



360° gallery installation shot.

James Lovera Craters from Fire

Crocker Art Museum,
Sacramento, California

Review by Nancy Servis

Left: Crater Construction. ca. 1970. Porcelain with copper oxide glaze and rusted iron. 24 x 17.5 x 12 cm. Collection of Ron Casentini.



VISITING THE EXHIBITION, *CRATERS FROM FIRE: Ceramics by James Lovera*, is a remarkable experience. More than 60 ceramic objects by the accomplished Californian ceramist, James Lovera (b. 1920) were on view through October 2006. Featured in two galleries at the historic Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, are early pieces dating from 1939 to the present including a selection of the artist's early figurines, utilitarian pitchers and a remarkable gathering of his chargers, bowls and clay constructions.

James Lovera has pursued his ceramic practice for nearly 60 years. He was born and raised in Northern California, studied at regional universities and taught for 40 years in the greater Bay Area. He developed as a ceramist during a time in California when other remarkable practitioners were working in the region. Antonio Prieto (1912-1967) and Marguerite Wildenhain (1896-1985) among others were recognized for their ceramic accomplishments and productive output using the vessel format. This was also the time when traditional pottery was being challenged by artists whose direction toward figurative ceramics or expressionistic clay took centre stage. Lovera was not drawn into the often provocative arena of ceramics during this time. Rather, he continued his clay practice when teaching curricula shifted, focused on design.

The exhibition provides historical context of the artist's work using early pieces to set the stage for the dramatic main gallery. Arranged in full-length wall encasements leading down a wide hallway are a mixture of selections including the organic *Incised Bowl* from 1939 which in texture and glaze-usage are reminiscent of the pioneering work of Southern Californian ceramist, Glen Lukens (1887-1967). Paired modernist birds, pitchers and even an incised narrative tile present arenas explored by the artist. These pieces offer the notion that Lovera, whose mature work is unsurpassed, ventured into commercial realms before truly finding his stride. They also illustrate the artist's life-long practice of balancing assured form with a thorough understanding of materials and technique.

Lovera uses earthenware or porcelain as one of three elements that assist his artistic accomplishment. He skilfully employs glaze techniques coupled with purist form creating works of art in the vessel format. This consideration, although not new to the realm of contemporary ceramics, finds expert accomplishment in his hands. In California, one can reflect on the work of Antonio Prieto for his all-encompassing surface treatment and willingness to address the vessel like a three-dimensional canvas during the 1950s. Earlier on Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) addressed similar



Molten Crater Flow Bowl. 2005. Porcelain with reduced iron crater glaze. 12.5 x 35.5 cm. Collection of Forrest L. Merrill

concerns. Just as Lovera's style reflects this voluminous approach so too does his glazing capacity equate to the intensely finished contemporary sculptural-vessels of Ron Nagle (b. 1939).

As a meditation on the vessel, *Craters from Fire* reveals an artistic interplay between common form and surface treatment to achieve unparalleled expression. The main gallery of the exhibition is where the majority of James Lovera's later work is on display. Approximately 40 large chargers and bowls along with a selection of smaller pieces reveal his ceramic virtuosity. To some, like catalogue essayist, Robert D. Mobry, Ph D, Head of the Asian Art Department, Athur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Lovera's porcelain works pick up, "where Chinese potters left off in the late 18th century and have carried forward that work". This valid endorsement is appropriate when viewing Lovera's egg-shell thin walls of his refined bell-shaped bowls. A rewarding experience for any ceramics patron is to walk with the artist through his collection and observe his tinging of forms to hear the correct ring. James Lovera's luscious glazing of reds, oranges, blues and greens, as seen in the pair of *Red-Orange Fire Flow Bowls*, 2005, assume a fluidity. Gradations of colour swirl across his curved surfaces and prompt an aesthetic appreciation and technical affirmation. These works are stirring and for curator Diana Daniels evoke celestial associations.

Along with the elegance of Lovera's porcelain pieces are his crater-glazed earthenwares that embody the artist's contemplative link to nature. Often, large bowls pool with slow glaze drips down the underside of select pieces, creating a drama easily overlooked by the hasty observer. *Molten Crater Flow*

Bowl, 2005, illustrates how intriguing technical and topical inquiry can arise. Are these works really ceramic accomplishments or rather some geological anomaly that has inherent aesthetics? Surface roughness is not off-putting since especially here Lovera's assuredness is evident. Hues of sea foam, green, turquoise or shades of tan or brown spawn a sense of ceramic history of the West. The naturalistic presence first presented by Lukens is transformed in the hands of Lovera whose homestead in the Sierra foothills is suggested in such works.

The ceramic work of James Lovera is both elegantly subtle and quietly powerful. His high standard and productivity testify to the artist's commitment to his work. This retrospective is an overdue tribute to a modest artist whose consistency has created an extensive body of work which spans an energetic era in Californian ceramics. Its encompassing presentation in a highly stylised setting would be enhanced by a slightly tighter selection of work. Since Lovera is such an accomplished technician a mention of process would have supported his artistic accomplishments. The Crocker Art Museum succeeds in presenting the accomplished work of James Lovera as an artistic high bar in the realm of ceramic art. The exhibition, *Craters from Fire* sheds light on the unfolding analysis of contemporary ceramics, especially in California which would be well-served by more such one-person shows.

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