Artist's vessels sail on a revolutionary sea

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These three vessels by Adrian Saxe, among nine currently on exhibit at the Garth Clark Gallery, offer evidence that he is in the forefront of contemporary ceramists.
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By Christopher Knight

Herald Art Critic

A s the bright sun of modernism sinks slowly to the west, a jazzy, jazzy gasp at the radiant color of its sunset alone tends to emerge with a certain dread at the approach of darkness. For some, modernism's fundamental source of illumination is claimed to have been snuffed out, never to rise again.

That source was modernism's new historical consciousness: Honesty laced in set in concrete weren't merely discarded in the collapse of the social order; they were formulated to determine the level of their continuing viability. But now that modernism itself is widely seen as the value set in concrete, a dark and gloomy question is being posed with increasing frequency: Has the ability to perform a salvage operation been lost in the midst of contemporary collapse?

Adrian Saxe's current exhibition, which opened last week at the Garth Clark Gallery, offers evidence that, as with the work of certain other important figures, that mode of historical social criticism hasn't really been lost at all; it's been radically transforming itself instead. The show also presents further evidence that, at 42, the artist is in the front rank of ceramists today.

The reason for Saxe's emergent stature will not simply be found in the territory of spectacular craft and tour-de-force technique, although the artist's gifts in that area are nothing less than astonishing. If a painter or sculptor of commodity achievement had endured a similar sphere of near invisibility here, it would barely be perceived as nothing short of a scandal.


With all these seemingly incompatible elements competing with one another in craft, the object is heir to no wonder that the dazzling functional fusion of lumpish stone and delicate porcelain in a single piece takes place. It was simply necessary to Saxe's larger conceptual thrust.

It is within that conceptual arena, rather than in terms of stylistic affinity, that Saxe is heir to the Otis legacy. The work produced by Voulkos, Ken Price, John Mason, Henry Takemoto and the rest was itself marked by broad stylistic variety. Whatever the individual approach, the unifying quality of Otis clay was its assault on a traditional canop of Western pottery: the dictate that all features of the object had to coalesce in harmonious, unitary integration. In Voukolos split apart each element of a pot — not simply foot, body and neck, but the whole conception of form and surface — and rebuilt ceramics as a medium in which each element played against the other in a lively struggle for attention. Pitting muscularity of form against fragility of surface, or common two-dimensional shape against idiosyncratic form, Voukolos, Price and the others achieved works with an ambiguous life and personality all their own.

The formal and material fragmentation so essential to the Otis revolution provides the underpinning to Saxe's work, most obviously in the discrete splitting of foot, body and lid (or stopper) of his vessels: A volcanic stone base might support an elegant, heraldic body that is itself crowned by a golden stopper in the form of a baby's pacifier. His vessels hit you all at once, but you don't know where to look first, your eye tumbles and careens from place to place, alighting here and shifting there in a futile attempt to find an anchor.

Saxe doesn't stop there. He pushes that fragmentation and competition for attention far beyond the formal and material properties of the object, extending them into the scarier arenas of taste, style, mythology and history. After all, sensuality and violence, elegance and tawdriness are not objective categories. In so doing, he wades into social and cultural terri
tory that isn't just the home of the object; it's the residence of the spectator as well. Amid its mass of difficulty, contested meanings, his work suddenly introduces the audience as a full collaborator in the creation.

Not surprisingly, the door to this particular path was first opened, and then shoved wide, by a member of the Otis crew. Although Voukolos led the charge, the work of Ken Price has proven to be the more fertile territory. In his work since the 1960s, Price has tampered with all sorts of cultural archetypes and stereotypes, not the least of which has been the whole hierarchy of taste and propriety in the visual arts. For an important precedent for Saxe's work, you don't have to strain to locate "Happy's Curios," Price's "elevation" of roadside souvenirs into a dazzling assault on refined sensibility (the curios were shown in a memorable 1976 exhibition at the County Museum of Art).