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Peter Voulkos
Vase
ca. 1952
collection of Jamie B. Boran
photo by Gene Sasse



Peter Voulkos
Rocking Pot
1956
Smithsonian American Art
Museum, Washington, D.C.
photo by Bruce Miller

Ceramics in L.A. FEATS OF CLAY

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

These are the last weeks of exhibitions sponsored by the Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative. "Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, 1956-1968," on view at Scripps College in Claremont, Ca., through April 8, 2012, is something of a model for what PST has accomplished, putting into relief the important contributions made by California-based ceramicists during the '50s and '60s. The show is organized by curator Kirk Delman and art dealer Frank Lloyd with museum director Mary McNaughton.

One of the most influential artists of Los Angeles in the late 1950s was **Peter Voulkos** (1924-2002), a dynamic personality who was determined to use the humble material of clay to build monumental abstract sculptures. Hired in 1954 as the first head of a new ceramics department at the L.A. County Art Institute, now Otis College of Art and Design, Voulkos inspired any number of his young students, many of whom would go on to successful careers of their own, notably **Billy Al Bengston**, **Ken Price**, **John Mason** and **Paul Soldner**.

Before starting his new job in L.A., Voulkos spent three weeks in 1953 at Black Mountain College, where he was exposed to the ideas of **John Cage**, **Merce Cunningham**, **Robert Rauschenberg** and David Tudor. Tudor then drove him up to New York, let him stay in his apartment, brought him to the Cedar Street Tavern and introduced him to **Franz Kline** and **Jack Tworkov**.



Peter Voulkos
Black Bulerias
 1958
 collection of John and Mary Pappajohn



Peter Voulkos
Tientos
 1959
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Those experiences cumulatively comprise the Montana native's introduction to serious, established artists -- and by the time Voulkos came to L.A. to teach ceramics in '54, he was in the process of reinventing his work and himself. His students watched in awe as he moved away from carefully crafted utilitarian objects and on to giant clay sculptures rendered with all the freedom and power that the Abstract Expressionists used in their paintings.

Inspired by their teacher Voulkos, John Mason (b. 1927) and Ken Price (1935-2012) also left behind the restrictions of craft and used clay to build abstract sculptures in the 1960s. The show's title, "Clay's Tectonic Shift," refers to the substantial realignment that took place when these bold characters initiated their modest revolution, which was literally a tempest about a teapot.

Though Mason and Price both showed at the dynamic Ferus Gallery, and Voulkos showed first with Felix Landau and then with the David Stuart Galleries, all located on La Cienega Boulevard during that time, the works in this exhibition have never before been seen together. By presenting them together, the show allows us to see influences and ideas zing back and forth, while each artist manages to develop his own practice with absolute originality.

By 1956, Voulkos was rocking the boat with his work *Rocking Pot*, which has holes in the sides and curved rockers on its base -- as though he is poking fun at notions of containment and balance. In 1957, Voulkos and Mason constructed an enormous industrial kiln next to the studio that they rented in Glendale. It was large enough to fire ceramic sculptures that stood nearly as tall as the artists themselves. This enabled both of them to eschew the dainty restrictions of craft and to operate instead on a scale commensurate with that of modern sculpture.

Voulkos was, like many of his generation, in awe of **Pablo Picasso**, and echoes of the Spanish artists influence are visible in the spiky shapes of his earliest sculptures. But by 1958, Voulkos' work adopted some of the pure force of Franz Kline, as he piled conical or cylindrical clay forms atop one



Peter Voulkos
Untitled
 1956
 private collection, Orinda, CA

another. *Black Bulerias* (1958) won him the Rodin Museum Prize at the Paris Biennial of 1959.

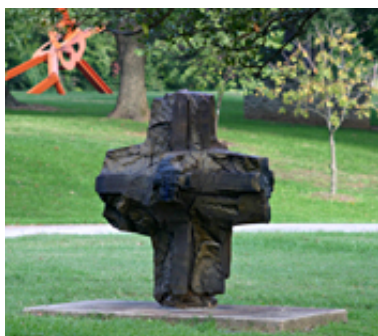
During this time, Voulkos also pursued abstract painting, freely applying paint to his clay sculptures in order to define edges and volumes -- techniques that clearly violated the parameters of both ceramics and sculpture. Such brash invention eventually led to a confrontation with **Millard Sheets** (1907-1989), the director of the institute and a man who supported a purist approach to craft. He had originally hired Voulkos, and forced him to resign in 1959. Voulkos moved to the Bay Area, where he was given a job by U.C. Berkeley curator Peter Selz, who decided to show his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1960.



John Mason
Untitled Vertical Sculpture
 1960
 collection of Frank Lloyd
 photo by Anthony Cuñha

Around the same time, Mason was hired to teach sculpture at Pomona College, not far from Scripps. After Voulkos moved north, Mason took over his entire studio; Mason threw clay on the floor the way Jackson Pollock poured paint, and made snaky patterns that he glazed and mounted on the wall. Piling clay around an armature, his vertical sculptures included a series of large ceramic crosses from the mid-1960s which are more than 5 x 5 feet, sometimes totemic, sometimes more Minimalist. The show includes his masterpiece of simplicity and fluid color from 1966, titled *Red X*.

