



Heinemann's Clay Continuum

BY HEIDI MCKENZIE



ABOVE **Steven Heinemann**, *Slider*, 2017, ceramic,
15 x 58 x 22 cm. PHOTO TAIMAZ MOSLEMIAN

LEFT **Steven Heinemann**, *Husk* (detail), 1996, ceramic,
25 x 35 x 74 cm. PHOTO TAIMAZ MOSLEMIAN

One rainy day in the fall of 2006, I found myself walking down Dovercourt Road toward Queen Street West in Toronto. This was a time when ceramics weren't even on my radar. I happened to glance in a shop window, and in the blink of an eye my world changed. Stopped cold in my tracks, I gazed intently at two somewhat oblong bowls—one black and one white—both checkered with the type of surface you might expect to find in an arid desert. They were virtually mirrors of each other, about the size of large mixing bowls. Something deep inside me shifted. I entered what I came to know as the David Kaye Gallery, and discovered the work of Steve Heinemann. It is in this context that I find myself thrilled to have the opportunity to consider what it was, and continues to be, in the art of Steve Heinemann that is so powerful that it can arrest its viewer, into the depth of "poetic contemplation,"¹ as curator Rachel Gotlieb describes it. I believe Heinemann's tendency to work both volumetrically and spatially within the realm of abstract minimalism coupled with his ability to exploit the inherent properties of his material are key to unlocking this puzzle.

In 1999, a contemporary of Heinemann's, UK-based potter and author Edmund de Waal, in his book *Design Sourcebooks: Ceramics*, coined the term "the new austerity" as a counterpart to contemporary minimalist sculpture. I sense that Heinemann's aesthetic compass is guided by this new austerity. Certainly he points to the early modernists, Hans Coper and Lucie Rie, whom he discovered in books as a teenager, as having shaped his drive for minimalist line and unadorned form. From the moment Heinemann laid hands on clay at his Aurora, Ontario, high school, he did not merely replicate the bowls he was taught how to throw on the wheel; he fashioned what might be categorized as "fine art craft" bowls—vessels



OPPOSITE (TOP) Steven Heinemann, *Little Dipper*, 2004, ceramic,
20 x 73 x 19 cm, PRIVATE COLLECTION TORONTO,
PHOTO TONI HAFKENSHEID

OPPOSITE (BOTTOM) Steven Heinemann, *aretherenottwelvehoursofdaylight*,
2009, ceramic, PRIVATE COLLECTION TORONTO,
PHOTO TAIMAZ MOSLEMIAN

that are not so much made for quotidian use, rather to be pondered, gazed upon, and relished for their unique and austere beauty. He notes that it never occurred to him that ceramics was anything other than art. This point of view, untainted by either academic or popular discourse on craft versus art, continues to serve Heinemann well.

Heinemann places himself in the post-war era of artists who moved beyond subtraction from marble, stone, or wood as a way of reckoning form and turned to alternative methods of construction that inherently allow for consideration of volume and interior space. Ultimately humankind began fashioning containers out of clay, and unlike sculptors who work in subtractive media, Heinemann is compelled by clay's potency to reveal contained space: "that's always attracted me about pots: it's not difficult to take that [the mysterious quality of clay and volume] and extend it into things that are not pots." It's not surprising that Heinemann views his work as operating on a continuum. On certain parts of that continuum there are identifiably familiar things such as a bowl, but farther along on that continuum are "the dynamics of containment that the bowl offers you, they that can be stretched and extended into things that are not bowls, but still incorporating similar aspects of volume and containment of space."² As the most basic of containers, the bowl is a metaphor in Heinemann's studio. It is a point of departure that proved to be formative in forging Heinemann's creative methodology—that of dogged investigation. His process is evidenced in the work's quiet attention to detail evolved out of years of practice, trial and error, learning through failure, and insatiable patience—in a word, "craft." In his final year at Sheridan College, Heinemann became obsessed with making bowls. After completing his requisite assignments, he restricted his year's work to thrown bowls. He allowed himself the freedom of repetition as a means of inquiry. For Heinemann it was a revelation that by narrowing, rather than limiting, your focus to the exclusion of all else, "kind of surprisingly it allows you to consider all the facets of that subject in depth and detail." As a student he chose to alter his bowls by hand and/or play with the physical properties of soluble pigments to effect subtle gradation of colour the way a painter might tease out watercolour on gouache paper. Heinemann believes in "the power of the act and all the things that are suggested by, unleashed by, and/or sparked by that act—and taking account of and responsibility for them." For Heinemann the process itself leads you along a path, "like you're following a stream...which then opens up into a pond, and then further on becomes a stream again."

