



Jim Melchert

Works of Resonance

IN THE SPOKEN WORD PERFORMANCE, *100 STATEMENTS ABOUT Myself*, 1992/2013, at Southern Exposure Gallery in the Mission District of San Francisco, California, US Jim Melchert calmly stood before a restless urban crowd restating 50 phrases written two decades ago followed by 50 contemporary statements. His vocal cadence and intonations infused the cavernous room with warmth, humour and surprise. As one might expect, his comments touched upon observations on art and living a creative life. But others such as, “Most people could use some good news,” from 2013, hinted at a humanitarian perspective gained over the course of time.

This performance was part of the exhibition, *The Long Conversation*, featuring select multigenerational artists from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area who were exhibiting, performing and creating conceptual work. It was also one of a number of exhibitions in which Melchert and his work were recently featured, illustrating his enduring and productive career. His inclusion in many exhibits such as: *Paul Kotula Projects* in Ferndale, Michigan; Gallery Paule Anglim

in San Francisco; *Scores for a Room: David Haxton and Jim Melchert* at the Worth Ryder Art Gallery at University of California, Berkeley; *Lively Experiment* during NCECA’s 2015 conference in Providence, Rhode Island, US; and recently, the art commission, *Riven/River*, 2013 for the San Francisco Airport Museum, sharpen anew the focus on a conceptually driven artist whose creative output is often, but not always, associated with the material of clay.

The Southern Exposure reading illustrates an essence in Melchert’s work, spawned decades ago by the ideas presented in Raymond Queneau’s book, *Exercises de Style*, in which, as the artist notes, “he related the same anecdote over and over, but each time in a different literary style. I seem to have a passion for multiplicity.”¹ This idea prompted Melchert to devise his 1970 lowercase *a* series where he placed 21 *a*’s throughout the main gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute. Some were sculptural, made of varying materials while others were two-dimensionally flat such as a word on paper. As both a single letter and a word, the multiple uses of ‘*a*’ challenged art

Article by Nancy M Servis



and exhibition mores of the time, as the conceptual messaging that unfolded suited the artist's intent.

A slightly earlier piece in Melchert's sculptural explorations is *Photo Negative with Metal Ashtray*, 1968. It captures the artist's early probing of ideas through materiality, and starts to pave the way for both his time-based work and his celebrated expansive planes of tile. This curious serial piece, is a three-dimensional representation of a photographic negative. It is only complete as a work of art when someone's hand enters the scene to approach the ashtray while trailing cigarette smoke.

The duality often present in Melchert's body of work is better understood when considering his participation in two landmark and distinctly different Bay Area shows during the provocative 1960s: *The Slant-Step Show* in 1965 which revolved around the painter, William T Wiley and his then University of California, Davis graduate student, Bruce Nauman, exploring the confounding mystery regarding a small linoleum-covered slanted chair spawning artistic speculation to its intended use; and the 1967 Funk show curated by Peter Selz at the University of California, Berkeley where the controversial wave of sculptural work was shown by 26 artists, including Robert Arneson, Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, Roy De Forest, and Manuel Neri. Both exhibitions were bold harbingers of creative societal thought that stimulated many artists not artistically bound by the use of any one specific material. Melchert successfully and simultaneously straddled both realms.

Facing page: *Photo of Jim Melchert*. Photo by Kurt Edward Fishback.

Above: *Changes: A Performance of Drying Slip*. 1972.

Photo by Mieke Hilla and courtesy of the artist.

Melchert's investigation of existential ideas was poignantly illustrated in 1972, with the performance piece, *Changes: A Performance with Drying Slip*, a well-known landmark event in the annals of conceptual and ceramics history, undertaken during a visit to Amsterdam and *Documenta 5* in Kassel, Germany. Melchert recalls this original event where 10 people dipped their heads in slip and then were guided to sit on either side of the temperature-variant room. He recalls, "The studio in Amsterdam was large. I placed the two benches perhaps eight feet apart in more or less the centre of it. Between them I had the blocks of ice at one end and the charcoal fire at the other."² The respective rate of drying slip encasing each individual's head defined their interior soundscape of breathing, heartbeat and even nervous system pulsations. Consequently, participants were shifted out of the realm of an artist acting on a medium into an arena where the medium asserted control.³ This communal performance and his 1975 one-person show, *Points of View, Slide Projection Installations* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art permanently anchored Melchert in the realm of conceptually driven engagement.

