



I now live in an isolated farm house/studio in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a long way from the New York City art world that nurtured my early years of work in clay. Though I lived for 25 years in a rural area it was only an hour's drive into New York City every week to visit galleries and museums, and to attend experimental music and dance performances.

Born and educated in New York City my childhood interest in art was encouraged in art classes and I enjoyed the city's cultural life. It was only after graduating from college, where I had majored in art that I found clay, my expressive medium.



Wheel thrown cocoa set 1956

From the beginning in the mid 50's, I made pots for people to use daily. I loved the wheel as an instrument of variety and subtlety, and though my pots were always made in families, there was never an effort made to reproduce pieces in volume. Both relaxed rhythm and attentive consciousness to developing form kept my production work interesting to me, and I always took long periods in which to play with new form. I made groups of joined serving pieces, or a series of large planters or vases. There were also weeks of hand building large pieces. Slab bird feeders hung in the trees near bird baths, and hand built garden seats stood near the studio. I made a number of fireplaces in the flameproof clay that was used for casseroles, and wash basins set into counters or on pedestals.

Because I lived near an urban center, in time people came to my showroom and many accepted new work as it developed. It is important to me to preserve time in which to work experimentally, freed from the necessity of the immediate market place.

I sold my work through a few shops, and in the days before

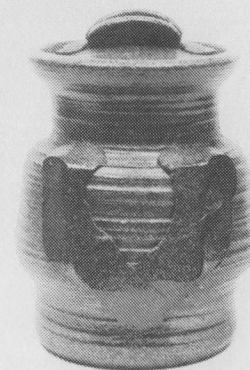
the craft fair, shop owners came to the studio where they could select and buy a body of work. Since they were then able to see examples of newer things, my working patterns were sympathetic to them. A show invitation could be the inspiration for a theme - I once made an exhibition of large hanging bird feeders. Some pots were only sold through my showroom - dinnerware, coffee and tea sets, cups, since I was not prepared to sell them wholesale. I enjoyed being the local potter and was able to fill special requests from my customers/ friends.

I have felt fortunate to have begun work in clay in a less competitive time when there were fewer potters and shops, and the smaller scale made for personal relationships. We were a family and it was easier to be recognized. Many of us expected to lead lives with modest economic rewards, which would be fulfilled by the pleasure of creative work. This is still a practical and realistic ideal for me.

After 25 years in Stony Point I moved to northern Vermont in 1979, seeking a life of quiet and concentration. Here wood is available as fuel for my large kiln, which is built in an adjoining shed. A 140 year old farmhouse has been transformed into a beautiful light filled studio.

Influenced by my new open environment and the large kiln, my work grew in scale. I was invited to join the Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery in New York City, where my large jars, bowls and vases were exhibited for the next years until the gallery closed in 1986. I now show my work with the Garth Clark Gallery.

The evolution of my work has flowed organically. During the early years my concerns were immediate use - were the contents of this container to be removed by hand or with a spoon? A casserole is most connected to use - it sits firmly with



Salt glazed stoneware 1967



handles that feel secure, is easily cleaned, and expresses generosity as it is welcomed to the table. I still make a limited number of casseroles and they are similar to those made 25 years ago. I feel no need to change them.

As I started to make pots for my salt kiln in 1968, a kiln in which the flames deposited exciting surface richness randomly, I enriched my form with subtle changes and linear emphasis. It

felt as if the pots were breathing as they turned on the wheel, and I joined in a dance, the inner space revealed by expressive constriction. The flaming salt fumes were a fitting conclusion to the cycle of making salt glazed ware.

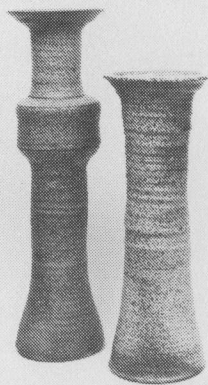
My wood kiln is a serene temple, fired in a steady rhythm, which crackles quietly at the start, then gathers momentum as the chimney roars with the rise in temperature. I welcome the day of firing, imagining flames coursing over my pieces, depositing enriching ash on them. It is fitting that I live in Vermont where

my neighbor supplies me with wood for the kiln and then spends the day firing it with me.

This period of work is one of creative introspection. Pieces made for the wood kiln reflect the massive mountains and ploughed fields that surround me. And more recently I follow the mystery of light glimpsed through a narrow opening. Not for now the sparkle of salt glaze, but the quiet majesty of darkness in varied tones, or the brightness of evening skies.

I no longer need the inspiration of the art world, with the necessity of keeping up with its fast paced changes, though I enjoy periodic big city visits. Even though my work must travel to art centers, I am fortunate to have the privilege of this simple life.