Ken Price, on the other hand, rejected the "bigger is better" philosophy of his peers and left L.A. to do his graduate work at the New York State College of Ceramics in Alfred in 1959. Ostensibly, he wanted to develop low-fire glazes -- but he also wanted to move away from the overpowering influence of Voulkos and his circle.



John Mason
Cross Form
 1962-63

Price's ceramic sculptures, none of them larger than a basketball, were conceived as series called "Mounds, Eggs, Lumps and Bumps." Price spray-painted them in colors like lime green or hot pink, in keeping with the technique and the esthetic of his friends at Ferus, **Craig Kauffman** and Billy Al Bengston. As with *L. Red* (1963), his ovoid forms are often ruptured to reveal plump shiny tendrils. A few are housed in their own wooden boxes, such as *Specimen* (1963), which demonstrates the influence of **Joseph Cornell**, a favorite of his curator friend Walter Hopps. Small but fierce, Price's sculptures

Art Institute of Chicago



John Mason

Red X
1966

Los Angeles County Museum



John Mason

Sculpture
1956-1957
collection of Derrick Johnson and
Andrea Chen
photo by Gene Sasse

were lumped into the Pop ethos of the '60s, and they retain a quirky insouciance while packing a serious punch, knocking down all sorts of shibboleths about sculpture, ceramics and painting.

A few miles west of Scripps is the American Museum of Ceramic Art, a rather grandly named former bank building in downtown Pomona, featuring a 77-foot-long mural by Millard Sheets that is now part of the main gallery. "Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California 1945-1975," on view through Mar. 31, 2012, was organized by Museum director and curator Christy Johnson, and it serves as an introduction to the Scripps show by chronicling Sheets' role as an educator and promoter of ceramic programs in Southern California. It includes 300 works by 53 artists, all of whom have some connection to Sheets, and it was funded by the Getty as part of Pacific Standard Time.

"Common Ground" also illuminates the powerful relationships between other teachers and their students throughout Southern California. Among those mentors is **Glen Lukens**, who taught at USC and molded sturdy bowls and plates with deeply colored glazes in the late '30s. He is rumored (thankfully) to have advised **Frank Gehry** to abandon ceramics for architecture, although he encouraged the practice of **Beatrice Wood**, whose lustrous, gold-glazed bottles are included in the show, as well as **Harrison MacIntosh**.

But primarily it focuses on Millard Sheets, who became head of the Scripps College art department in 1936, just five years after graduating from Chouinard Art Institute. He asked his former classmate William Manker to establish a ceramics department there -- and it was Manker who initiated the studio pottery movement in Southern California.

Later, in 1954, Sheets was hired as director of the L.A. County Art Institute, and that is when he hired Voulkos to establish the program for a MFA in ceramics. The show includes early work made by Voulkos before he began pushing the boundaries of the medium, from refined vases in dark brown and gray glazes to a chocolate pot -- though one of his asymmetrical vases hints at the bold direction he would later pursue.

**Ken Price**

S. L. Green
1963

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
photo by Jerry L. Thompson

**Ken Price**

L. Red
1963

San Francisco Museum of Art

**Ken Price**

Specimen

Sheets, best known today for his mosaic murals on the facades of California buildings, was considered a pioneering figure in the history of modern design. The exhibitions that he organized at the County Fair gallery were consistently popular and significant events, especially since there were so few venues for modern art in L.A. before the County Museum of Art was built in 1965. His prominent role in the lives of his students, encouraging them by purchasing their work for his various building projects and offering them important contacts at the commercial ceramics company Interpace, for example, is highlighted by this revelatory exhibition.

"Common Ground" ultimately serves as a prequel to much of what is commonly known about the history of ceramics, and presents Sheets as an advocate for the relationship between ceramics and design, even though younger artists might have seen him as an old-fashioned relic of a time gone by. It also includes Sheets' own ceramic teapots and tiles, which are streamlined but not daring, clarifying his important role in the development of ceramics in Southern California.

"Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, 1956-1968," Jan. 21-Apr. 8, 2012, Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, 1030 Columbia Avenue, Claremont, Ca. 91711.

"Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California 1945-1975," Nov. 12, 2011-Mar. 31, 2012, American Museum of Ceramic Art, 399 North Garey Ave., Pomona, Ca. 91766.

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1963
James Corcoran Gallery
photo courtesy Matthew Marks
Gallery



Glen Lukens
Bowl
1939
collection of Forrest Merrill
photo by Gene Sasse



Millard Sheets
Teapot Prototype
1960s
collection of Tony and Flower
Sheets
photo by Gene Sasse



Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman
Decanter Grouping
1952-1956
collection of Jerome and Evelyn
Ackerman
photo by Gene Sasse



Dora De Larios
Sierra Madre
1960
Frank and Marian Sata Collection
photo by Gene Sasse



Gertrud and Otto Natzler
*Ovoid Monumental Bottle with
Cupped Top* 1960
Catherine Glynn Benkaim and
Barbara Timmer Collection
photo by Gene Sasse