

*Fine Form
Saskatchewan Ceramics*



A MacKenzie Art Gallery Outreach Exhibition

The Quest for Fine Form

Timothy Long

What makes a pot work? This is the question that faces ceramists every time they pick up a slab of clay.

Why throw a pot instead of building it from coils? Why use earthenware and not porcelain? Why use a gas kiln and not a traditional wood fire technique? The options are endless.

And then there is the larger question, why make a pot at all? After all, there is no practical reason for hand making a vessel when cheaply produced industrial versions abound.

The answers to these questions vary from artist to artist, but one common thread connects them all: a belief in the power of a finely crafted form. For ceramic artists, forms have a life and a history. They speak and have stories to tell. A well-made vessel is not an anonymous, mass produced object, here today and discarded tomorrow, but a creation imbued with intelligence and feeling. From this perspective, the decisions around how to make a pot are not arbitrary at all—rather, they represent the steps in a quest to create a form that embodies history while touching the world of today.

The quest for fine form has taken many shapes in Saskatchewan, which has been particularly fertile ground for ceramic exploration over the past fifty years. While often this exploration has been sculptural—witness the funk creations of the Regina Clay movement during the 1970s—many artists have continued to use the vessel as their primary vehicle. This exhibition from the permanent collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery offers a dozen examples of how pots speak through a language of form.

In traditional pottery, form is not an end in itself, but rather a product of traditional knowledge responding to utilitarian needs. The work of **Peter Rupchan** (1883–1944) exemplifies this historical understanding of form, which he brought as an immigrant to Canada in 1905.¹ A skilled potter by the time he left Ukraine, Rupchan was the first European potter of note in Saskatchewan, establishing pottery production as a cottage industry in the Endeavor-Usherville area between 1910 and 1941. Made to serve the needs of Ukrainian cookery, Rupchan’s wares reflect a level of sophistication that belies their utilitarian function. Working in virtual isolation, Rupchan primarily made pots on his homemade potter’s wheel, though he did experiment with using hollowed-out tree trunks as molds. The unglazed earthenware bowl in this exhibition, decorated with a simple undulating black line, displays a graceful, classical form that is typical of his vessels.



PETER RUPCHAN, *Untitled*, no date



JACK SURES, *Untitled*, 1982

In the post-war period, pottery gained substantially in status, moving from a cottage industry to a subject of academic study. Leading the way in Saskatchewan was **Jack Sures** (Regina), who established the ceramics program at the University of Regina in 1965.² Sures advocated that ceramics be considered an art form on par with painting and sculpture. His work embodies a search for personal expression in many media—sculptures, murals, vessels, drawings, prints and tiles—and his approach to form is equally eclectic, drawing on a wide knowledge of international ceramics gathered through study and travel in North America, Europe, the Middle East and Japan. The small double gourd vessel in the exhibition reflects a shape found in nature, to which Sures gives a playful twist through the addition of a narrow, hand rolled neck. As in all of his work, personal expression, rather than utility, is the governing principle.

The importance of forms derived from the wellspring of Asian ceramics is a recurring theme among the artists in this exhibition. **Randy Woolsey**, a Regina-born ceramist, was one of the first artists from this province to work and study in Japan, setting up a pottery studio in 1969 in the city of Kasama, where he now lives.³ In the 1970s he returned to Saskatchewan for a period, bringing a highly refined Japanese-inspired aesthetic. *Untitled*, from the 1980s, is an example of his masterful use of salt glaze technique and his sensitive interpretation of a simple bowl, a form revered in Japanese culture through association with the tea ceremony. In this case, the bowl is brought to life through diagonal fluting, highlighted by alternating green and brown glazes and punctuated by small round bosses below the lip—a quiet celebration of a timeless form.



RANDY WOOLSEY, *Untitled*, circa 1980s



CHARLEY FARRERO, *Sajoi*, 2003

Travel to Japan has also been important for **Mel Bolen** (Humboldt) and **Charley Farrero** (Meacham).⁴ First acquainted with each other through the pottery program at the University of Regina Department of Extension where Bolen was an instructor, they were among the Saskatchewan delegates who attended the 1978 World Crafts Council General Assembly in Japan. There they encountered first hand the ancient ceramic centres of Bizen and Shigaraki, as well as meeting Fujiwara Kei, one of Japan's "living national treasures." This experience inspired an interest in wood-firing which the two artists have pursued over the past twenty-five years, an interest which eventually resulted in Farrero's decision to build "L'Agamine," a wood fire anagama kiln which he constructed at his home in Meacham, Saskatchewan in 2003. *Sajoi*, a product of the first firing of L'Agamine, is a tribute to an unexpectedly heavy Fujiwara pot which Farrero picked up in his host's studio, a vessel which disrupted his idea about the need to produce light pots.

