

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Ron Meyers

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation with Tom Spleth in May, 2007 on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

He has an affinity for the material and process and a search to make it better.

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to

your work and if so how?

He is interested in historical ways of working such as English Slipware.¹

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Part of his underlying commitment is to function. But, he was recently in Peru and saw many Inca pots, from Inca times and earlier. These cultures did not have writing so their way of recording was through the ceramics. Every aspect of their lives appears on the pots. They put it all there, plants, animals, birds, fishes, people. It is marvelous work. What he saw is that they were storytellers and that is what he is trying to do.



Ron Meyers- Collection

Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

¹ English Slipware refers to the ceramic production in England during the 16th and 17th centuries which covered coarse pots in a white slip (clay and water mixture) allowing for greater glaze adhesion, as well as a variety of decorative techniques like sgraffito (scratching into the clay) and slip-trailing (creating linear decoration with slip squeezed from a bottle).

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

It is like working in the steel plants (he is from Buffalo, New York). Punch in the morning; punch out at night. He works seven days a week if he can (and frankly doesn't know what else he would do with his life). He works in isolation with no one in the studio when he is actually making things, though he has a young man come in some and carry things around and prepare the clay.

What does "mastery" mean to you?

Mastery is a mystery. He believes that one masters a technique and then moves on to something that is not mastered. In order to keep an edge to the work, it is important to move on. He is experimenting with soda firing and also wood firing.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

Ron moved to the South in 1967 to teach at the University of South Carolina. He went to the Rochester Institute of Technology for graduate school in 1965 and worked with Franz Wildenhain. He remained in South Carolina for five years and then moved on to the University of Georgia in 1972 (he retired in 1992).

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

He was in an academic setting for most of the time he has been in the South and for the last 15 years, he has been on his own. He has no particular ties to the South but sees himself in relationship to a national scene. Critics have related his work to Southern story tellers and the face-jug folk potters, but he, personally, doesn't make that connection at all. He is more interested in keeping up with art in New York. If any one influences him, it would be Don Reitz and Pete Voulkos.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

No. It's all a national perspective.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Not particularly. He is happy to find a new brush or a new way to make a mark. This is innovation, perhaps, for him, but not in his mind.

How is your work evolving?

Slowly, in very small steps, with new firing methods to keep it going.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

The local community of artists share wood firings back and forth, but other than that there is little connection regionally. He does some demonstrations. His role is to present a more casual idea.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

He is very optimistic. Many people are springing up wanting to get the “hands on” experience. In Joe Bova’s recent book 500 Animals in Clay: Contemporary Expressions of the Animal Form, he knew only about 10 people, so there is a lot going on. He has been in it for 40 years and more people are interested now than ever. In the past, Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont Folk School, and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts were about it, but now, there are places where people can work all over, with new people coming through and a lot of diversity. The scene is not macho like it was in the 60’s and 70’s (and this is a good thing) but he feels that there are a lot of bad pots being made.

How did you learn your craft?

The easy answer is that he is still learning, which is the truth. He returned to school in order to do something with his life. In undergraduate school he was doing a little painting and metal work but hit a clay class and knew that he found it. He went to Rochester for more instruction and the degree, and he has never stopped. He is always looking and watching. It never ends. When he got out of graduate school he knew what clay was all about, but after about five years, he realized that there is another side to this, and it became a life long commitment to learning.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others—the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

Outside of spending his life in academia, he now does occasional workshops. The inconvenience of travel and getting trapped in airports in bad weather lately is causing him to begin to do less. For the moment, he is content with work in his own studio.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? What role do you think places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, etc have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South?

When he went to the University of South Carolina in 1967 there were only two ceramics programs in universities in the country, one at Louisiana State University and one at the University of Georgia. He established the program at South Carolina and during that time and later, many programs were set up that were important to the development of ceramics. Alternative schools like Penland and similar places have also been very important to the field.