At first, these events seem unrelated to Melchert's current large-scale tile-based artwork. While he does not describe himself solely as a ceramics artist, the category fits most of his work. Through



Top left: *Seven-Eighths of an A*. 1970. Urethane on ceramic. 22 x 22 in. Collection of Kahitsukan- Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Top right: *Photo Negative with Metal Ashtray*. 1968. Metal, clay and glazes. 4.5 x 15 x 15 in. Courtesy of di Rosa Collection, Napa, California.



conversation, however, it becomes clear that his 20 year engagement with large fractured tiles (each tile measuring 18 x 18 in) that are glazed and realigned achieving a constellation-like presence, is rooted in his lifelong meditation of ideas that often intermingle *avant-garde* music with surrealism and even physics.

Born in 1930 and raised in Ohio, Melchert circuitously made his way to Northern California to work with the unconventional Peter Voulkos, with whom he first briefly studied in 1957 during a summer session at the University of Montana, Missoula. Leah Balsham, an instructor at the Chicago Art Institute where Melchert was pursuing his first graduate degree in painting, encouraged this contact. She encountered Voulkos and the un-apologetic use of large amounts of clay in the early 1950s at the recently formed Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts (then known as Pottery, Inc at the Western Brick Manufacturing Company) on the outskirts of Helena, Montana. Balsham's two introductory classes enabled Melchert to complete his graduate studies in three quarters. In 1957 he was hired to teach art at Carthage College, Illinois (now in Kenosha, Wisconsin). As sole art instructor for the school, he taught all the course offerings, including ceramics. "Having had nothing more than an introduction to it," he stated, "I would work with clay the evening before class to get some ideas to present to the students. I began enjoying those sessions. That is when I decided to

spend the following summer investigating clay."⁴ He wrote Balsham inquiring about the Bray, which she praised yet directed him toward Voulkos' course in Missoula instead.

As for many Bay Area artists, Peter Voulkos served as a magnetic draw. And for Melchert, the early association in Montana lured him to UC Berkeley (Cal) where he undertook a second graduate degree with Voulkos in the Department of Decorative Arts. There, he and Sandra Johnstone were Voulkos' first and only registered graduate students in ceramics. Soon thereafter, many artists came to Cal either as students or auditors to be a part of the unfolding dynamic scene at Berkeley's ceramic Pot Shop. John Mason was one of many artists Melchert met during this time; and Melchert fondly recalls driving to Los Angeles in 1959 with Voulkos to connect with several of Voulkos' friends and fellow artists. Mason, along with many other artists such as Michael Frimkess and Henry Takemoto were also periodic auditors at the UC Berkeley program working alongside enrolled students such as Kazuye Suyematsu. These early associations set the groundwork for the lifelong friendship Melchert and Mason still share. Their enduring artistic relationship also illustrates the creative fluidity that exists between Northern and Southern California. Although the San Francisco Bay Area and greater Los Angeles are 400 miles apart, the channels of ceramics engagement were direct.

Melchert also was an influential teacher at the Bay Area universities: San Francisco Art Institute 1961–1965 (ceramics) and University of California, Berkeley (sculpture) from 1965 until 1992, and is now Professor Emeritus in the Department of Art Practice. He led the Visual Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC (1977–1981) and was Director of the American Academy in Rome (1984–1988). Such advocacy took seed early in Melchert's life. Upon graduation from Princeton University in 1952 with an AB in art history, he travelled to Japan to teach English for four years.⁵ While in Japan, Melchert met his wife, Mary Ann, and started their family that grew to three children. These guideposts create a framework in which Melchert's artistic productivity is considered.

A complexity of cultural forces also underlies the essence of Jim Melchert's lifelong work. Raised in a



musical home and adept at piano and choral singing, Melchert's creative thinking reflexively aligns with experiments in music, especially John Cage, the development of indetermination and the role of chance guiding artistic direction. Musician and composer, David Tudor, whom Melchert admired for several years and then met while in Rome, performed many of Cage's works.⁶ Melchert's depth of thought and ongoing engagement with subliminal tenets find realisation in a series of recent works collectively titled, *Piano Scores for David Tudor*, 2011–2013, illustrating both his kinship with indeterminate music and the incorporation of chance to dictate surface design. This series illustrates the artist's method of spinning a short measuring stick-like tool that lands on the porcelain tile to indicate where the glazed bands of colour are applied. Once fired, he then conjoins his reassembled tiles to create visual resonances mounted on the wall. Melchert then draws with graphite on some of his large wall works, intentionally departing from traditional ceramics practice since graphite vanishes when fired. Each square section is an opportunity to further articulate his ideas. For the artist, graphite renderings on tile succeed in a way that drawings on paper cannot.