Where Farrero's *Sajoi* speaks of a stability of both form and tradition, Mel Bolen's *Scott Lake NWT* moves in the opposite direction. In this salt fire work, Bolen takes a flattened gourd shape and elevates it delicately on a pedestal of three carved feet, giving a contemporary stance to a traditional form. Another artist with an interest in Japanese firing techniques, in this case raku, is **Don Chester** (Regina), who was head of Extension Pottery from 1977–87. As a student he was encouraged by his professor, Jack Sures, to explore sculptural forms in ceramic.⁵ The results were large slab bowls with raw edges and improvised forms that dramatically reveal the process of construction. The metallic lustres created by the raku firing process accentuate these forms and add to the impression of a vessel that has been shaped by elemental forces.



MEL BOLEN, *Scott Lake NWT*, 2004



DONOVAN CHESTER, *Untitled*, 1987



MARTIN TAGSETH, *Song Form #42*, 2009

For **Martin Tagseth** (Lake Lenore), Korea, with a ceramic tradition as ancient as that of China and Japan, has been his touchstone. Regarding his aesthetic direction as a ceramist, Tagseth explains: "I am engaged in creating objects that deal with the aesthetics of usefulness. Concepts associated with the specifics of utility and form are cross-referenced with ideas generated from my growing understanding of the tradition of vessel making, considering space, structure and the inherent meaning of a useful object. I have focused on the ceramics of the Korean Choson Dynasty [also known as the Yi Dynasty] and German stoneware traditions. Both are connected to my deeply rooted appreciation of agrarian culture."⁶ Utilitarian forms take on a metaphorical resonance in works such as *Song Form #42*, which radiate a new life through the exquisite ash glazes produced through the wood-firing process.

For **Beth Hone** (Regina) and **Anita Rocamora**

(Meacham), nature rather than history is the primary source of inspiration. Hone played an instrumental role in the early development of ceramics in Saskatchewan, bringing her British training to a teaching position at the University of Regina Extension Department from 1959–66 and to the formation of the Hone-James Studio in 1968.⁷ *Fluted Gills #1* from around 1972 (cover image) is a fine example of the transition in Hone's oeuvre from functional pottery towards sculptural investigations. This evolution is registered particularly in Hone's use of porcelain and lustre glazes, materials associated with domestic ceramics such as tea cups, and in her decision to combine thrown and sculptural elements. Hone further references emerging feminist concerns through the use of natural, biomorphic forms such as the delicate, fluted gills. Rocamora, who helped to found North Star Pottery near Humboldt with Bolen, Farrero and Robert Oeuvrard (1976-80), explores the naturally



ANITA ROCAMORA, *Trifolia*, 2004



CARA DRISCOLL, *"Lydia" Maker of Purple*, 2007

occurring vessel shapes of seed pods, gourds, seashells and other organic forms. While her past ceramics have been mostly polychromed earthenware, Rocamora has recently experimented with wood-fired stoneware.⁸ Using Charley Farrero's anagama kiln in Meacham, Rocamora has relied on the uncontrolled wood ash glazes to accentuate the gourd-like forms of the vessel *Trifolia*.

Form can also function as a narrative element, as seen in the work of **Cara Driscoll** (Regina). Influenced by a coil building workshop led by the Southwest U.S. ceramist Richard Zane Smith, Driscoll has employed this technique for more than a decade as a means of wedding form, symbol, and process.⁹ "*Lydia*" *Maker of Purple* is from a series entitled "The Forgotten Women of the Bible." For each vessel in the series, Driscoll would inscribe on its base a text which shaped her thinking as she shaped the pot. The inscriptions refer to women who have been silenced within the authorized texts of Western culture. Lydia, who is mentioned in Acts 16:13-15,

was a woman of Thyatira (in present day Turkey) who was a seller of purple dye for the textile trade, hence Driscoll's inscription: "The first weave of the shuttle is called the sacred weft. From this point the pattern is formed. The path weaves threads of our life into a pattern with meaning." Like a weaving, the vessel's coiled form gives physical expression to a feminist and spiritual discourse.

Concepts from the worlds of architecture and industrial design inform the final two vessels in the exhibition. **Joan McNeil** (Toronto) was a practicing architect for a decade (1967–77) before coming to Regina to complete an MFA (1982) under Jack Sures. *Untitled*, from 1978, is representative of the slab built, constructive approach which she applied to her vessels prior to entering the MFA program. Of particular interest is the contrast of soft and hard elements, which points to a desire, manifest in later works, to deconstruct the forms traditionally associated with architecture.¹⁰



JOAN McNEIL, *Untitled*, 1978



ZANE WILCOX, *Teapot*, 2004

Zane Wilcox (Regina), a current MFA student at the University Regina, has an established reputation for intelligently designed pots and sculptures.¹¹ His crisply engineered vessels derive their interest from the purity of their lines, such as those seen in the jaunty arch of his *Teapot* from 2004. Postmodern in spirit, his vessels translate cerebral designs into formally satisfying ceramic objects that are nonetheless functional, showing that form and utility need not always be opposed.

