

New Works by TIM ROWAN

Randall Morris

I began this piece on Tim Rowan's work many times and each time I tossed it out, feeling that I wanted to write it at a more auspicious time, when the most justice could be done for this important American artist's work. It was vital for relevance to feel a shift in the way people perceive an art that used to be relegated to craft. Not only that, it was also necessary to rethink the common perceptions of process: how that itself is slowly, yes, too slowly, changing the art world in relation to ceramics, wood, glass and fibre and their positioning in Contemporary Art. I realized that I would have to rethink even the language in which we perceive this work, and invite concepts not usually associated with Western critical language.

Much of the historical craft cosmos is based upon materials; thought is relegated to an artist's formal contest and victory over clay or woven materials or wood. This ranges from a deep respect for original materials to a post-modern disregard for them, still craft was and is essentially about materials.

This focus is becoming less and less the case; intention includes materials, but also so much more. This is not a priority in classic Western Art. But when we start looking outside the canon, outside Western dictates, we realize that there are artistic and aesthetic concepts never articulated in the West. This renders much art as intellectual exercise, or as a narrative 'about' the world rather than a part of the world. It describes Nature from a distance rather than becoming one with it or creating it. We have no equivalent for yugen or shibui, for example; both of which are aesthetic references to impermanence, mystery and beauty.

The Process Art Movement touched upon this relationship with Nature. It was one of the few Western concepts that actually rhymed with non-Western art practices, but it focused on ephemera; it concerned art created for the sake of its own creative moment which then disappeared into its own life cycle. It didn't take into consideration that there could be work made with the same attention to intrinsic nature – art that might physically remain as a signifier of its own process, not symbolic of anything but an actual part of the nature it contained. The easiest example to demonstrate this would be a tea ceremony bowl (chawan), which not only sits in physical space but contains within its negative space a spiritual arena, an invisible but very present activation of place.



#11A90, ceramic, 18 x 19 x 9 cm, 2011

Tim Rowan's personal quietude belies the depth and activity of his process. He allows his work to be his voice, but sometimes this falls victim to the misplaced perceptions of the viewer. The work depends on the viewer to not only intellectually grasp it but to intuit it as well. This work not only occupies gallery space, but also has a placement in the context of his studio and land. When you see his work in its birthplace you realize you are standing in the presence of one of the world's great Poets of Place.

This is not an easy status to achieve. If you are a contemporary sculptor who works with ceramics you have many drummers to pay. From the folk forms native to home ground to the iconoclasts of abstraction and deliberate post-modernism, the giants are formidable for one seeking to carve out his own niche. To play saxophone you must travel past John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and John Zorn; to play trumpet you must move past Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. In Japan Rowan interned with Ryuichi Kakurezaki, a bold ceramic sculptor who utilizes cutting and carving, predominantly in the unglazed style of Bizen. Kakurezaki's style is immediately recognizable like the whispered dark tones of a Miles Davis solo. There is a challenge to move away from his huge sphere of influence, as Kakurezaki once moved away from the Sodeisha movement in Japan, which set the scene for Japan's non-functional ceramic sculpture.

In the United States a similar force exists with the abstract expressionist/minimalist sculptor Peter Voulkos, and with John Mason and Ken Price, among others. These are the men who set the critical guideposts for ceramics in the art world. For a ceramist working with predominantly unglazed surfaces, the essential quality of the surface and the shape becomes paramount. Rowan's work looks nothing like Voulkos or Kakurezaki's, although the treatment of the clay may sometimes naturally overlap. Both Rowan and Kakurezaki share a muscular visceral involvement in the density and thickness of the clay body. For all his angular freedom Kakurezaki's art comes with his dance with Japanese form. We



above #12210, ceramic,
11 x 16 x 9 cm, 2012

below #134, woodfired native clay,
7 x 29 x 6 cm, 2013





above #1214, ceramic, 10 x 10 x 10 cm, 2012

below #11A86, ceramic, 13 x 22 x 9 cm, 2011

opposite #12206, ceramic, 7 x 12 x 5 cm, 2011

revel in the way he corrupts, changes, and plays with traditional vessels and tableware to create visual music around them. Kakurezaki's pieces are prescient; they know well the history they have been pulled from and how they constantly bring those ancient forms into the present and future. What is a given and perhaps of the utmost essence is that, no matter what he does, each piece steps into an arena that is timeless. They exist both in retrospect and in the projected future.

