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See Geometry in All Things

The Ceramic Vessels of Marvin Sweet

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THE DICTUM OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, 'SEE THE Geometry in All Things,' has served as a useful guide for Marvin Sweet. His exhibit at the MC Gallery during the 1995 NCECA conference in Minneapolis, provided the occasion to view his current effort and to reflect on the journey he has made in his work. In this postmodern world of fragmentation and media blitzes that bombard the senses, Sweet's clay vessels reveal a personal expression that builds on a diversity of art historical references, while juxtaposing both occidental and oriental aesthetic ideals in a unified and integrated fashion.

Beginning as a production potter, Sweet moved in other directions upon completing his Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics, in 1984, from Boston University's

Program in Artisanry. He constructed 12 m. (40 ft.) long by 2.4 m (8 ft.) high ceramic walls with small, carefully placed openings that evoked elements of ritual and mystery. The basic design elements of his visual vocabulary were the geometric motifs of a triangular wedge piercing a circle. With roots as a potter and the training of a sculptor, he returned to the vessel using this motif as a basic form, for a series of teapots, baskets, and jars whose glazed surfaces began to reflect his interest in ancient Chinese bronzes.

In 1986, Sweet travelled to Kanazawa, Japan, to study the tea ceremony and raku firing with the Ohi family. The Ohi family has been making tea utensils for 11 generations and are directly linked to the Raku family and the Urasenke Tea Society of Kyoto. While



Ancient Carrier #1. 1995. Clay, low fired glazes. 50 x 45 x 30 cm.



La Dame d'Henri. 1993. Raku. 76.5 x 40 x 19 cm.

there, he continually explored the Zen temples, gardens and tea houses. The allure of the Japanese affinity with natural forms and the use of chance that is an inherent part of the raku firing process, began to take hold. Upon returning from Japan, Sweet began to make raku fired, figurative vessel forms, which he placed on pedestals made of wood, giving reference to ritual and spiritual nourishment.

As he continued the investigation of intertwining vessel and figurative forms, his work became a metaphor, suggesting containment and fulfillment of human and spiritual aspirations. The work subtly integrated references from diverse sources such as the Greek *Kouros* and *Kore* figures, African sculpture, Sumerian fertility goddesses, Cycladic art and Minimalism. A number of these pieces emphasised tonal blacks, whites and greys, much like a Japanese landscape painting, standing direct and strong in the presence of the viewer.

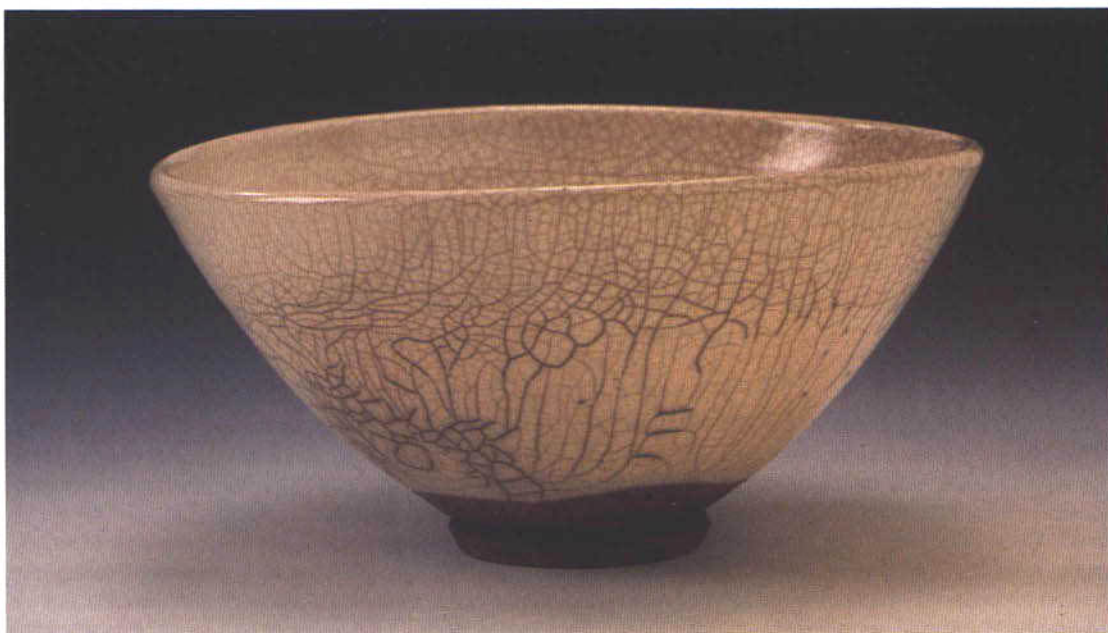
In the late '80s, his hollow line forms became more gestural and animated. An overall sense of ritualistic dance was conveyed through the work. These calligraphic, organic shapes were enhanced by his

painterly/naturalistic use of glaze. But always there is a sense of tranquillity and harmony in the work. These hollow line forms expand the traditional definition of vessel and figurative sculpture, as the viewer is invited to explore ambiguities suggested by the work.

In 1993, the same year he was named Professor of the Year at Bradford College, Sweet moved from his urban Boston environment to a rural Massachusetts setting. The trees and animals of the forest filled his everyday world instead of the buildings and people of the city. As his work has moved from an emphasis on line to an emphasis on mass, from the vertical to the horizontal, so has the reference from human figure moved to references of animal forms. During a 1992 visit to China, Sweet was captivated by neolithic Chinese pottery. He saw in the pitcher forms of these ancient artists a further understanding in the use of basic geometric components, and of animation and gesture. His current work pays homage to such as they refer to porcine and equine worlds, two of the 12 animals represented in the Chinese zodiac. The works still exude a dignity and presence, and are more solid and forceful. A number of them



Tea Bowl. 1994. Clay, raku fired. 11.5 cm/diam.



Tea Bowl. 1994. Clay, raku fired. 7.5 x 16.5 x 15 cm.

are brightly coloured in their glazes, reminding one of playful folk art pieces. There is also continual reference to Sweet's basic geometric vocabulary which has gently evolved, involving both construction and destruction, in much of his work.

Marvin Sweet's vessels allow us to contemplate both history and the present, the roots of ourselves and a current sense of beauty. The repetition of basic geometric shapes in a variety of guises and in connection with diverse artists and cultures from the past and present, makes the viewer feel connected, more easily at one with some part of our fragmented, post-modern world. The traditional themes Sweet rethinks

and re-presents bear new fruit when harvested in our contemporary society. His vessels become a means of communion with oneself and one's world. They may permit one to translate and transform matter and materials into a more spiritual realm. One can indeed begin to see the connected geometry in all things.

Dr. Hoffman is Chairperson and Associate Professor of the Fine Arts Department at Saint Anselm College, Manchester, New Hampshire. She is the author of *An Enduring Spirit: The Art of Georgia O'Keefe, Collage: Critical Views, and Explorations: The Visual Arts Since 1945*. Her most recent book, *Concepts of Identity: Portraits of the Family, Then and Now*, is forthcoming from Harper Collins. *Caption title page: Green Horn Spirit. 1995. 22.5 x 37.5 x 14 cm.*