Melchert's use of chance for breaking tile is not an uninformed act. Similar to how potters perceive the firing results of an anagama kiln, Melchert experientially intuits the breaking of tile. The sidewalk just outside his studio is where he drops and cracks commercial tiles knowing which abruption will cause a spider crack, radiating fan, or elegant arc. This act exposes the clay's interiority and, for the artist, respects the path of energy. Contextually, the artist often describes his conversation with a physicist regarding the definition of a crack and that it is forged along a weak alignment of molecules. "The point is" he explains, "that on one hand you



Top left: **Keyboard Flamenco**. 2012. From the series *Piano Scores for David Tudor*, 2011–2013. Broken and glazed tile with ink. 17.5 x 17.5 x 17.5 in. Courtesy of Paul Kotula Projects, Ferndale, Michigan, US.
Top right: **Jim Melchert in his Oakland, California studio**. 2013. Photo by Nancy M Servis

have fired clay which is mass and on the other, energy rushing through it separating sections where the bond between molecules is weak."⁷ This material vulnerability suited his desire to identify and explore the inherent vice of ceramics. "But surely in clay," the artist pondered, "there was a place for the concept that was other than structural."⁸ Melchert's tiles attest to this idea. It is fitting, then that *avant-garde* Bay Area composer, Greg Moore, visited the artist in his studio to record Melchert's shattering process which he then recalibrated into a sound performance.⁹

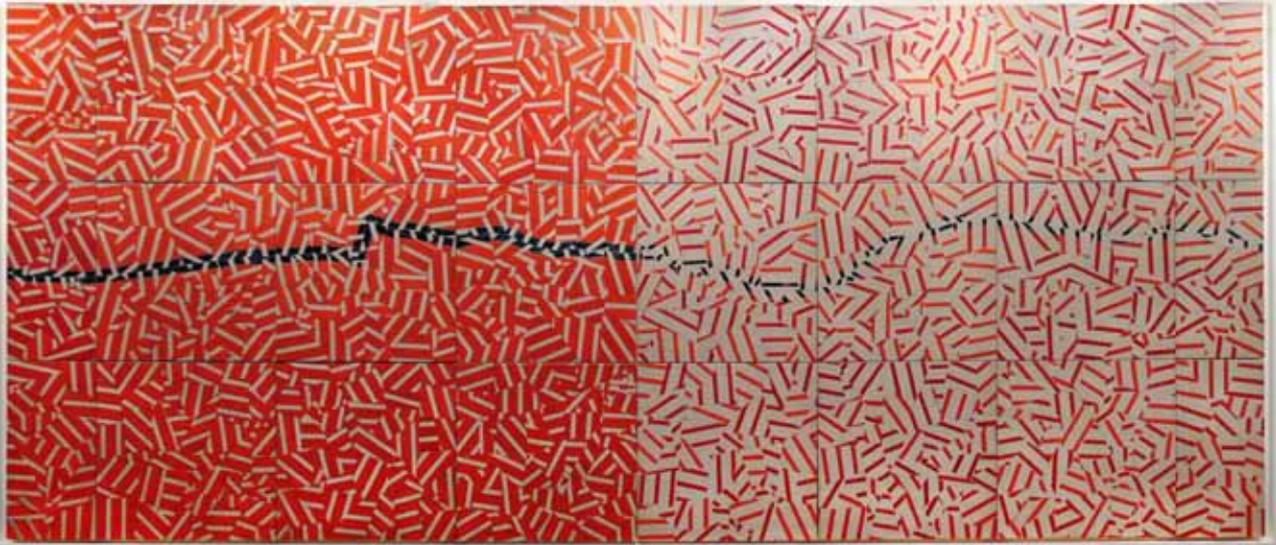
This layered approach enters the realm of creative phenomena and is where Melchert's tile murals insightfully succeed. Wayne Higby discusses the idea of creative phenomena in his curatorial essay, "Material Matters: Art and Phenomena" for the *2010 Scripps College 66th Ceramic Annual*. "The dynamics of perception," he begins, "are central to both the experience of art and to the critical theory that examines the experience of art." . . . "I have become convinced that we initially experience works of art through our senses in response to phenomena."¹⁰ He featured 14 artists whose work attained an insightful depiction of materiality deeply informed by process that bridled phenomena accelerating the final work. Melchert, whose pursuit of conceptual ideas led him



in and out of the use of clay as an artistic medium for many years, similarly has been investigating this complex balance. "What I had formerly thought of only as a flaw I could now regard as a positive feature worth investigating. . . Opening a tile is like entering a hidden place. There are seemingly endless ways of interacting with what you encounter, each of which can lead to a discrete body of work."¹¹ During his active 60 year career he has made sculpture, film-based conceptualisations, drawing, performance, and commanding wall-mounted tile murals creating a life-long collection expressing a varied dialogue of universal thoughts and ideas.