As we move further into the digital age, the ceramic vessel continues to face new challenges. What is the meaning of a pot in a virtual world? While the answer to this question remains to be formulated, Saskatchewan ceramic artists clearly lack nothing of the imagination needed to create new forms for a new millenium.

Timothy Long
Head Curator

Notes

1. For details of the life of Peter Rupchan, see Judith Silverthorne, *Made in Saskatchewan: Peter Rupchan, Ukrainian Pioneer and Potter, A Biography* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2004).
2. See Timothy Long, ed., *Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2005) and <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/ReginaClay/>. Sures work will be the subject of a major, nationally touring retrospective at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, co-organized with the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, September 24, 2011 to January 1, 2012.
3. See www.randywoolseypottery.net.
4. See Timothy Long, *L'Agamine: Portrait of an Anagama Kiln in Saskatchewan* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2004).
5. For biographical details and interviews with Don Chester, see: <http://www.artsask.ca/en/artists/donchester>.
6. Quoted in Sarah Yates, "Things are not what they seem," *Contemporary Prairie Clay* (Brandon: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2002).
7. For a description of Hone's role in the development of Saskatchewan ceramics, see the essays by Sandra Alföldy and Julia Krueger in *Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making*.
8. See *L'Agamine: Portrait of an Anagama Kiln in Saskatchewan*.
9. Information on the process and symbolism of this work was provided to the author by the artist, personal communication, November 2007.
10. See Arthur Handy, *Joan McNeil: Brickworks* (Halifax: St. Mary's University Art Gallery, 1999).
11. See *L'Agamine*.

List of Works

MEL BOLEN

Canadian, born 1947

Scott Lake NWT, 2004

stoneware, terra sigillata, salt vapour fired

21.5 x 33.6 x 33.6 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
purchased with funds donated by Taylor Auto-
motive Group in memory of Bobbie Taylor
2005-001

DONOVAN T. CHESTER

Canadian, born 1940

Untitled, 1987

raku

14.7 x 45 cm

MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina
Collection
1987-021

CARA GAY DRISCOLL

Canadian, born 1946

"Lydia" Maker of Purple, 2007

mid-fire ceramic, terra sigillata, purple glaze

36 x 30 x 30 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery
2007-061

CHARLEY FARRERO

Canadian [French], born 1946

Sajoi, 2003

stoneware, wood fired

21.2 x 22 x 22 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
purchased with funds donated by Taylor Auto-
motive Group in memory of Bobbie Taylor
2005-003

BETH HONE

Canadian, born 1918

Fluted Gills #1, circa 1972

porcelain, stoneware, glaze, lustre

18 x 17.8 x 17.8 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery
2008-003

JOAN MCNEIL

Canadian

Untitled, 1978

ceramic, glaze

14 x 15.4 x 15.4 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
gift of Jack Sures and Cara Gay Driscoll
2008-106

ANITA ROCAMORA

Canadian [French], born 1952

Trifolia, 2004

stoneware, wood fired

17.5 x 11.4 x 11.4 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
purchase in honour of Sandra Whittick's 92nd
birthday
2005-035

PETER RUPCHAN

Canadian [Ukrainian], 1883 – 1944

Untitled, no date

earthenware

13 x 33 x 33 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
gift of Richard Spafford
2006-014

List of Works *continued*

JACK SURES

Canadian, born 1934

Untitled, 1982

glazed porcelain

21 x 10 x 10 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,

gift of the artist

1999-152

MARTIN TAGSETH

Canadian, born 1963

Song Form #42, 2009

wood-fired stoneware

32.5 x 19.9 x 19.9 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, purchased

with the financial support of the Canada Council

for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program

2010-007

ZANE WILCOX

Canadian, born 1971

Teapot, 2004

ceramic

25 x 22.2 x 13.4 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,

gift in honour of Sandra Whittick's 91st birthday

2004-065

RANDY WOOLSEY

Canadian, born 1944

Untitled, circa 1980s

stoneware, salt glaze

11.1 x 17.3 x 17.3 cm

Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,

gift of Jack Sures and Cara Gay Driscoll

2008-113

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Front cover: Beth Hone, *Fluted Gills #1*, circa 1972

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