His work most often begins with a model from which a plaster mould is made, and then a ceramic form is cast, and possibly another form cast in that bowl (in the case of his double-walled bowls). Or, he closes his forms, pushing the boundaries of what may or may not still be considered a bowl into double-walled, large oblong forms that settle into rounded bottoms with mirrored vessel-like depressions on the upper surface of the object. Here he is reminding us of the potency of contained space.

Other touchstones on Heinemann's continuum are varied, ranging from soft rolling curves that imbue the illusion of solid masses on wall-mounted steel "shelves"; to monumental disks heightened or recessed geometrically with masterful precision. He has always been interested in working two axes of the plane at once, the 2-D surface and texture (the "canvas") as well as the 3-D sculptural form. Taking up the former, Heinemann has branched out into photography and moving image in order to present the viewer with the time-lapsed insider's view of the clay's process in the making. More recently, Heinemann added 3-D modelling to his tool kit—ironically creating forms that appear even more natural and organic than what he might otherwise be able to achieve through haptic manipulation.

In the recent retrospective of Heinemann's work at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, *Culture and Nature*, curator Rachel Gotlieb worked with Heinemann to group pieces in periods of four or five years, reflecting the serial and cyclical nature in which the artist chooses to undertake his creative investigations. I felt one of the most poignant moments in my interview with Heinemann was when I asked him what inspires him and where he finds his motivation. After pausing a beat, he admitted that he doesn't really think about "those kind of things," stating: "I'm obviously not a conceptual artist." He went on to explain, "I find things percolating up through the material that you might call concepts, but they are by-products of working and identifying certain things that just capture your interest...I tend to pay attention to those things." We discussed how in one's life you take in any number of a myriad of stimuli, whether it's observation of clouds, or a seed pod, or a mechanical gear system; for Heinemann "all those things tumble out through the act of doing."

At least some of what tumbles out of Heinemann's studio has been influenced by his interest in Mimbres pottery that dates back over a thousand years. Its black and white, often anthropomorphic imagery appealed to Heinemann. In the late 1970s he travelled to New Mexico to study and had the opportunity to spend time with a collection of three hundred Mimbres pots. It wasn't until much



ABOVE **Steven Heinemann**, *Husk*, 1996, ceramic,
25 x 35 x 74 cm. PHOTO TAIMAZ.MOSLEMIAN

RIGHT **Steven Heinemann**, *Radarlove*, 2017, ceramic,
37 x 11 x 155 cm. PHOTO STEVEN HEINEMANN

later that any kind of graphic representation “percolated” into his own practice. However, Heinemann’s aesthetic consciousness picked up on the sense that each of the vessels was like a universe unto itself. As he says, “once you look into it you are in its territory and that territory marks out unique and discrete space.” Gotlieb characterizes the bowl’s nature in relation to Heinemann’s work as “a vessel that at once shapes the void and is shaped by it”³ and Heinemann himself talks about these bowls as “portable cosmologies,” capturing a particular worldview or set of ideas about the sacred, the cosmic, and the mundane that are “somehow all organized in that one thing which in itself has no fixed place.” With regard to the Mimbres pots’ form and function, Heinemann notes that they predate any western formal understanding of abstraction. Furthermore, neither their reason for existing, nor their role or function, has an equivalent in our culture. His lateral way of thinking allows him to postulate that today they might be considered functional in the sense that “their purpose is to heighten the viewers’ attention to allow them to be absorbed in them.”

In the sense that Heinemann clearly considers his art within a historical arc and within a broad cultural context, I would argue that he is a “big picture” conceptual artist. He continues to question where he fits into the cultural and artistic landscape.

In another interview recently, Heinemann posed the question “What do you do with this ancient medium today in a country like Canada where there’s no monolithic culture to guide this activity?”⁴ In my mind, one of the best answers we have is to look forward to the endless possibilities this artist has yet to explore. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Rachel Gotlieb, “Steven Heinemann: Culture and Nature” in *Steven Heinemann: Culture and Nature* (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2017), 13.
2. All Heinemann quotes from an interview with the author, June 26, 2018 except where otherwise noted.
3. Gotlieb, “Steven Heinemann,” 19.
4. CBC Radio interview with Ali Hassan on “Q,” January 2, 2018.