Jim Melchert's tile panels and large murals are the most appropriate forum for his complex artistic

pursuit. Pieces such as *Reassure*, 2008 illustrate one aspect of his approach. He draws upon ideas that, after many years of inquiry and experimentation, summon poetics in his work. The graceful arc of a cracked, often sharply-edged line is carefully echoed through repetitions of bands of glaze that follow the crack's trajectory. Merged with sibling tiles to create pairs, triptychs or 60 x 40 inch painting-sized works, Melchert's ensembles attain visual and perceptual effect. They emerge from thoughtful reformations of abrupt occurrences where studied embellishments unfold into eloquent imperfections. Further, his fascination with patterned light and light's transparent and reflective capacities, synchronise with his conceptualisations while utilising the realm



of clay. Melchert's preoccupation with tile's ability to react to light emerged while visiting mosques in the Middle East during the 1980s. His discussions of those observations, of seeing the changing light reflect off of large architectural forms by way of small angled tiles, assist our understanding of his focus. His recent 2014 trip to Iran, where he visited more ancient architectural sites, is evidence of his enduring consideration of the ethereal capacity of tile.

Riven/River, 2013 is Melchert's latest work resulting from his 20 year inquiry into the structural, artistic and poetic properties of tile murals. The title reinforces the artist's act of fracturing with the idea of energy release and flow. Here energy, like water, as seen with select blue glazing, takes the path of least resistance. With its saturated use of red on gray tile, visible from great distances often negotiated in airports, the work is charged by intense patterning in the two large pulsating sections. Fundamental to this energised piece is his willingness to engage chance in its initial tile breakage. The sensitive reassembly of shards into bold swaths of vibrating colour distance the work from its ceramic reality, positioning it in the realm of eloquently depicted ideas. While process is not the main consideration for his work, it fosters our understanding of his transcendent result. Jim Melchert's tile murals depict his conceptual message in the realm of ceramics. They also direct our thinking toward a resonate aesthetic that attains what Higby concludes is, "phenomena imbedded in the never-ending richness of material and process".¹²

ENDNOTES

1. "James Melchert: Conversations on Time, Chance and Creative Intelligence", http://0vnweb.hwilsonweb.com.library.cca.edu/hww/results/results/_single_fulltext.jhtml?sessionid=D. This article first appeared in the publication, *Studio Potter*, No. 25, pp 43–59, June 1997.
2. Email from the artist, January 1, 2015.

Facing page: *Reassure*. 2008. Glaze on broken tile. 18 x 18 in.
 Courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.
 Above: *Riven/River*. 2013. Glaze on porcelain tiles.
 6 x 14 ft. Photo by Ethan Connolly Caflisch.
 Courtesy of the San Francisco Airport Museum and the artist.
 Collection of the San Francisco Airport Museum.

3. See: [Vimeo.com/108589844](https://www.vimeo.com/108589844) for the original b/w filmed performance.
4. op cit, email.
5. While at Princeton, Jim Melchert met another student, Stephen De Staebler, two years younger, who was pursuing a degree in religion.
6. Melchert was introduced to the musical scores of John Cage by Peter Voulkos in 1959/1960. Voulkos acquired them while at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, in exchange for some wares. "You look at these scores and it is almost as if somebody had written a letter. They have nothing to do with notation. And he (Voulkos) said that David Tudor could play these. He remarked that David Tutor could play the telephone directory." Melchert, Jim. Interview by author. 14 November, 2013.
7. op cit, email.
8. op cit, interview.
9. *ibid*.
10. Higby, Wayne. "Material Matters: Art and Phenomena." In *2010 Scripps College 66th Ceramic Annual*. Exh. Cat., Claremont, California: Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, 2010, p 9.
11. Melchert, Jim. "Breaking and Entering." In *Jim Melchert: Breaking and Entering*. San Francisco, California: Gallery Paule Anglim, 2008 p 3.
12. In discussing the idea of art and phenomena, Higby cites the book *Aesthetics and Appearing* by Martin Seel, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Giessen, Germany as an influence. op cit, p 10.

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