"Blue Drip Mugs," 4 inches (10 centimeters) in height, handbuilt porcelain.

Margaret Bohls' Models of Tension

by Glen R. Brown

Their thin walls straining against a fixed grid, expanding through its immobile mesh and separating into orderly fields of convex planes, the recent porcelain vessels of Margaret Bohls resemble balloons inflated within cages. The impression of conflicting elasticity and rigidity provides the tension that every visually appealing object must convey on some level through some aspect of its form. Interestingly, however, Bohls' consideration of the aesthetic dimensions of her work is always secondary to the utilitarian aspects of the objects she makes. Form always follows function—at least in theory. This sequence may unfold exclusively on a conceptual level, the idea of function being a sufficient stimulus to creativity without the necessity of the object's actual destiny in use. The recent works originated entirely in the contemplation of volume as an indispensable characteristic of functional vessels. The task that Bohls set for herself was to emphasize volume to the point that it became not merely a necessary physical trait of a container but also a means of *identifying* an object as a container. Her works, in other words, have aspired to be both literally volumetric and visually indicative of volume.

Since the days of her graduate study at Louisiana State University, where she received her M.F.A. in 1995, Bohls has concentrated her energies on utilitarian forms, as much for the purpose of abstracting from them concepts relating to use as for producing actual functional objects. Early on, she posed for herself the challenge of focusing on one utilitarian form at a time and discovering diverse possibilities for it by changing the proportions of parts, the firing methods or the glazes. In her subsequent vessels she has continued experimentation with these same central forms and their possible variations, but at a more protracted, contemplative rate. Her most recent works, which comprise what she describes informally as the "Upholstery" series, have evolved for more than a year but continue to display nuances. Their symbolic description of volume is consistent, yet they also have provided an effective starting point for exploration of the historical dimensions and even hierarchical associations that functional form can acquire. Formal constants serve as backdrops to these variables, the grounds against which differences are revealed. Recognizing this, Bohls values consistency as much as she values diversity.

Throughout Bohls' designs, the grid is an inflexible constant, a counterpart to empty space, an essential framework that dramatically arrests the expansion of volume and thereby draws special attention to it as a primary quality of a container.

The tension arising between expansion and restraint is central to both the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of Bohls' "Upholstery" series, but it is not their sole focus. Seeking to situate her works

"Multi-Flower Vase," 10½ inches (27 centimeters) in height, porcelain, handbuilt using press-molded slabs.

"Pink Rose Flower Brick," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in height, handbuilt porcelain.

within what could be described as a network of gestures, Bohls places particular emphasis on the forms that surround the body of the vessel, that respond both to its utility and to the implications of force and counterforce that are conveyed by its formal qualities. These contingent forms exist like the particles of two concentric spheres around the nucleus of the vessel, the container itself. The first and most obvious layer is composed of spouts, handles, knobs and feet. While Bohls eschews the obviously anthropomorphic gestural qualities that such appended forms can acquire, she recognizes the degree to which they are fundamental to the impression of movement and attitude in a vessel. Through these simple utilitarian extremities, she produces a sense of upward motion, a brisk vertical thrust that appears to elevate the distended body, which in contrast seems to weigh heavy as a bloated wineskin.

The second layer in Bohls' network of gestures is less obvious but ironically more literal, consisting of the motions made by the users, real or imagined, of her functional vessels. Influenced by conversations with ceramist Linda Sikora, Bohls has carefully considered the persuasion that functional objects can exercise over actions. Utility, she observes, is always oriented toward the needs of human beings and the fulfillment of the physical tasks that must be accomplished in the ordinary course of daily life. The vessel is a tool wielded by the hand and therefore is intimately connected to gestures made by the body. While a vessel must account for both the strengths and the limitations inherent in that body, it also enjoys a certain degree of freedom with regard to the motions that it prompts: the

"Blue Cruet Set with Basket," 10 inches (25 centimeters) in length, handbuilt porcelain and earthenware.

particular direction in which the hand is compelled to move, the amount of force that it must exert and the care that it must exercise in grasping. Forms that are visually heavy, for example, are likely to incite a firmer grip than those that are perceived as light and delicate, regardless of their actual weight. Factors that are ostensibly purely formal can in this way choreograph events unfolding around the utilitarian vessel. While Bohls makes a focus of this phenomenon, she does not claim it as a unique property of her work. On the contrary, she recognizes that her vessels' ability to prompt a succession of gestures situates them squarely within the long tradition of utilitarian pottery making.