Karen Karnes

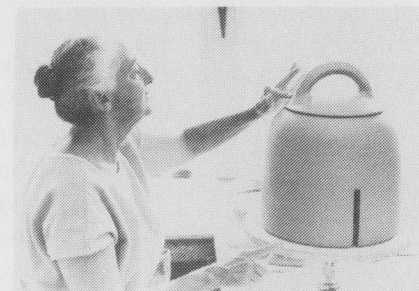


Salt glazed stoneware vases 1975

KAREN KARNES

COMMENTS ON GROWTH AND TRADITIONALISM

I met Karen Karnes and her friend Ann Stannard in 1975 when traveling through the United States on my first nationwide lecture tour. She introduced herself after a lecture I had given at Columbia College in New York City. We sat out on the campus grounds afterwards for what was to be a brief chat but ended up talking for several hours. Even though our tastes were in some ways very different, it was stimulating to speak to someone whose feelings about clay and pottery were so passionate and a bond was created that has endured. It has been intriguing to grow closer to the artist and her art over the ensuing fourteen years, a period that has seen several rather profound changes in her work.



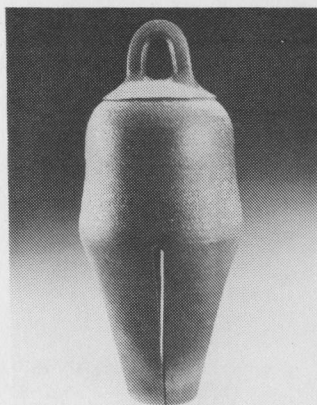
Karen Karnes in her studio 1987

At the time of meeting I already knew of Karen by reputation as the international doyen of saltglazed pottery. She has made some of the most dramatic 20th century pots in this tradition - a mixture of complex, richly mottled surface set against a simple form that eschewed elegance for a robust honesty that exuded strength. Then around 1980 the saltglazing came to an end, not because Karen had sated the market (on the contrary, the demand for her saltglazed work was growing apace) but because she needed to move on down her chosen road.

Between 1981 and 1983 she produced a series of extraordinary shows of wood fired pieces for Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery in New York with a radiant new palette of blues. The forms became massive, still and pensive. Then she began to cut into the exaggerated feet of the pots and refocus the volume of her vessels.



This year saw one of the finest (if not *the* finest) of her exhibitions. She showed a group of vessels (some lidded) in which all the searching of the past decade came together. In these works one could detect Karnes's mastery - not of technique, for she had mastered that decades ago - but of the *art* of the potter. The works were evocatively anthropomorphic (although subconsciously so on the part of the artist). They



Woodfired stoneware 1985

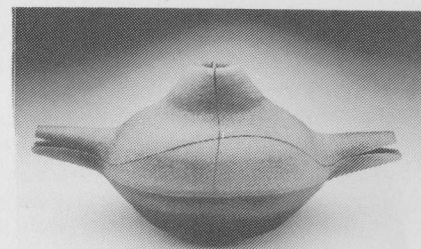
stood torso-like with considerable dignity, presence and an undisguised and frank sensuality. The relationship of foot to shoulder, of silhouette to contour, of gravity and lift was all so accurately and seemingly effortlessly drawn. They reminded me of Hamada's admonition that a good pot should not appear contrived and strained but that it should seem relaxed and quietly inevitable, "like a person walking downhill in a cool breeze."

While this is true, Karen's work is still not easy in another sense. This is not because it deals with difficult subject matter but because it is so uncompromising. Her pots have never pandered to fashion nor has she ever played hide-and-seek with the fine arts. Her goal is a certain bluntness that one finds in the person herself, no-nonsense pots that are stoic and powerful. There is a certain purity in this stubborn directness which one cannot but respect in this age of faddism and careerism. Even though her latest works achieve a tough sculptural geometry that has its roots in Modernism, her work remains grounded in the traditions of pottery. Karen insists that the work be addressed as such in all the historical complexity and visual abstraction that this discipline evokes.

It is fitting therefore that the first Medal for Excellence in Craft in this revived programme by The Society of Arts and Crafts should go to such a dedicated traditionalist. I use

tradition in its true and positive sense. All progressive artists are traditionalists at heart with a deep respect for the past. But it is a term that has become misunderstood and misused today like so many in the crafts lexicon. The late Michael Cardew argued that you tell a real traditionalist from the *faux* variety by whether or not their work grows and changes like every other *living* thing. By this definition, Karnes's development - without departing from the confines of her craft or the singularity of her vision - has been remarkably fecund. It is my pleasure to join the Society in saluting her achievement.

Garth Clark



Woodfired stoneware 1989

