



## Shadows

THE SUBTLE WORK OF PAUL PHILP BORN 1941, A WELSH-born ceramics artist now living in Bath, England, cannot be ignored. Its recent display at the Hedge Gallery in San Francisco, California, illustrates the elegant, yet tempered force ceramics can possess when made by someone who cultivates interests beyond immediate expression. The stoneware pieces vary in size. Many are monumental in their presence, resulting in a deep satisfaction similar to that of reading a well-written book. Just as a good book is hard to put down, Philp's work endures.

This exhibition displayed 30 current pieces by the artist who is now 73, including a selection from Philp's own holdings. Like other Hedge Gallery shows, the work was displayed on pairs of aligned large tabletops creating two expansive white plains. This ceramic population, with shape variety and surface character, redefined the urban exhibition space, creating an environment of unfolding curiosity. Philp's expressed philosophy regarding his work is to produce objects that appear naturally occurring as if discovered, not made. Most of the featured pieces emerged from Philp's careful coiling and carved building method,<sup>1</sup> while nearby larger expressionistic sculptures served as a counterbalance in their rawness and seeming spontaneity. Philp's blending clay with impurities leads to encrusted works with an eroded aesthetic. Each piece has a presence all its own, while their totality sets an elegiac tone, suggesting a sensorial association with silence. "Silence," Jeffrey Jones

writes about the work of Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, "is functional in establishing and maintaining a micro-context within which their work thrives while also providing a defence against the possibility of a macro-context in which their work might be more widely interpreted."<sup>2</sup> This perspective extends to Philp's body of work, especially when considering the show's title, *Shadows*.

Philp's artistic authorship is derived from an internalisation of global, historical and regional ceramics calibrated with an interest in architecture, especially vernacular buildings such as Japanese Minka. His scope of work echoes classic ceramic form, sculptural interests, Japanese ceramics practice, expressionist tenets and geologic force. As ceramics

### *A Review by Nancy M Servis*

history and use is extensive, Philp's approach is a well-suited procreation of ceramics intent. Philip Rawson addresses historicism like that reflected in Philp's work stating, "Echoes are echoes. But works of visual art are more than echoes, or even bundles of echoes. However many echoes a work may evoke, it exists to make them real and to unify them by its own presence. The ceramics presence is not, like words, a 'here' that points by convention to a 'there'; its meaning and its presence cannot be separated."<sup>3</sup>

Philp's work sympathises with ceramics practice that supports his making shaped vases and related sculpture. Such sources find resolve in partnership with Philp's interpretation of the natural world. Focused studio practice fostered his assured work,



honed from his building successes and his self-acknowledged failures. "And so often," he explains, "it's only when I can see how something is not working that then I can see how it would succeed. I just have to work and such an action will show the way."<sup>4</sup> Working for many years in the Welsh countryside, where artistic solitude forced creative challenge, Philp built pieces that embody his personalised ceramic ideas.

Philp's coil-building method is measured as well as evolutionary. He does not follow a prescribed shape or sketch to guide him. Rather, he handbuilds vessel walls that often lilt, invigorating his work as seen with *Ceramic No. 25* and *4*. Addressing this organically suggestive result, Philp states he gained structural insight from studying Picasso's cubist practice of "pulling the planes and dimensions around."<sup>5</sup> This led him to triangulating forms achieving sculptural posture, as in *Ceramic No. 19*. While he contemplates shape initiated by the vessel aesthetic, the universality of form as seen in the human figure, rock formations and bones all inform his work.

Textured and muted surfaces of Philp's ceramic pieces also imply painterly modernity. He is known to expose works to multiple firings, devising a variety of clay bodies with materials that melt, run or burn out suggestive of abstract expressionist painting. Consequently, he achieves pieces that interweave vessel and sculptural considerations, as seen with *Ceramic No. 32*. Though no more than seven inches in height and consistent with the vessel



Facing page: Paul Philp *Shadows Installation View at Hedge Gallery.*

Above left: *Ceramic No. 19*. 2013. 14 x 11 x 4.5 in.

Above: *Ceramic No. 25*. 2013. 20.5 x 11 x 7 in. and *Ceramic No. 4*. 2013. 19.5 x 10 x 5.5 in.

Above photos by Nancy M Servis.

construct, this work has eroded holes that challenge such characterisation. Combining architectural form with perforated surface, Philp's work is a disregard of the differentiation between functional and fine art.

The title of the exhibition, *Shadows*, contextualises Philp's goal. He alternates between architectural and organic forms using limited oxide and slip coatings. Combining surface nuances such as texture and coloration, Philp's fully realised works are further refined by the ever-changing influence of light. His integration of surface details with austere forms projects the aftereffect of shadows that broaden their perceptual realm. Textural definition also reveals his skill portraying non-clay surfaces. Some works appear like ancient bronze, as with *Ceramic No. 40*, while others suggest alabaster. His surfaces richly emerge with consistent success. The spectrum of work – from rounded pods to angular shapes and sculpture – coexist in this display indicating their equality within the artist's body of work.

Philp's larger expressionistic pieces can be considered as intensified interpretations of his finer-surfaced works. ". . . making the organic pieces," he explains, "is more intense and exhausting. With the organic sculptural pieces, I am venturing into the unknown and have to fight feelings of trepidation."<sup>6</sup> *Ceramic No. 9*, represents his approach to clay handling where



Above: *Ceramic No. 32*. 2013. 6.75 x 9 x 5.5 in.  
Right: *Ceramic No. 9*. 2008. 20.5 x 12.5 x 3.75 in.  
Above photos by Nancy M Servis.  
Below: 5. *Ceramic No. 40*. 2013. 8.5 x 17.5 x 9 in.  
Photo by Patrik Argast.





dense irregular masses with pits, cruxes and drips suggest geologic energy.

The presentation of Paul Philp's work at the Hedge Gallery exhibition, *Shadows*, was rewarding. The variety of sculpturally organic shaped vases and sculpture defined an aesthetically provocative realm. The large grouping of nearly 30 pieces illustrated the scope of Philp's work but also prevented a circumferential view of any one piece. Knowing which works, if any, to emphasise takes curatorial focus. The ability to make these selections distinguishes gallery presentations from museum exhibitions. Though not crucial to the success of the show, such considerations would have more fully emphasised Paul Philp's resonate work.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Philp's sculptural coil-built vessels are finely carved both inside and out using Italian plaster worker's tools, industrial metal saw blades, homemade implements and abrasive papers.

2. Jeffrey Jones, "Keeping Quiet and Finding a Voice: Ceramics and the Art of Silence," *Interpreting Ceramics*, Volume 5. 2004. (<http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue005/keepingquiet.com>).

3. Philip Rawson, "Echoes: An Introduction," in Garth Clark, ed., *Ceramic Millennium*, Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006. p 218.

4. Richard Philp, *Fired Clay: The Ceramic Work of Paul Philp*, Antwerp: DeckersSnoeck, 2008. p 7.

5. Philp. p 94.

6. Philp. p 90.

Nancy M Servis is an essayist, curator and ceramics historian who resides in Northern California, US. She presently is conducting oral history interviews with ceramics artists and practitioners in preparation for her upcoming book on ceramics in Northern California.

*Above: Ceramic No. 61. 2013. 15 x 13 x 2.5 in.*

*Below: No. 9 (Detail). The Artist's Stamp.*

*Photos by Nancy M Servis.*