In use, Bohls argues, a vessel is inherently connected to a limited range of human motions and therefore induces a repetition of gestures every time it is handled. The past insinuates itself in the present through these gestures—the nuances of touching, lifting or turning—and, consequently, the use or even simple handling of historical vessels generates the impression of a living tradition that is so familiar to potters. Of course, the precise meanings of the gestures that a particular vessel prompts, the interpretations of the performance that it initiates, are connected to specific circumstances. The original cultural and historical context of a vessel cannot be wholly revived after the fact, and therefore a large part of the experience of that object must necessarily be relative to present circumstances. Recognizing this, Bohls does not argue for the universal comprehensibility of utilitarian ceramic forms but on the contrary suggests that within every cultural and historical context something like a vernacular has circulated with respect to forms, their use and their meanings. This vernacular has provided a communal framework through which to interpret the sequence of gestures that a utilitarian vessel provokes. For Bohls, in other words, the meanings of such forms are always situated between universal movements of the body and culturally collective codes for interpreting those movements.

If this conviction suggests that a good part of the original meaning of historical vessels is irrecoverable in the present, it certainly does not imply that there is nothing to be gained through the careful study of forms from the past. On the contrary, Bohls has deliberately sought inspiration in historical ceramic types from Koryo celadons and Iznik pottery to Hall China and Russell Wright. The challenge is to render aspects of these types intelligible within the vocabulary of the present, a task that Bohls has attempted to accomplish by considering them in relation to contemporary issues. The most obvious instance of this practice is reflected in her use of pastel colors and floral decals on many of her recent vessels. Linked to the 19th-century pastime of China painting, the saccharine colors and dainty decals touch upon a kind of repressed insecurity within contemporary American ceramics. While Bohls approaches her in-

Handbuilding with Molds

The most obvious formal constant in Bohls' recent work—the bulging pattern that imparts to her vessels the appearance of overstuffed furniture, precious cargo protected in layers of neatly tied insulation, or an infant's squeezable vinyl versions of domestic objects—is created during the handbuilding process, partly through the use of plaster molds. These are not, however, as complex as one might suppose. In order to achieve the convincing quality of expansion in the final forms, Bohls presses slabs onto flat molds incised only with simple grids. Removing the slabs, she pushes out the rows of protrusions one-by-one with her fingers. The slabs can then be cut to the desired shape and joined to form the vessel body. Handles, knobs and spouts may be appended to enhance the potential for use. The resulting vessels are often designed to sit on trays or within baskets that echo the grid through the geometry of their open structures of extruded earthenware coils.

"Red Rose Covered Jar," 4 inches (10 centimeters) in length, handbuilt porcelain, by Margaret Bohls, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

vestigation of the vessel as an intellectual pursuit, she recognizes that, for many others, ceramics is only a hobby. Although at one time she would have argued that an important distinction exists between the two, she is now no longer so certain. After all, she observes, "Maria Longworth Nichols and Adelaide Alsop Robineau began as dilettantes but now are considered by many to be among the first American studio-art ceramists."

The point is an interesting one. Within the ceramics community a great deal of discussion has been directed toward the relationship between art and craft and the issue of exactly where ceramics is situated as a field. An underdeveloped facet of the ongoing debate, however, has been the problem of the division within ceramics itself between professionals and the large population of purely avocational ceramists. Bohls is one of those who is not entirely comfortable with the idea of a hierarchy between these groups. If her Upholstery vessels seem far removed from the awkward ashtrays and coffee mugs thrown by the unsteady hands of aspiring potters in makeshift studios, she does not dismiss those efforts as entirely unconnected to her own concerns. She is not interested, after all, in working exclusively on a rarefied level but rather in engaging the vocabulary of form that by definition must be as accessible to the hobbyist as to the academically trained professional—or, for that matter, to anyone else in contemporary society who has ever had occasion to use, and not necessarily make, ceramic vessels. One could even argue that the tentative efforts of amateurs are more likely to reflect a *general* cultural understanding of certain ceramic forms (if not a physical mastery of them) than are the works of those academic ceramists whose efforts are directed toward more specialized aesthetic and theoretical concerns.

Although the primary tension in Bohls' Upholstery works derives from formal relationships between their static grids and their ostensibly expanding surfaces, the secondary, conceptual tension is perhaps even more significant. The confrontation between a vernacular understanding of form and a more theoretical, explorative impulse is not uncommon in contemporary ceramics. Bohls is one of a great many American ceramists who acknowledge that conflicted feelings are bound to arise in anyone whose work evolves in the uncertain space between tradition and innovation. Today, investigation of this space has acquired new reasons for spawning anxiety, not the least of which is the tendency among many to equate tradition with craft and innovation with art. Inevitably, this line of thought broaches uncomfortable questions of hierarchy. While Bohls hesitates to adopt facile formulas, she is keenly aware of their circulation both within a contemporary ceramics vernacular and in circles professing an allegiance to ceramic art. Her works therefore remain ambivalent, refusing to cast their lot exclusively with either camp while acknowledging the existence of both. Formally and conceptually, her works are models of perpetual tension. In this respect they could even be called symptomatic, indicative of the conflicted condition of American ceramics today.

the author *a frequent contributor to* Ceramics Monthly, *Glen R. Brown is an associate professor of art history at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.*