Tim Rowan's work does not refer to the history of traditional Western ceramics. Of course aspects of all ceramic sculpture processes are universal, but his work does not travel to us directly out of an evolution of Western ceramic form and surface techniques. By this token they barely travel out of Japanese form either, though there are parts of the process that refer to it obliquely—firing technique and flame markings, for example. But his cups are not chawan, and his sculpture does not quote Bizen form. His urns are not mizusashi. If there are any references at all to his teacher's work, they come from Rowan's responding to that work, despite the legacy that birthed it. When you look at Tim Rowan's pieces, the implications of his freeform place in history come home to roost. You can compare his colours, perhaps; his textures, perhaps; his melted ash perhaps; but his forms are his alone. They are not utilitarian objects trying to break free from tradition. They are, however, utilitarian to the eye and the soul, used in aesthetic contemplation, and the cerebral and ephemeral pleasures therein.

I am not sure I would label Rowan as anything but a Contemporary Artist. His expansion to found — and shaped — stone forms extend his ceramic vocabulary. He is a Minimalist, but that is more a description of his affectation than of any philosophical viewpoint. The tension in his pieces is not minimal. His work covers power with a veneer of control and calm—a dangerous, directed power. It seethes. The spikes on



his cups or in his bowls, the cracking and splitting of his geode-like forms, whether ceramic or metal, reveal mineral turmoil. They convey a universe that can be both ominous and aggressive even at its most quiet moments. He creates a geological ethnography, objects that have resonance beyond the membrane of ordinary spiritual recognition.

It is too facile to bind Tim Rowan's work to the earth alone. It has become a cliché in writing about ceramics to give reference to the al-chemic interaction of earth, fire, air, and water. This is a given. But the magical code does hold when it claims moral neutrality. The skill and tenacity and intention of the alchemist are determining factors in the empowerment of the process.

In previous writings about his work there are always references to an element of death in his boxes and the return to earth. I think this is too easy on the part of writers. Perhaps several of the tall boxes refer to ossuaries, but I find the emptiness within to have more significance in their references to the earth of place. These pieces have a gothic atmosphere, as does much of the architecture and vernacular of this part of New York that Tim calls home. To mix it up even further, one could say it is far more apt to see this as Goth-meets-Buddhist; they acknowledge the underbelly of death's presence, but they are by no means inviting death in. They are architectural, castle-like in the mist. They are an attempt to express courage through the mark of the hand. They do not hide what is mortal: they shout it out. Yet ultimately, they lead back to Nature and her morally neutral fecundity.

Tim Rowan's work is made in Nature. It rarely leaves those confines, yet it willingly acknowledges what is manmade. Rust, iron stains on concrete, granite and marble walls are only a few of the poetic evocations. Landscape Art is about the land. This is landscape art that is land.

Randall Morris is an independent scholar, curator and co-owner of Cavin-Morris Gallery in NY. He has been lecturing and organizing exhibitions on non-mainstream art since 1979. His current project is a book called Indigenous Drawing; The animistic impulse in Non-mainstream art.



Tim Rowan was born in 1967 in New York City and grew up in Connecticut along the shore of Long Island Sound. His art education began during college, receiving a BFA from The State University of New York at New Paltz before journeying to Japan for 2 years to apprentice with ceramic artist Ryuichi Kakurezaki. Upon his return he worked briefly in studios in Massachusetts and New York before receiving his MFA from The Pennsylvania State University. He established his kiln and studio deep in the woods of the Hudson Valley in 2000, where he lives with his wife and son. His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions internationally, most recently having solo shows at Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York and Yufuku Gallery in Tokyo, Japan. In 2013 Tim Rowan was the first prize winner of the international "Janet Mansfield Award".

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