

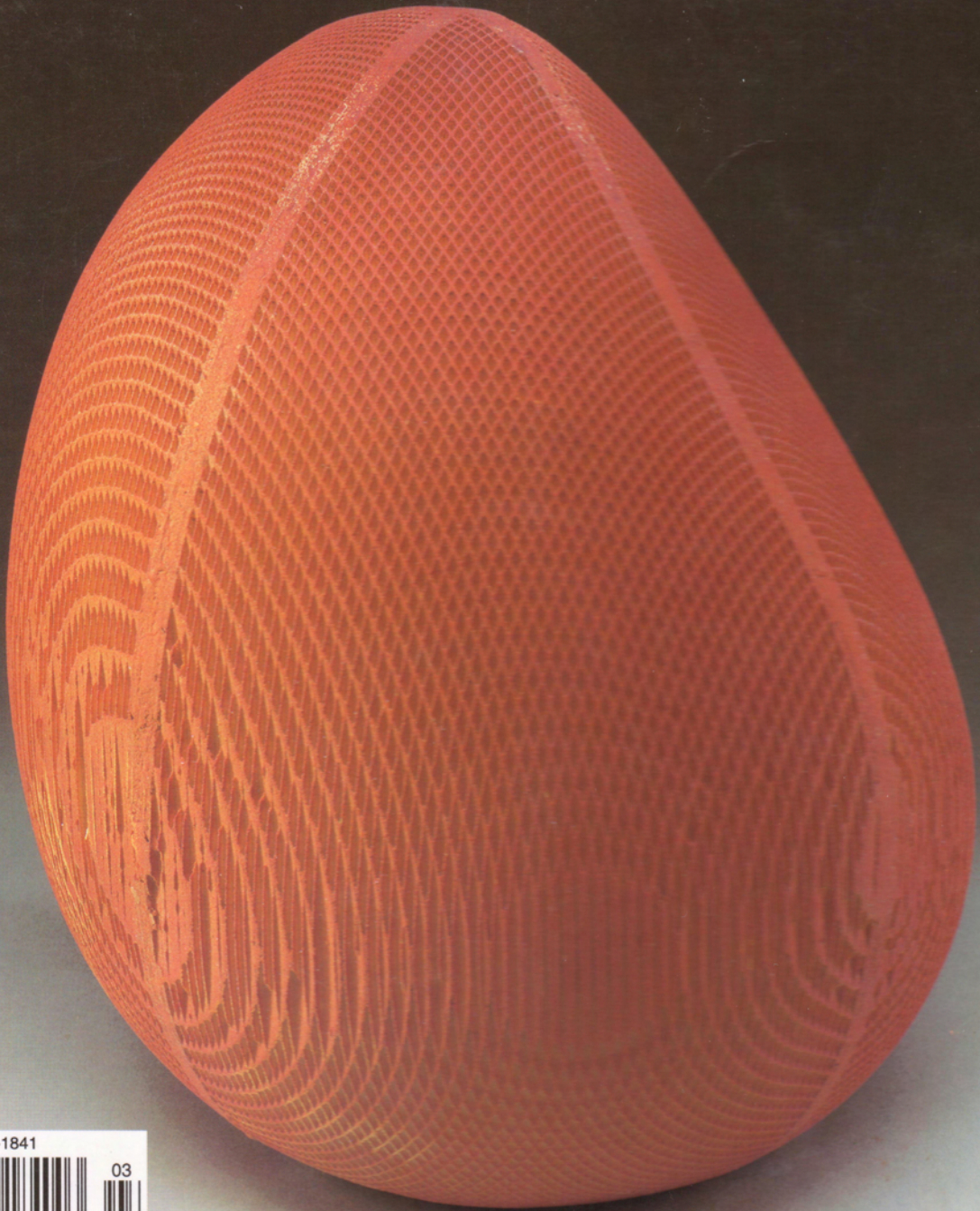
# Ceramics

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*Stone Gatherer. 1996. White stoneware. 65 cm/h.*

# The Container as Metaphor

## Figurative Works by Donna Polseno

*Article by Anna Fariello*

**C**ONTAINER/CONTAINED, NATURE/CULTURE, ANIMATE/inanimate, figure/ground – new works by Donna Polseno have achieved a level of complexity which combine contrasting ideas and images from various phases of the artist's past. Having worked in clay for 25 years, Polseno has gone through periods of vessel and figure-making, wholesale production and one-of-a-kind sculpture, her own personal pendulum exploring one form and the next. That the artist has now fused seemingly disparate elements into unique, holistic forms is an indication that her work has achieved a level of maturity which comes with confidence in one's ability and experience with one's material.

After being awarded two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts early in her career, Polseno became known for pottery which appeared animated and lively. While it is not uncommon for potters to reference the body in describing their pottery, Polseno embraced this analogy wholeheartedly and began pushing the idea of 'body,' 'belly' and 'foot' of each pot. When her sculptural forms evolved to the point of becoming recognisable as female torsos, she continued to call her figures vessels, remaining committed to the ceramic tradition.

What is it about ceramists that they remain forever loyal to the vessel? The concept of containment is a fascinating point of focus. The ability to hold, to save,



to possess, these simple basic human capacities were among the first truly human acts. Like tool-making, often cited as the defining human characteristic, containment separates us from our more primal relatives. Today, faced with a glut of mass produced objects, it is difficult to fully appreciate the power of containment which characterised those first bowls and cooking pots, but survival and prosperity of our species depended upon the ability to contain. A clay pot may have functioned as a bank, the sole repository of all that was personally owned and cherished. A broken waterpot could be a tragedy, a crisis to a family group possessing but a single container. Considering its history, one can begin to appreciate that pottery could be invested with spiritual quality, ceremonial capacity and reverence. For Polseno "the vessel is many things," an icon of "culture, function and spirituality".

