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Fire At Both Ends by Jim Thomson

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In addition to being a brilliant ceramic technician, Jim Thomson is a master of concatenation. He creates strangely disturbing objects that combine contradictory references.

The disorientation, disjuncture, and distinction that his work instigates in the viewer may seem to be part of an implied but enigmatic ritual, but in fact the very qualities that strike viewers in initial contact as extreme, have evolved in Thomson's studio in a very gradual way innate to anyone working in the high-firing range. His affection for the craggy surface and an unusual palette may have become second nature to him, but for many unaccustomed to his work, it has a corrosive, assaulting character - course, abrupt and primal - far outside normative aesthetic values for tableware.



Blistered skin and fleshy fissures, orifices, sphincters, lips and maws- these are the associations that arise via Thomson's penchant for crackled, lumpy and scaly teguments. He exploits nearly acidic pigments rather than calm, smooth and impervious coatings. Virulent greens and strident yellows, berry reds and fish pinks foil his clay bodies. Historic precedence can be easily sited within contemporary ceramics, but hoary surfaces have been more pronounced in the international milieu than in the Canadian scene. Such a proclivity places Thomson in conversation with peers in his field, and with them, he pushes at the boundaries of the art form as he understands them, distant from industrial prototypes or the polite finishes of amateur craft.

Presenting inherently contradictory notions or disparate impulses, making them seem viable, operable and understandable, is a function of ritual. The artefacts used in ritual assist us in measuring and making sense of the world. Their use fortifies social institutions, facilitates passage, and eases

transition in religions, social, sexual, economic and political spheres. Such items help us to internalize beliefs and realize our spiritual condition. An operative feature of ritual is a heightened sense of the ordinary. As if to convey that, Thomson draws on the repertoire of functional vessel forms ranging from the funnels, colanders, and sieves common to the kitchen and the garage, to the filtration screens, perforated drain covers, and conduits of the street and sewage systems.

In the earliest pieces in this show, trompe l'oeil geological samples immediately interrogate viewers on topics of nature and artifice. Other shapes that we associate with botanical seedpods and insect cocoons show up with the camouflage, missile forms, and the stencilled inventory markings of munitions. In combination, these aspects carry us to considerations where nature's explosive fecundity confronts environmental catastrophe.



With Thomson's platters we seem drawn deep into the thrall of the elemental states, where mineral sludge seems to effloresce, where tidal ponds glisten, where we move beyond the diurnal ebb and flow to far broader rhythms that etch and erode the earth's body with inimitable markings. Repeated replenishment and evaporation seem to have embellished the rims and edges with rings of sedimentation. Thomson's platters participate in landscape evocation - not through representation, but through the demonstration of properties, processes and substance. This presentational mode shares with the pictorial idiom the possibility of poetry. If in the basin of the vessel the glaze is read as pooled, and if leaves are seen to be floating on that surface, then the tiny dots strewn across the surface can be nothing other than stars overhead. In some of the platters, a crust that seems to coat the water surface breaks to reveal silting deposits below. This is a vision lodged in wonder.



In many ways, these measures exemplify Thomson's strategy, for looking down while thinking up indicates the scope of his endeavour. This type of intellectual bracketing is innate to ceramicists who, through vessel production, straddle both instrumentality and narrative purpose. Thomson notes that after many years of working, he "arrived at a premise that a structure is set up in the relation between an object, its function and the experience that function generates."

Contrary to modernist precepts, the abstract vessel does not require distortion of physical form, and the narrative vessel does not require applied imagery. The issue is always one of embodiment, and Thomson belongs to a cadre of contemporary ceramists who have so integrated their technologies that the work becomes suffused with their own being. This is not about medium specificity, nor about truth to materials, nor about disclosing the supposed inner nature of a material, but about having the work carry the artist into cohesive identity with substance and process. This distinction is the most crucial to an understanding of craft-based expressions today.

The simple, pinnate leaf form reoccurs as emblem of the waxing and waning of organic life. The primordial pool and the perennial nest contribute their associations. The spiral, customarily known in prehistoric goddess cults and recognized as the wiles of Venus, has, I suggest, an expanded reference here. While the spiral is a mark innate to the potter's craft, it is also associated with the perambulations of the initiate in the spirit quest, where the self searches for identity and world meaning.

The cornucopia, the twirling funnel of horn, another Venusian spiral, signifies the gravid aspect of Earth herself. Although associated now with the accoutrements of harvest, that framework is abridged, for Earth's outpouring of potential is not seasonally limited: it is pervasive, ceaseless, perpetual. Thomson's inventive Boboli form, a pod with filtering grate, seems perennially viable, changing surface and colour according to seasonal ascription. As a class of objects, they imply that all the phases of metamorphosis are worthy of care.



In this show, funnel forms predominate. Their capacity to facilitate flow from one place to another lends metaphoric capacity, and like the Tin Man's nose, they fulfill functions beyond their category as utensils. The Holes, those pieces where funnel forms balance on the prow-like boxes, require a stretch of the imagination, since their form indicates containment and passage simultaneously. The salsa-dipped surfaces of these funnels reiterate an almost repulsive physicality, while their colour orchestration begs reason. Comet-like tails of glaze connect the funnels to base vessels, lending associations of celestial bodies in flux, a poignant gesture for ash bearing urns which generated this form in Thomson's repertoire.



These in turn connect with the "covered ant hill" pieces located near the windows. The latter seem mindful of an ancient vessel type known in the orient as hill jars. This type of vessel mimics in its conical lid the shape of burial tumulus or grave mound. Covered here with funnels, these hillocks seem to confirm the agenda of channelling spirit from ground to ether. In that sense, Thomson's funnels replicate the purpose of sucking tubes, those hollow appurtenances used the world over in ancient shamanic practices for spirit conveyance.

By opening up the space of the body of funnel itself, by implying that even within their thin walls another interiority awaits, Thomson reaffirms the traditional alignment of the containing vessel with the human body and its own capacity to hold both substance and life.

In the context of ritual, we endow ceremonial objects with multiple meanings. We take ordinary items, such as the wafer eaten at Communion, and we invest them with the dynamics of power. We make them fetishes. When we view Thomson's funnels in the light of ritual function, they force us to ask what cosmology they might celebrate, what sacrament they confirm, what mythic origin they may re-enact, and what power structure they perpetuate?

This show bespeaks multidimensional aspects of intent. It takes its name from a piece shaped like the pod bombs, resting horizontally, emitting nasty tongues of flame from each extremity. The body of the pod, finished as if to appear tightly twined, incants cyclical recurrence. Whatever its origin and purpose, it confounds inert form with burning vitality, front with back, head with tail, beginning with end, and by inference, creation with destruction. As a bizarrely anxious object, it reminds us that while creativity may be instigated in Thomson's kiln in Ottawa, metaphorical fire and the crucible of the imagination are a social phenomenon, constructed by responsibility shared by both the art maker and the audience.

Exhibiting, viewing, and art gallery discourse themselves are rituals transparent to most who participate in them. Perhaps Thomson's work carries us to a realization that Art itself is now our most

cherished and effective ritual fetish.

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