

OF FIRE AND EARTH

Adam Silverman continues to evolve his pottery practice—and in the process, pottery itself.

BY TIM McKEOUGH PORTRAIT BY ADRIAN GAUT

Frequently covered with thick, oozing layers of textural glazes, the creations of Los Angeles ceramicist Adam Silverman grow out of an unwavering quest to find new forms of expression with an ancient art form. “My work is pretty limited in terms of the formal vocabulary—the shapes are usually eggs and spheres, and another that I think of as an abstracted torso,” says Silverman. “But I’ve been using increasingly aggressive and textured glazes, multi-firing things, grinding and reglazing to build up the surface texture, which kind of obscures the form.”

Sometimes the finished pieces might be covered with a powdery matte blue glaze that would make Yves Klein proud; other times they drip with thick, crackled glazes that resemble dried lava or scabs. And in many cases, his vases and pots crack or shatter before they’re even complete. “I’ll fire them five, six or seven times, and they just can’t handle it anymore,” he says. “But sometimes they get to that magic place where they just feel done.”

The former studio director of Heath Ceramics, the storied mid-century modern California ceramics company, Silverman is well versed in sculptural forms and proportions. He initially worked as an architect after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1988, before co-founding a fashion company in the ‘90s. All along, he made pots as a hobby. “As the clothing thing became less fulfilling and interesting, the pottery became more meaningful,” he says. “After September 11, 2001, I reassessed everything that was happening in my life. I wound up getting divorced and went to a summer program at Alfred University to see if my fantasy of becoming a full-time clay guy would make sense.”

The trip was more exciting and inspiring than he had ever imagined. “I had never studied ceramics, so I knew nothing about other ceramic artists, ancient or contemporary—I was operating in a vacuum,” he says. “I went to the library and started looking at books, and it was like my family tree unfolded in front of me.”

He established his studio upon his return to Los Angeles in 2002 and gradually grew his business from inexpensive, functional objects sold at design shops across the country to increasingly experimental one-off pieces for clients and galleries (along with special projects for institutions like the Kimbell Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art). “I started making a lot of vases, because there are fewer rules than there are with dinnerware,” says Silverman. “These big designers would come in and say, ‘I really like that, but could you make it four times the size for a 30,000-square-foot house?’ Suddenly, you’re in the thousands of dollars range, as opposed to tens of dollars.”

The more he produced, the more he sought to push the envelope. “It evolved very naturally to where I am now, which is barely functional stuff—and very often, things that aren’t functional at all.” In his latest pieces, Silverman is now deliberately attacking the underlying forms—puncturing them, punching wet clay from the inside out and combining parts of fractured vessels to create new wholes. “I was afraid of this kind of work until now,” he says. “Before, I was making really tasteful, Scandinavian-inspired pieces. My belief is that if you’re a skilled craftsman and work your way toward this kind of abstraction, it’s deeper and more meaningful—it vibrates or sings a little more.”

A growing base of collectors and galleries would agree. After presenting his pieces in group shows this past summer at Los Angeles’ Cherry and Martin gallery and Tokyo’s Tomio Koyama Gallery, Silverman is preparing for a solo presentation with New York’s Friedman Benda gallery next May. Along the way, he never loses sight of the raw appeal of working with his hands. “Life is divided into people who provide services and people who make things,” says Silverman. “I’ve always wanted to be the latter.”



Adam Silverman's *Untitled*, 2015, from the “Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better.” exhibition at Cherry and Martin in Los Angeles.

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