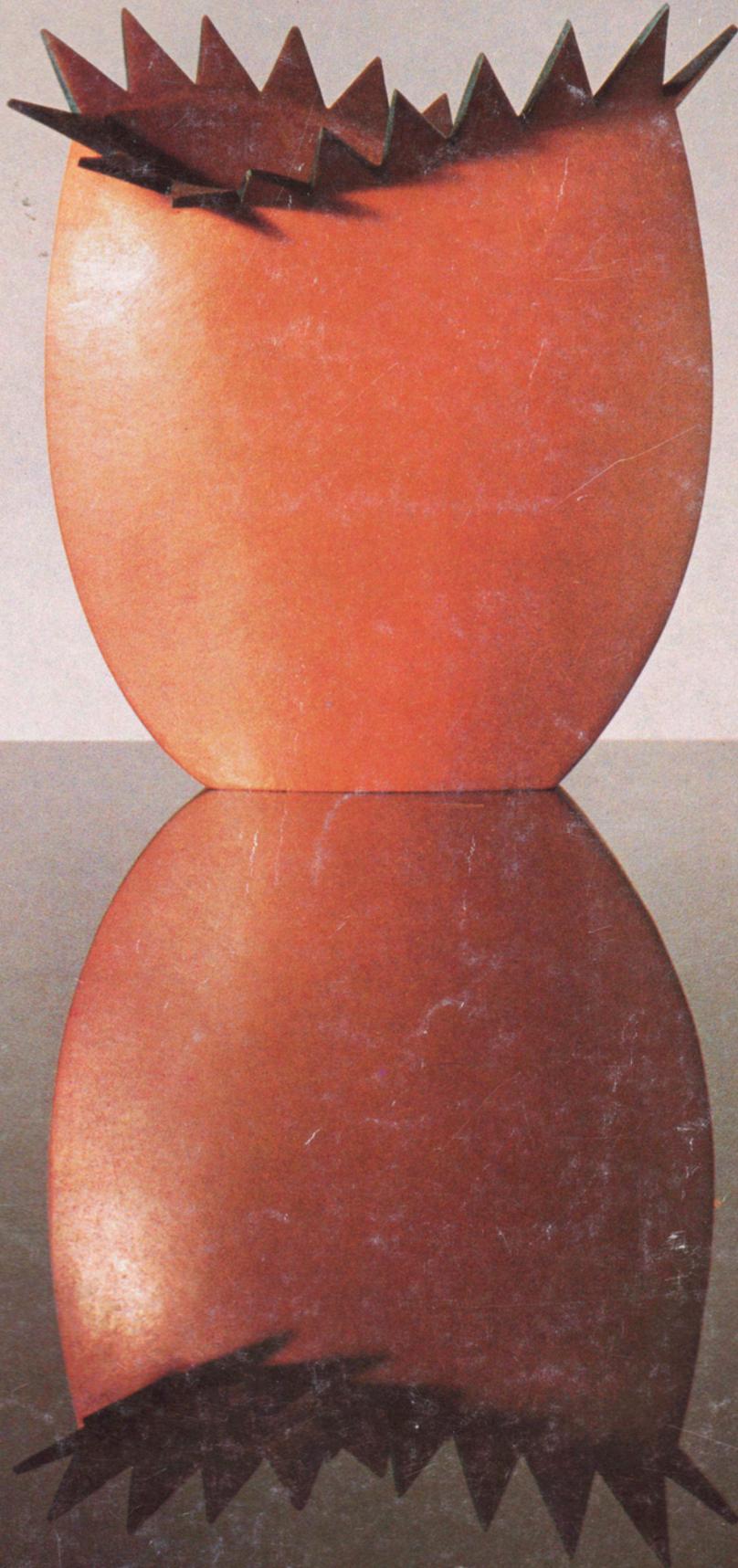


Ceramics
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AFTER finishing graduate work at Rhode Island School of Design in 1974, I moved to a rural area in the mountains of Virginia to make pottery for a living. While in the graduate program at Rhode Island School of Design, I had made sculptural wall reliefs, so there were to be some serious reconsiderations. I hadn't really thrown pots since undergraduate days at the Kansas City Art Institute. One week after moving into a four-room rented house (with two rooms used as studio space), over a table filled with slabs, I tried to decide what kind of pots to make, eventually feeling that vessels of a less functional, more decorative nature would still have a wide appeal.

The earliest attempts were severe, geometric, almost architectural shapes with underglazes airbrushed through stencils and raku fired. Raking tended to soften and add another dimension to these very tight forms, and I enjoyed the directness and excitement of the process.

Trying to resolve the paradox between my controlled and exacting work, and an attraction to other people's more fluid, claylike forms, I began changing approaches by first learning to employ a brush instead of stencils. For a long time, grassy Oriental marks were the focus of my surface designs. But after that technique was taken as far as possible, the brushwork slowly became abstract marks made with thick slip and covered with runny glazes. The forms changed from geometric shapes that always contained space through rims and handles, to oval and round vessels of a softer nature. The added rims were eliminated to let the edges move out for a new relationship to exterior space, one that was not so exact and defined. However, when I left the grassy images and contained geometric forms, a large part of my purchasing audience was also left behind.

