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By Kurt Shaw
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Tom Turner is a potter's potter. He even has a type of clay named after him, "Tom Turner Porcelain," which he invented and is currently being manufactured by Standard Ceramic Supply Co. of Carnegie.

However, it's not his clay that has brought this Ohio potter his esteemed reputation, nor the fact that he has taught ceramics at leading craft schools throughout the United States, but his 43-year career during which he has been producing some of the most refined works known in the field.

Nearly 60 of Turner's bowls, vases, jars and cups can be found at The Clay Place in Shadyside in the one-man show "Tom Turner: Attention to Detail."

"My pots are 180 degrees from the current trend," Turner says of the works on view, and he's right. Present-day tastes favor wood-fired pots. Heavy and lopsided, the most eye-catching usually are covered in thick, earthy glazes. Some look so craggy and crude, it's as if they were spewn from the mouth of Mt. Vesuvius itself.

Aside from the otherwise clean lines and slick glazes, part of the reason Turner's pots are so refined is his signature use of porcelain, particularly his own.

"It's really the best throwing porcelain that I have ever touched, and it's whiter than anything that we have been able to test," Turner says.

But what is really amazing about Turner's porcelain is its strength. In March, Turner wowed the crowd at the annual conference of the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts by hammering nails into a two-by-four with a coffee mug made of the stuff.

That's where Elvira Peake, owner of The Clay Place, ran into Turner, and that's how he ended up having a show at Peake's gallery, which is known for showing works by some of the top names in contemporary ceramics.

Peake says that since the show opened in early November, potters have been coming in and flipping the bowls over just to look at the bare, unglazed part of the porcelain body that can be found on the underside of each work. They try to tell whether Turner made it with his newly invented porcelain, which has been in production for about a year.

But beside all the hoopla surrounding his porcelain, what is most interesting about Turner's work is its elegance. A Turner pot has a certain sense of refinement that comes only with years of working with clay. And although his style is uniquely personal, it does have hints of influences from the past, particularly that of Asian ceramics.

"I'm not trying to make Japanese pots, yet there is a very strong influence from age-old pots," Turner says.

For example, several vases covered in a honey-colored glaze look to have a Chinese influence, as evidenced by their fluted necks, which are similar to the pottery of China's T'ang dynasty (618 – 906 A.D.), which is why Turner has titled them "Tang Vases."

Other works also show signs of Chinese influence, such as a small vase covered in a brilliant oxblood glaze that has three tiny fish heads protruding near the mouth. The fish heads are an obvious nod to the dragon and animal motifs that were incorporated into some T'ang and Sung (960-1279) dynasty wares.

The other thing that's particular to Turner's pots is their glaze. Turner says he relies on the "classic glazes," such as oxblood, celadon, temmoku and ash. "These are all glazes that go back hundreds and hundreds of years," he says.

What sets them apart from the more popular glazes of today is their finicky nature, because, Turner says, "All of the colorants are metallic oxides – iron, copper, cobalt, manganese." Hence, all of them have to be fired in a reduction process to control the outcome of each.

According to Turner, it can be tricky. "You know, it makes it very frustrating because if one thing is off, you don't get what you want," he says.

For a constant experimenter who not only creates his own porcelains and glazes, but also designed and built much of his own equipment, this suits Turner just fine. In fact, he takes so much pleasure and pride in the glazing process that he often names his pots for the glazes.

"I tend to describe pots by their glazes. I don't give them names like a painter gives paintings," he says when asked why a small bowl covered in a beautiful blue speckle has been named "Blue Tea Dust."

But for all of his experimentation, Turner still holds fast to the traditions he learned long ago as a student of what he calls the "Midwest school of art pottery" during the 1960s.

That's why Turner says that, in spite of the trends, he strives to make the best pots he possibly can.

"In my 43 years (as a potter), I've seen a lot of things come and go, but I try to make pots that, hopefully, will be good forever. I don't just want them to be good in 2004. I want these pots to stand up to the test of time."

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