Carl Beam

Whale of our Being (2002)

Ann Beam

Medicine Ravens (2004)

Anong Migwans Beam

Oriole Pot (2004)

Three Bluebirds (2004)

Carl Beam

Black Snake Pot (2002)
Carl, Ann, and Anong Beam have established international reputations as innovators in the contemporary art scene. Carl's work is distinguished by its frequently critical examinations of historic and contemporary political events. His work deals with tough questions concerning social and cultural values. Technically Beam is regarded as an innovator for his intentional blurring of diverse art practices, thereby enabling certain methodologies and techniques to acquire new contexts. Although he has had formal art training, Beam also had a number of life experiences not specifically related to art-making. He culls images from these experiences and frequently contrasts them with historical and contemporary images, thus relating the "personal" with the larger "societal" picture. Stylistically his technique is more connected to Rauschenberg then to the Woodlands or traditional native art styles. His innovative techniques, in fact, have been emulated by a new generation of artists - native and not. Ann Beam's works combine images of personal and cultural significance. Her early works dealt with issues relating to violence against women but have since moved into the areas of Female warriorship, Initiation and Rites of Passage. Ann's method reinforces the content of her work through combining and juxtaposition of techniques and imagery. She often uses painting, printmaking and photography within one work. Images are juxtaposed against words; the figurative is contrasted with the abstract or intuitive; and the active shares space with the contemplative.

The Beams' art is fully integrated within their lifestyle. And while they do work closely together they nonetheless maintain independent and distinctive art practices. While the Beams are best known for their paintings and works on paper they have been creating ceramic work for almost twenty-five years now. As with their two-dimensional works, these ceramic pieces are distinctive and utilize a multiplicity of techniques.

The ceramics pieces go beyond the realm of decorative arts and are instead a fully-developed and integrated part of their art practice. The same concerns, technically and symbolically, that occupy them when creating a painting or a print are first and foremost in their minds when...
making a piece of pottery. Undoubtedly they want to go beyond simply making a bowl - they want to make art.

In 1980 Ann and Carl Beam were living in the American Southwest. It was there that they first encountered Native American pottery. The discovery of the techniques and materials used by the Native Americans in creating their works, acted as the catalyst for the Beams' excitement about the possibilities of ceramics as a part of their art practice. The most important aspect, for the Beams, was that the pottery was hand-built rather than wheel thrown. This allowed for a greater potential of shapes and encouraged them to experiment. The materials that are used for this kind of pottery are what ever was found locally. The Beams fully explored these possibilities creating ceramic works which were entirely created with natural materials that they had found themselves - paint stones, dug earth, etcetera. The act of pottery making became in effect a manifestation of their personal philosophy in which respect for nature was of paramount importance.

Ann Beam describes the time that they lived in New Mexico and Arizona as an incredibly stimulating time for her and Carl. As artists with a young daughter and not much money the great thing about this kind of pottery-making was that it didn't need an art supply store - it suited their financial state and inspired their creativity. During this time, they dug their own material and tried all kinds of experiments. In doing so they blew up three times what worked until they had their techniques perfected.

The Beams continued developing their ceramic practice and moved into working with blackware, inspired by Sante Clara black wares. In learning how to do it, they began innovating some of their own forms. While they mostly learned from their own experimentations, they also connected with other local potters and learned from their experiences

Some of their most intriguing ceramics are those executed in the Anasazi method. Azasazi pottery creates a kind of visual tension or dynamism through its contrast of a smooth interior bowl shape with a rough exterior. The process begins with an application of a kind of abstract dialogue of images on the rim with the open exterior, rather than interior space. After that personal and particular forms are drawn onto the bowl's interior. This kind of art-making requires very sophisticated art-thinking and ability, in order to succeed.

This kind of thinking, or process, in working with ceramics was something that the Beams began to apply to their other artistic practices. They found that there was a good cross-influence between their work as painter and printmakers and ceramic-artists. By making the most of all of these influences, they opened up a number of different technical and metaphoric layers to their works.

In 1986 they began working with Raku and foraying into the realm of glazeware. However, at that time they weren't satisfied with the results of the glazeware and concentrated on other aspects of their artmaking.

In 1990 they were once more living on Manitoulin Island and began working on an adobe home. This time-period coincided with their increasing concern for the environmental and cultural problems, including world-wide hunger and housing shortages. Thematically, they posit that endemic hunger and homelessness worldwide could be cured through exploration and development of previously marginalized resources. In particular, Carl Beam uses hominy corn and adobe structure as signature metaphors within his work, as well as forwarding them as real
solutions to the real problems faced by our contemporary society. The Beams hand-built their adobe house. Adobe architecture provides relatively simple, economical, and thermally efficient. Local earth provides a building material to create an "artificial cave" that is in harmony with its environment. The nature of adobe as a building material dictates to a great degree its aesthetic forms and characteristics. These forms are organic, simple and rounded, often molded by hand. Their adobe house become, to a certain extent, a large-scale project which evolved naturally out of their earlier experiences with Native American pottery.

In 2001 the Beams started working extensively with pottery again but this time they wanted to do something more painterly. They were joined in this by their daughter Anong, who by now was an accomplished artist in her own right. They decided to use painting techniques on their glazeware, rather than potters' techniques. In essence, they wanted to take the medium past its accepted definition, to give it a new potential. This same desire to stretch the limits can be seen throughout their artistic practice. For example, in Carl Beam's etchings he has drips and fluid techniques. Generally, etching tends to be very controlled but Carl instead brings fluidity and the opportunity for the incidental to enter into it.

As with many of their works, the Beams develop a tension within their ceramic pieces through technique and imagery. The results are dynamic and innovative works that cross over the traditional boundaries between painting and pottery, between fine art and craft. Their pottery making has influenced how they approach their paintings, and they come at their ceramic work as painters not potters. The different mediums and techniques lend fire to each other. And as their finished works demonstrate, glass and colour sliding around during firing can be a thrilling and unexpected way to paint.

- By Virginia M. Eichhorn
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