Continuing without really coming to grips with that, I still believed these decorative vessels would have a wide appeal; my specific challenge was to approach form and surface pattern separately, then to integrate the two so that the decoration accentuated and grew naturally from the form. At first, I completely simplified things, feeling that the fewer the variables, the easier it would be. Working with molds for two or three very large, simple, austere forms, I almost totally eliminated color, just applying lay-

ers of dark slip for decoration. Although these dark, unglazed pots came from as deep inside me as any previous work, I finally had to admit that the number of people with whom I was communicating as an artist had narrowed considerably.

Wanting to say something an audience would appreciate and wanting to do something for myself (oblivious to a



Donna Polseno and her rural Floyd, Virginia, studio.

market) caused much personal conflict. It was a difficult period technically as well, since most of the pots broke (until the clay was altered enough to accommodate the increasing size of the work). Obviously, I wasn't making a living from my pots any longer and after a period of feeling alone with my work, I accepted that I wanted to continue developing these forms regardless of the consequences.

To support the raku work, I began making stoneware objects. This experience taught just how long it can take to be expressive in a new medium. It took three years before I had made any kind of personal statement with stoneware. Still not saying what the raku work says, the stoneware forms turned out to be only slightly more acceptable—not strictly functional enough to serve as a financial back up. So for now the stoneware is on hold and the raku forms are developing further. Beginning to resolve

feelings of isolation, I have finally accepted that my one-of-a-kind objects appeal to only a few people.

In recent work, color has become important again and the forms, while still simple, have taken on more lifelike qualities. The pots are made in two parts, fired with different processes for color contrast—to visually unify opposing elements. Surface decoration is built up in layers for a visual depth accentuated by the raku process itself. Random marks overlapping other patterns are a painterly way of leading the eyes around the pots.

From a white raku body—made with Cedar Heights Goldart Clay or other fireclay, a lot of grog and nylon fibers—several slabs are usually rolled out (with a slab roller) at night, then assembled as pots the next day. The clay is not very plastic, so the timing of assemblage is crucial. While the very large pots are partially press molded, the two sections of the smaller vases are made freehand and put together to dry slowly under plastic to ensure a good fit.

The two-part forms are decorated by spraying layers of commercial underglaze over liquid latex resist patterns. The latex is thinned with water for a more fluid brush mark, and is peeled away after the final underglaze layer. Top sections are fired in oxidation, while bottoms are sprayed with a copper slip as the last coat, then fired, allowed to cool to dull red (sometimes cooler) and sprayed with a copper sulfate solution as they come out of the kiln. Reduction is with newsprint formed into a nest for the pots placed inside a barrel, making sure that no paper touches the pot to avoid undesired marks. The reduction barrel is a large oil drum with a trash can inside and a layer of fiber blanket in between for insulation. It is covered with a double lid inside and third lid on top. This added insulation was one solution to the loss of so many large forms when reducing. After the firings, the two parts are glued together so that they cannot be handled or viewed separately.

Now working in a spacious studio in a converted dairy barn, I feel emotionally compelled to continue making decorative raku vessels. The challenge remains in exploring the relationship between form, color and surface treatment.



Above "Bowl on Pedestal," 18 inches in height, handbuilt, sprayed with underglaze over liquid latex resist patterns (peeled away after the final underglaze layer), raku fired.

Left Donna's studio interior—converted from a barn.

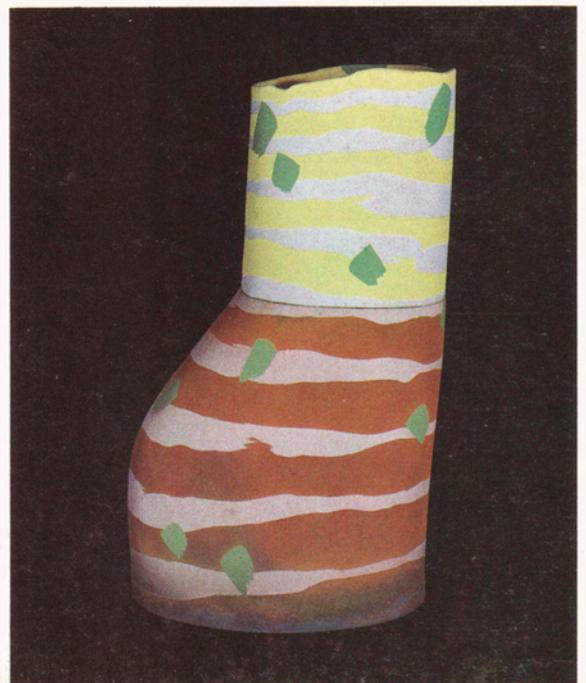




Above Forms are handbuilt in two sections and slowly dried under plastic to ensure a good fit. After spraying with underglaze over liquid latex resist, the sections are fired separately in order to vary color response. Tops are fired in oxidation, while the bottoms are sprayed with a copper slip, fired, allowed to cool slightly in the kiln, sprayed with copper sulfate as they are removed, then reduced in newspaper. Finally, the two sections are epoxied together permanently.

Right Vase, 17 inches in height, handbuilt and fired in two sections, reassembled after firing, by Donna Polseno.

Opposite page Handbuilt vase, 19 inches in height, raku fired.







The interior of Donna Polseno's home, an old farm house in the rural mountains of Virginia, reveals a collection of pots for everyday use.

Right Vase, 15 inches in height, handbuilt in two sections, the top fired in oxidation, the bottom fired, then reduced in newspaper.