Donna Polseno's current series of sculptural forms is similar to her abstracted female figures of the past decade, but each woman holds her own vessel. It is inviting to look inside. Some pots contain stones, others are empty. Embraced by each figure, the container is a metaphor for its potential to hold, to possess, to preserve. The frontal, square-shouldered woman in *Stone Gatherer* turns her head aside, averting her gaze. She is the colour of earth – she is of earth – posing in a timeless gesture of ritual offering. Embracing her individual vessel, she drifts in a dream state of reverie, collecting small treasures and depositing them in the pot clutched to her breast. The artist has placed the vessel central to her being and carefully constructed it so that it rests freely in her hand.

Polseno expresses her creative nature, as artist, mother and daughter. Like all artists true to their nature and unafraid to explore the depth of their beings, Polseno's work is essentially autobiographical. Changes in her life are manifest through changes, however subtle, in her work and she expresses an unswerving faith in the capacity of the visual to express "profound experience". It is a lesson learnt from looking at art. She recalls: "There are times in my life where I have encountered a figure in a museum and almost fainted from the profoundness of it." Through the creation of her own museum-quality figures, Polseno shares her reverence for life and the magical and mystical experience of making.

Like the *Venus of Willendorf*, the femaleness of Polseno's figures is exaggerated: their breasts swell, their hips are curvaceous, their thighs meet defining their sexuality. *Nurturer* is one of the more voluptuous figures in the series. A fleshy female holds a plain, salt-glazed jug. Both figure and pot are weighty and earthbound. In this piece the vessel is integral to the figure, the pot growing out of the figure. "Woman and vessel are one," Polseno explains. Using the female body as generic being, containment becomes a metaphor for human capacity.



*Nurturer*. 1996. Salt-glazed stoneware. 85 cm/h.

*Nurturer* is an earth goddess whose featureless face is universal. "There is always an underlying pressure from other people to have my figures become more specific and more realistic. But what I want is essential, non-specific and non-portrait." Drawing on the tradition of votive sculpture which predates written history, Polseno's sculptures appear as archaic mother figures updated by their adoption of a contrapposto posture which gives them an added dynamism.

Polseno is an experienced craftsman, one who pursues her ideas through a chosen medium. For a brief period she finished her figures with painted plaster, but today she has recommitted to working strictly in glazed surfaces. She is part of a resurgence of interest and experimentation in material technology which characterises contemporary craft and has sought a subtle stone-like quality for the surface. Posing a challenge to her technical expertise, she has pursued this idea with a vengeance, making hundreds of test pieces over a three-month period.

Comfortable working in stoneware and porcelain, oxidation and salt-firing, she uses whatever process is required to achieve the desired result. Like early potters impressed with clay's twin characteristics of





*Reverence*. 1997. Salt-glazed stoneware. 75 cm/h.

malleability and permanence, today's ceramists remain fascinated by this dichotomy. How can a material so plastic and soft become durable and substantive? The power of transformation continues to captivate our imagination. It is the mystery of transformation which animates Donna Polseno's sculpture. In *Reverence*, a female figure fixes her gaze on a pot held upright in her outstretched hand. Her torso accommodates the weight of the pot held aloft, tipping toward it. It appears as if the figure is a pedestal; indeed, the artist explained that the vessel was built first, then the figure made to support it. Staring intently, the figure assesses her treasure, a dark vase ringed with the evident throwing marks of its maker. While the figure elevates the pot physically, it is a likewise elevated metaphorically to the status of cultural icon, an object worthy of contemplation. Using sculptural form, Polseno explores the layered meanings of pottery, paying homage to traditional characteristics of the vessel.

As we shift from the industrial age of the 20th century to the more ephemeral, data-based information age of the 21st, we experience a corresponding shift away from the physical. In all businesses and trades – and, yes, in the creative arts as well – skill, once the hallmark of quality, has become secondary to concept. The shift is most obvious in the field of design, the interface between art and commerce. Fashion and

furnishings prominently advertise the name of the designer, while products are manufactured in third world factories by anonymous craftsmen. The maker has become inconsequential.

To continue to build a viable ceramic tradition, contemporary craftsmen might examine the possibilities for the handmade vessel of the future. Inherent in this series, Donna Polseno proposes such a new 'function'. Holding aloft a piece of traditional pottery once necessary to our physical survival, she reminds her viewers of its more intangible properties – containment, utility, materiality, tactility, intimacy, domesticity – allowing us to revere qualities once common to and sustaining of more simple times. We recognise that the ceramic vessel has a potential for meaning beyond its physicality and beyond its material worth. While it certainly will remain material, the vessel can also contain an essence of meaning which exists in spirit. Compressed inside its material self, the genie of meaning captured by the artist, is released by the viewer who willingly participates in the mysteries of making.

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Anna Fariello currently holds the position of James Renwick Fellow in American Crafts at the Smithsonian Institution. Author of numerous essays on craft and craft history, she is on the faculty of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Tech. She is the owner of InSight, a consulting service to small museums and collectors. Photo credits: Tim Barnwell.