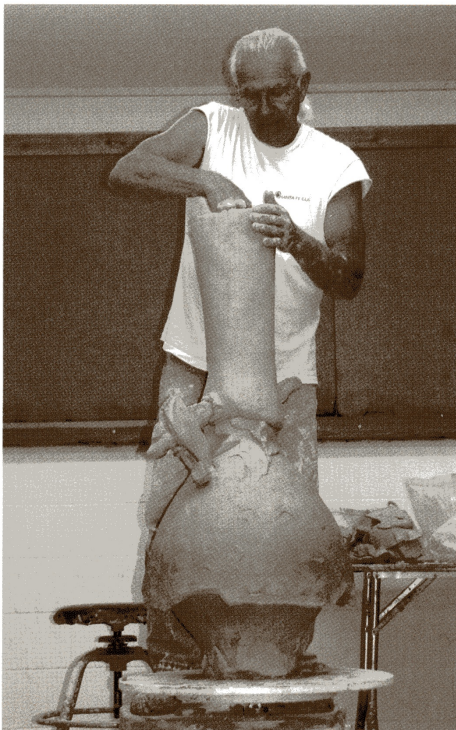
Below:
Bowl, 1959, 4¾ x 9 x 9 in (12 x 23 x 23 cm).
Image credit: Nancy M Servis, Don Reitz Collection.

Opposite:
Ring Toss with Bar, 2012, wood fired stoneware with engobes, 18½ x 15 x 15½ in (47 x 38 x 39.5 cm).
Image credit: Nancy M Servis, Don Reitz Collection.





Spontaneous Response: The Innovative Ceramics of Don Reitz sets in motion a timely reconsideration of a prolific, driven, and complex artist. The refinement of many of his textured surfaces with delicate colorations, added “X” symbols, and kiln effects are partnered with vigorous forms, testifying to Reitz’s integration of subtlety with rigor in his work. Many of the pieces reveal Reitz as a sensitive colorist who instinctively understood the firing process and chemical interactions in the kiln, which elicited colored surfaces over a variety of textural forms. The intimacy of the small tea bowls, the surprise characterizations of vessels like his broccoli bowls, and the commanding presence of the thrown columns portray Reitz as a ceaseless practitioner in high gear. His complete investment in the materiality of clay established an openness as to what is possible and supplied a parameter from which the artist himself could break free. Accordingly, Don Reitz has provided us with an original compendium of mid-20th and early 21st century ceramics that is of its time while also being one of its definers.



Below left:
Don Reitz assembling
a teastack, c. 2000.
Image courtesy
Westmont Ridley-Tree
Museum of Art.

About the Author

Nancy M Servis is an art historian, gallerist and author. For over 20 years she served as a curator, educator, and arts administrator in Northern California. She presently serves on the Board of Directors for NCECA and is a new member of the International Academy of Ceramics. Nancy is completing her book, *The History of Northern California Ceramics*. For more information visit www.servisarts.com

Below right:
Platter (Detail), 2006,
wood-fired stoneware, 19
½ x 4 ½ in (49.5 x 11.5 cm).
Image credit: Nancy M
Servis, Don Reitz Collection.

Endnotes

1. Oral history interview with Don Reitz, 2006 June 6-7. *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution.
2. Ibid.
3. Clowes, *Don Reitz: Clay, Fire, Salt, and Wood*, p. 10.
4. Reitz, “Drawing From the Heart,” *Studio Potter*, Vol. 14, No. 1 December 1985, p. 40.
5. Ibid.
6. Op. cit. – Oral history interview.
7. Clowes, *Don Reitz interview with Mark Leach*, p. 27.

When discussing the evolution of ceramics or sculptural development, many often speak of the maker’s mark – the vestiges of a handprint or the deep trail of a finger across the surface of wet clay. Don Reitz embraced this tenet through Abstract Expressionism, and he left handprints on works like in the *Sara Series*. These marks are intentional signatures by the artist. Yet, his willingness to integrate himself into the material is autobiographical. “What really makes a piece successful for me, in a personal way,” he said, “[is] that feeling I’m in the cross-section, I am one with the piece. And when you’re making it, that’s the way to feel, that it is me... this is who I am.”⁶ *Spontaneous Response* presents the hallmarks of Don Reitz’s lifelong output with a moderate selection of work. The exhibition and accompanying catalog, with essays by Peter Held and Glenn Adamson, as well as a personal reflection by the artist’s son, Brent, provide a strong basis for further critical inquiry into the legacy of this dynamic artist whose relentless artistic drive to do more seemed endless.

Toward the end of his life, Don Reitz’s vitality waned. Nevertheless, seemingly until the end, he embraced art-making with a fearlessness. “I always deal with risk factors; there’s something about the risk and the potential of failure – which is only the other side of potential success – that I enjoy”⁷, he mused. It is no surprise that this premise appears on a stele-like sculpture in a related group show on view in a nearby gallery, testifying to Don Reitz’s level of success. Hard work and endless energy in his artistic pursuits flourished due to his willingness to work without a net. ■



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