

A POTTER'S TRUTH:

Karen Karnes and her wood-fired forms of clay

Dry. The colors of stone. Painted in tones of earth-ores: deep blue, blue-green, slate-grey, apricot, plum, twilight, dawn. The fire is now at rest in the transformed clay, through which it has blazed and swirled.

For as long as I have known Karen Karnes, almost 30 years, the movement of her potter's art has been toward the feeling for form. The natural gestures of her throwing hands in dialogue with clay: the opening base, the rising wall, the change of direction, swelling and return, the scar of a narrow pressure from a finger tip, the spiralling rings left by the track of her strong hands on the spinning cylinder. Lids shaped in planes by her cutting wire when the clay is just beginning to stiffen.

The play of form comes in the process of working itself. Work, she has always said, is the healing, is the mother of creativity. Working in the studio, steadily, finding the new forms, developing the themes as they come. A hint is given in a certain phrase of movement; it becomes an impulse; it becomes an inspiration, an exploration, a commitment. The impulse then is like a world coming into being, like a clay myth of creation. It invites forms into visibility. A number of pots play out of a single formative phrasing, like variations on a theme — a body of work. Like a body of poetry: a sonnet sequence, or verses of a long song. They cluster in our world of craft like Beings, blessing the work.

A family of forms: here some are squat and comfortable and primal, like ancient rock into which breath has come and noble simplicity. They stand, regal and deep, transformed in their firetried colors: dry and radiant. How can they be both dry in texture, and radiant? They can. Like the stretched light of intelligence, hand-and-soul. Like molded stone chambers, vessels, roofed, turned into stoneware jewels and caverns of craft.

Here they are, stout and rounded, their shoulders and hips puffed in royal blue, in turquoise burning rust as well — archaic, contemporary. So deeply felt, so deeply made, so at peace with themselves, so fresh and uncomplacent, so remarkable.

And here are others, tall and grand and epic. The feel for form rises in quite other gestures: finding the techniques for building form on form and finding the flow of the wall and the slant — adding and reintegrating.

I have seen her working. The clay is heavy. The amounts are large to start these big forms. The potter's movements are slow and sure: the walls are never allowed to weaken out of conceit or gamble. A second form is thrown, and joined to the first, moist and rough and overlapping. Then the joint is welded by a throwing

motion up and down, like weaving, like stitching, like marrying two into one. More may be added. The technique is demanding. It is both exact and flexible, sensual, perceptive. The potter's joy is quiet and continuous, like a supportive music to the strenuous throwing process. Later the joy may bubble, may smile, may dance.

In early years, Karen Karnes' work was fired by oil. Fire is the other passion in her art, deeply felt and deeply worked with. It too has a form: a way of taking in the air, of exhaling smoke and flame. In the studio we shared for 10 years in Stony Point, New York, I came to experience that steady attunement to the process of "working" which gives to Karen Karnes and to her pottery an unusual rhythmic quality. She walks in that rhythm. She relates in that rhythm. She throws and trims and glazes, stacks and tends her fire...in flowing strides, deliberate, intuitive, rich with grace.

I have found all these years such a uniting of opposites in her and her art: always fresh with her first love of a thrown form, always rooted in archetypal certainty. The play of nature herself: always new, always *there*. Steady, pulsing, one foot in front of the other. Commitment to the doing. Going with full heart where the doing leads.

It led to a gas-fired saltglazing period. High heat. High gloss. Rich colors, active surface texture. Stoneware and porcelain. Delicious. Adventurous in the ordeal of the fire. Eventually the kiln itself was spent. It was dismantled and laid to rest before the next movement was made into a new life form.

Now these current works here exhibited come from an experience with woodfiring, in a monumental kiln in Vermont, where Karen Karnes has moved as part of a larger move later on to Wales. She and her companion Ann Stannard and their friends and students have built a 100 cubic foot glaze chamber with 4 fire boxes, and a new way of working has been born. A new palette of color, new surface textures. These pots are a similar family, but they have been weathered through another atmosphere of flame.

Karen Karnes' new woodfired pots speak wordlessly of the power of fire, of an art of throwing on the potter's wheel through 30 years of practice, of color as the countenance of flame caught by light in the ground of the clay. There is a welding into newness of these powers. And the pots, so warmly created, live now independent of their creator. Each is a presence to which we can in freedom relate. Each tells its story in clear gesture and sensitive interiority. Each is a riddle, an art, which awakens in us a sense of how connected we are, also, to riddle and mystery and contour and presence, to fire and offering.

These covered forms are an imagery that suggests both openness and containment, both vulnerability and purpose. They speak a poetry of balance and proportion, of surprise and aliveness, lifted by color into awe. To live with one of these pieces is to feel the threshold where clay is inner vision.



KK 37-80 (20" h)
KK 10-80 (14" h)
KK 14-80 (8" h)

Karen Karnes' contribution to the craft culture in this country and in England and Europe has been distinguished and continuous. She and her work represent a rare integration of personal authenticity and an artistic dimension that enlarges both form and human truth.

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