



The Ceramic Pot Shop at UC Berkeley, 1959–1964

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INNOVATION in the 1960s

Before there was the Berkeley Art Museum on Bancroft Way, there was the ceramic “pot shop.” It began as a basement studio located in a former fraternity house that was converted into the campus housing office. Decades of ceramic innovation have passed since the pot shop began in 1959 when the ceramic pioneer, Peter Voulkos (1924–2002) returned to the Bay Area from Southern California to start what is widely recognized as the artistically transformative ceramics program.¹ Specifically, the pot shop was where the vessel aesthetic served as a point of departure for experimental inquiry by students, auditors, and visiting artists. It fostered an unconventional use of clay rarely embraced in academic settings. Moving to Northern California refocused what Voulkos had begun at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) as a legendary artistic revolution through the medium of clay. Berkeley’s nascent time lasted roughly five years. In 1964, the building that housed the pot shop was demolished to make way for the University Art Museum designed by architect Mario Ciampi (1907–2006), and the ceramics program was relocated to Wurster Hall.

The early 1960s was a defining era for the University of California educational system with campuses developing throughout the state. UC Berkeley was particularly on the rise under the leadership of Clark Kerr (1911–2003) who served as the school’s first chancellor from 1952 to 1958, and then as president of the nine-campus University of California system from 1958 to 1967. His progressive administrative and academic priorities set the tone for educational breadth that extended to the arts. Kerr’s egalitarian perspective on higher learning reinforced Voulkos’s pursuit of artistic experimentation.

MAGNET for EXPERIMENTATION

Voulkos was seasoned at establishing ceramic art studios for universities, having accomplished that in Southern California from 1954 to 1959.² When he started at Berkeley, ceramics was part of the Decorative Arts Department. Voulkos worked within this context, creating an exciting studio environment of artistic freedom fueled by abstract expressionist tenets present in his own work. The ceramics workshop included a main room with kick wheels and a few small glaze rooms with an outdoor kiln shed and three kilns. While Voulkos himself was known for using vast amounts of clay, that was not a dictate for students, some of whom still preferred to work on the potter’s wheel.

The pot shop atmosphere was a nonstop studio that was open day and night. Voulkos, who used the studio for his own work, established a ceramic camaraderie of equal footing. “He used that as his studio. We used it. He made no distinction between who was who,” recalled William Underhill.³ Voulkos’s creative allure attracted a spectrum of students, class auditors, graduate assistants, and studio technicians. His first two graduate students, James Melchert (b. 1930) and Sandra Johnstone (1930–1991) were central in anchoring the pot shop. Soon thereafter, Ron Nagle (b. 1939) from San Francisco State University joined this coterie as a studio technician with an emphasis in jewelry. As a sculpture student, Stephen De Staebler (1933–2011) migrated toward the synergy at the pot shop. He recalled, “Jim Melchert was the TA, . . . and he really mixed big mountains of clay, so when class started you could

walk over with a cutting wire and slice off as much as you could carry. . .”⁴

Visiting auditors, who intensified this dynamic environment, enjoyed complete access to the clay studio and its resources. Auditors associated with Voulkos’s Los Angeles days included Henry Takemoto (b. 1930), Michael Frimkess (b. 1937), and John Mason (b. 1927). As Jim Melchert recently recalled, “Pete viewed himself as a catalyst [and realized] that if he were the only one around, everyone would be dependent upon him, and that is not what he wanted.”⁵ Ceramic invention percolated through the environs of the pot shop. John Mason, for example, constructed wooden support walls for the large-scale ceramic sculptures he created while there, inspiring Harold Paris (1925–1979) to make his recognized ceramic *Walls for Mem.*⁶

MAKING the GRADE

The environment at the pot shop is often described as predominately masculine. Examples exist that reinforce this description. Harold Paris swathed his large clay walls using a sword, creating one piece in a twenty-four hour period. The prevalence for using large amounts of clay demanded physicality not everyone working there possessed. Students from that period, like Kazuye Suyematsu (b. 1938), broadened this view. She was a painting student from L.A. who, like Voulkos, left the school in 1959. Her friend, Henry Takemoto, was a student of Voulkos’s there and drove her to Cal where she took ceramic classes as an alternative to painting. For her and some others who were studying at Berkeley during that time, what made the experience valuable was the attitude and expectation. She perceived that commitment to your work in the studio was the equalizer among pot shop artists. Amidst those times when machismo prevailed, there were also times of inclusive camaraderie. In a recent conversation, she explained that Peter Voulkos was supportive if he respected you and sometimes complimented your work to others.⁷ Although it was the early 1960s

when the broader identity of women was still unfolding, Voulkos supported female artists, recognizing them for what they brought to the creative table. For Ann Christenson (b. 1942), it was Voulkos’s performance-driven throwing demonstrations that redefined the possibilities of the ceramics realm, inspiring her to open a public ceramic studio in New York City.⁸

CONCLUSION

What may at first seem like a serendipitous moment can navigate beyond the norm to something profound. This sentiment characterizes the origin and first five years of the ceramic studio on the campus of UC Berkeley. Peter Voulkos, now considered the father of contemporary American ceramics, was a lightning rod that attracted many artists, but it was also the atmosphere of the 1960s in Berkeley that supported his purview. Peter Voulkos’s uniqueness, along with the time and place, dramatically changed the contemporary artistic roadmap, invigorating the creative medium of ceramics that has enduring influence worldwide.

¹ In 1951–52, Peter Voulkos attended the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, as a graduate student in ceramics.

² Peter Voulkos was hired to start a ceramics program in Los Angeles. His first student there was Paul Solder. Together they equipped the studio with machinery, including potter’s wheels, which they built.

³ Rick Newby, *Wrested from the Earth: The Life and Art of Stephen De Staebler*, p. 75 in Stephen De Staebler: Matter + Spirit, exhibition catalogue, Fine Arts Museum, University of California Press, 2011.

⁴ Richard Whittaker, Interview with Stephen De Staebler, June 2, 2009 <www.conversations.org/story.php?sid+206>

⁵ James Melchert during Berkeley Art Center Panel Discussion, Berkeley, CA, October 24, 2012.

⁶ Interview with John Mason, Los Angeles, CA, by Nancy M. Servis, August 1, 2012.

⁷ Interview with Kazuye Suyematsu, Berkeley, CA, by Nancy M. Servis, January 22, 2014.

⁸ Phone interview with Ann Christenson by Nancy M. Servis, January 31, 2014. She opened the studio with Sue Katz.

Front image: Detail from a ceramic piece by Kazuye Suyematsu