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LA OUTDOOR TEMPORARY ART

CLAREMONT, CA

"Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, and Peter Voukos, 1956–1968" at Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery of Scripps College

The dominant issue of an art genre like ceramics—that spans both an historical (read mostly as craft) and contemporary (read just as art) continuum—is how the discussion of artistic endeavors and results is often couched in technical terms. In other words, there is far too much shoptalk and not enough talk about the art. What is brilliant about "Clay's Tectonic Shift," an insightful survey of art works made between 1956 and 1968 by Peter Voukos, Ken Price, and John Mason, is how it makes a viewer acutely aware of what this genre can accomplish outside of the pottery shed. And it does so without doing away with technique, by subordinating it to a vision. How these three guys ended up in LA and managed to transform the ceramics genre with their work, dragging several generations of students and peers along in their slipstream, is the principal axis of this revolution in clay. By leading the way

out of the shed and into the surrounding world, they did a lot to remove the utilitarian focus of ceramics as vessels and, with a mixture of physical machismo and poetic verve, made some remarkable art. Part of the PST re-discovery tour, "Tectonic" features critical works by each that mark the evolution of their individual sculptural styles during that time frame.

Arranged concentrically in the gallery, the larger works by Voukos and Mason hulk around the outside walls, almost closing in on the smaller set of works by Price. Although it seems like a friendly enough get together, a mix of rivalry, competition and camaraderie is unmistakable. Reunited in exhibition, this trio breathes life back into that moment of art in LA. The extremely handsome and well-written catalog documents in detail how this ad hoc community evolved personally and professionally behind the scenes and beyond the exhibition.

Peter Voukos, an apocryphal figure in California art world lore, is represented by

works such as *Snake River* (1959) and *Sitting Bull* (1959). In these pieces, his muscular handwork is directly registered in the way the clay is manipulated and then fired without being smoothed. He also occasionally draws into the clay leaving spidery drawings on the finished works. Expressionist in their making and yearning for a broad if open-ended symbolic significance, they push towards the personally monumental. Other works of his like *Sculpture (Hobgoblin)* (1956) provide an articulate revamping, almost a gloss, of the vessel form, as it heads into being a totemic device.

John Mason, an equally important but generally less well-known artist, is revealed as a bold and incredibly freeform handler of clay on a relatively gigantic scale. Works like *Untitled Vertical Sculpture* (1960) veer off their center and torque rowdily as they break with the laws of gravity. They recall the disobedience with the traditions of ceramic culture of an artist like Leoncillo and likewise overtly distance themselves from anything vaguely reminiscent of the pottery wheel. Massive chunks of solidified earth such as *Red X* (1966) and *Geometric Form, Dark* (1966) vie handily with any sculpted forms in bronze or steel, belying their dense minimal shapes only slightly with their distinctive fired clay surfaces. Minimal but not minimalist, his earthy bluntness is particularly effective in the permanently installed outside wall work at the nearby Pomona campus.

Ken Price, who is probably the best known to the LA art world, and who died this February at age 77, crafts a universe of riotously colored forms. In it, the feeling of something subtly sensual, and then almost creepy, exchange emphasis. Recalling pods, eggs, mounds and spheres and often playing upon a compositional device in which an element inside protrudes through to the outside, he draws upon nature and dreams for his source material. Generally diminutive in scale, these works nonetheless open a large imaginative realm for the viewer to project upon. Sometimes housed in precious glass and wood cases, other times set directly on a pedestal, the works build in synergy as their quasi-surreal poetic evolves.

The question of how this revolution in ceramics has evolved over the many years since it erupted with them onto the art market—and into thinking of artists and critics—is, well, cyclical, like the term revolution proposes. The market has certainly accepted artworks that do not primarily have a functional use, even if ceramic, and often goes as far as according

them a specialty status. Critics and artists look at ceramic artworks for form and meaning, without necessarily asking at what cone it was fired. The fight between ceramic purists, who argue for the truth of glaze over the artificiality of paint, and others, who are simply looking for good art, has not gone away, but fortunately, neither can claim victory. Clay's tectonic shift has resettled, the then volatile slabs and plates have re-adjusted and equilibrium has been established. The magnificent residues of that moment of tumultuous shifting are now on view and whether you militate from inside or outside the traditional fold, they are a wonder to behold.

—JOHN DAVID O'BRIEN



"Red X," 1966, John Mason
 STONEWARE, 58½" x 59½" x 17"
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