

Susan Harris
Lidded Vessels



*A Review by
Nancy M Servis*



WYOMING IS A VAST STATE WITH GRAND VISTAS in nearly every direction. It fosters the idea of America's wild west; as a region where an abundance of buffalo, more accurately known as American bison, roamed freely prior to their near extinction at the end of the 19th century. Natural wonders include Yellowstone National Park and Devil's Tower. Native American territories and frontier battlefields are amidst the state's extensive prairies. There is a sense of grandeur and American lore that permeates this place that made my visit to the Brinton Museum all the more compelling.

The Brinton Museum sits at the base of the Big Horn Mountain Range in the town of Big Horn, southwest of Sheridan. It is a small modernist dwelling on a well-groomed 1920s ranch-like estate named after its benefactor, Bradford Brinton (this building will become a part of a 25,000 square foot, three-tiered, state-of-the-art complex scheduled to open in June 2015). Driving past the two-story historic house poised on a vast lawn, I strode down a long straight sidewalk shouldered by giant irises in full bloom, then into a small one-story building. There, I discovered the 13 works by Susan Harris in the exhibition simply titled, *Lidded Vessels*.

Harris is a Professor of Art and Design at Southern Utah University, US who has been making ceremonial-inspired ceramic vessels for many years. Her textured stoneware and porcelains echo early Chinese and Etruscan bronze forms. Their origins

Facing page: *Gastropod Lidded Jar with Thorns*. 2008.

Black stoneware. 18 x 10 x 10 in.

Above: *Gastropod Fu*. 2001. Black stoneware and gold lustre.

7.25 x 10 x 4.5 in.

Below: *Duck Bowl on Stand*. 2009. Black stoneware stand and glazed porcelain bowl with India ink. 10.5 x 10.5 x 7.5 in.

as ritual vessels spawned her contemporary inquiry that melds with her background in anthropology. Her use of scientific nomenclature, such as gastropod and phyrnosoma, combine with ancient terms for forms such as *fu* (rectangular food container), *ding* (cauldron) and *zhong* (clapperless bell) creating curious hybridisations for her titles.

Harris' work was displayed in a small gallery space that measured approximately 350 square feet. Its intimate scale featured her mostly handbuilt and sometimes thrown forms adorned with thorns,





Above: *Cat Reliquary (Felis Sylvestris III)*. 2014. Black stoneware with laterite wash. 8.5 x 5.5 x 12.5 in.

Below: *Gastropod Ewer*. 2004. Porcelain. 15.75 x 9.75 x 5.75 in. Photo by Nancy M Servis.

Facing page: *Phrynosoma Ding*. 2014. Black stoneware and gold lustre. 8.5 x 9.75 x 11.25 in.

mollusks and other fauna on their surface. Because of this small gallery and the specimen-like nature of her pieces, this room felt as much as a cabinet of curiosities as a contemporary art gallery. Her work embodied antiquity, natural history and geology, suggesting a broadly informed and steadfast approach to makership that integrates cultural pluralism with earth sciences.

While her contemporary vessels are ceremonial in origin, such interpretation dissolves with the unfolding recognition of surface oddities; a work's alluring tactility is thwarted by the realisation of curious and unsettling embellishments. How does one touch a jar geometrically adorned with thorns or inhabited by lizard-like species positioned at the point of natural grasp? This interplay suggests a calculation forcing the

viewer's interaction on the maker's terms. Physical engagement must methodically occur.

Geology is suggested through colour striations of her surfaces. Harris treats her unglazed neo-species with exterior mineral composite washes; their resulting colour gradations are heightened through a reduction-cooled process. Select re-oxidation occurs, which manifests as red flashing over black clay. Along with the crisp textural designs carved or impressed into the clay, such works echo the effects of ancient wrought iron.

These stoneware pieces are where surface, form and confident clay handling coalesce. *Gastropod Thorn Jar* illustrates the conflicting elegance of her work. Here, a balanced thrown jar is adorned with surface elements that are seemingly an anathema to tactility. One may view this work as a strange harbinger of some distance time and unfamiliar place, which is what makes Harris' best pieces memorable. Many in the show are of this nature. Their success comes from an incongruent design that is thoughtfully realigned and cleanly presented. While some artists are constrained by their creative formulae, Harris' calculated but broadly informed approach engenders work, such as *Cat Reliquary*, that reflects her inventive capacity. In their totality, Harris' vessels illustrate her self-described preoccupation with mysterious purposes resulting from her use of intricate surface details and mythological symbols.

Although the strength of the exhibition lies with her mature stoneware pieces, a selection of porcelain



vessels were also on view. Their uniformity of colour emphasised surface detail and served as a counterbalance in the show. Their quickened vitality fostered the sense of three-dimensional sketches in comparison to the more mysterious and thought-provoking stoneware pieces.

Although the show is titled, *Lidded Vessels*, a number of pieces were outside this description. Fortunately, this curatorial inconsistency presented a fuller view of the artist's work. *Phymosoma Ding* reveals interior lustre glazing that is a key feature of Harris' work. While some may find this use of lustre with Harris' stony-iron surfaces disparate, its contrast has provocative appeal and extends the mythological interpretation of her work. Further supporting Harris' exhibition were two additional

pieces of hers that were a part of another and larger ceramics exhibition in the museum's nearby main gallery.

Harris's best ornate stoneware forms broaden our expectation of the functional ceramic vessel. They are not cultural markers of the known, but rather, aesthetic innovators using a scope of understood visual language to comment beyond our present-day vocabulary. Her work is both physically tactile and visually suggestive, serving as true objectification. The lineage of her work is not an imperative consideration. Susan Harris's vessels are conceptually of the moment, yet timeless. The exhibition's presence at the Brinton Museum was like uncovering a precious archeological find in the vastness that is Wyoming.



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