

Malcolm Mobutu Smith: HIP HOP ART POTTERY

by Matthew Kangas



Tripod Arabesques, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, thrown and altered stoneware and glazes, 2007.
Courtesy of Leedy-Voulkos Art Center, Kansas City, Missouri.

Malcolm Mobutu Smith uses the cup as a basic building block to extend historical vessel traditions within American ceramics and to express social and cultural themes. The 38-year-old Bloomington, Indiana, resident employs African, African-American, Asian and European influences to arrive at a hybrid form: hip-hop art pottery.

Trained at Kansas City Art Institute, Pennsylvania State University and the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University (M.F.A., 1996), Smith jumps back and forth between functional and sculptural concerns using thrown and hand-built stoneware to create abstract artworks that provide glimpses of popular culture and ancient ceramic practices.

Since his first solo gallery exhibition at Pipedreams in Chicago in 1997, and subsequent one-person shows at nonprofit university gallery spaces in Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois and New York, Smith has incorporated fragments of graffiti (his preoccupation as a teenager) into cups and vases. As graffiti is often experienced in flashes and glimpses—as seen from a moving car or subway train—so its presence in Smith's pottery is partial, often a peek at a disruptive element on an otherwise very well-mannered object.

Known predominantly in the Midwest, the Indiana University associate professor of art has attracted a variety of critical responses from traditional, medium-based commentary and analysis to high-flown postmodern theory. Doing everything possible to escape the limits of the rigid, Alfred-imposed vessel and cup aesthetic, Smith has, among other things, added Betty Woodman-like colored backdrops behind tiny cups on shelves; used elaborate zigzag cup handles; and undertaken exaggerated relief carving on the sides of cups. However, as in the art of Alfred professors like Wayne Higby, the nag-



PHOTOS: MICHAEL CAVANAUGH, KEVIN MONTAGUE

Moche Spoke (Cloud Cup Series), 6½ in. (16 cm) in height, thrown and altered porcelainous stoneware and glazes, 2005.

ging question remains not, “is it art or craft?” but “is it art pottery or sculpture?” With Smith, the answer is by no means pat or easy.

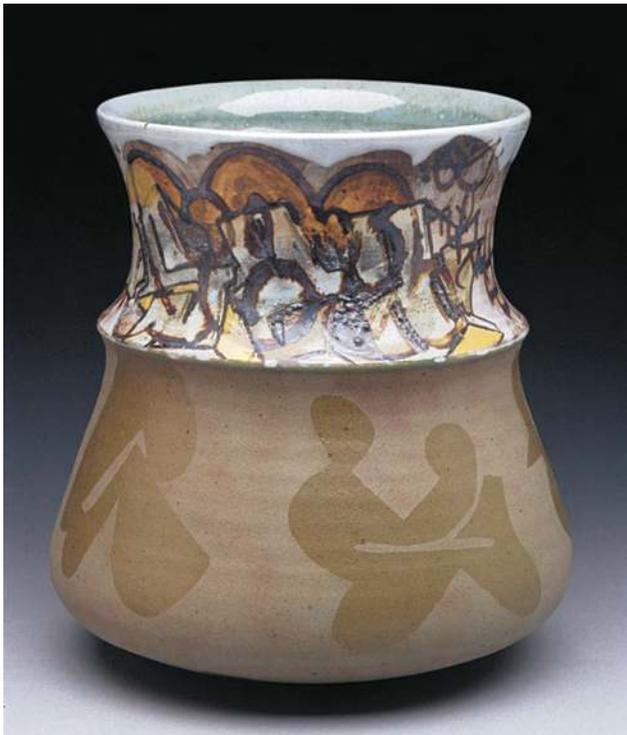
The Japanese-born ceramic installation artist Sadashi Inuzuka once reminded me of a question he asked me many years ago when I was visiting his student studio at Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, British Columbia. “What is the difference between pottery and sculpture?” Apparently, I answered with another question, “Is there a hole in the top?” If so, the answer was “pottery, not sculpture.” I don’t know whether I would hold so tightly to that view today but, in Smith’s case, the force of his attempts to expand the pot’s sculptural

status (especially in the wall-and-pedestal pieces) seems so labored that it is perhaps more worthwhile suspending sculptural expectations for Smith and placing him closer to artists like Ken Price (always a hole in the top) or Kathy Butterly (small scale, but no hole).

Looked at intimately and individually, Smith’s pottery carries signs and symbols with rich references in its surface decoration—if not in scale, volume or mass—to traditional expectations for sculpture. Even though they are usually installed with the painted Masonite thought-bubble behind them, let us examine a couple of the *Cloud Cup Series* on their own. *Moche Spoke* transfers the look of Mayan pottery shapes



Linear C (Cloud Cup Series), 7 in. (18 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware with slip and glazes, 2005.



Codex with Throw-Ups, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, thrown stoneware with slip and glazes, 2003–04.

to Japanese green-and-cream Oribe-type glazes. A blue finial resembling a bird's head perches beside an apostrophe-like handle, acting as a second handle. Asking the humble cup to do too much? Not when the viewer accepts smaller scale as a focus for reverent introspection.

With greater sculptural presence than the others because of its monochrome gunmetal-grey glaze, *Linear C* almost topples from all its additions and insertions, recalling Frank Stella's abortive attempts to turn painting into sculpture by adding dimensional layers. Only, with Smith's cup, this angle works: the cup disappears in a morass of altered and textured sections.

Left with the open hole at the top, Smith devises ingenious and original ways to work within the limitations of the Midwest university-based ceramic department "requirements." Light years away from West Coast figurative or abstract ceramic sculptures, Smith inserted snippets of graffiti vocabulary onto terribly staid thrown pots. The handbuilt *Codex with Throw-Ups* contrasts crowded, over-the-top decoration with strictly segmented, separated areas of Matisse-like figurative cut-outs and violent overlapping (and unreadable) graffiti tags and letters. It's almost as if Smith is paralleling the fate of graffiti within his lifetime: from subversive guerrilla street art to cooperative set-aside areas in approved urban developments.

One art critic fell all over himself addressing Smith's earlier, perhaps edgier, works with results that, as is often the case with postmodern theory, tell us more about the art critic than the artist or individual



Fill In, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, slip and glaze, 2002–2005; by Malcolm Mobutu Smith, Bloomington, Indiana.

artworks. B. Stephen Carpenter II's two long disquisitions on Smith unsuccessfully attempt to situate Smith with other African-American contemporary artists such as Glenn Ligon, David Hammons, Adrian Piper and Fred Wilson. Adapting a favored, but confusing, Post-modern strategy called "hypertext," Carpenter sees Smith's fragmentary sections of lettered glaze decoration as the perfect example of hypertext—i.e., how one fragment can cross-reference other cultural issues and artists. He explained how Smith's "richly layered visual references. . . lead to substantive conceptual, historical and ideational connections" ("Ceramics As Hypertext and Curriculum: Malcolm Mobutu Smith's Complex and Complicated Clay Conversations," Carpenter, *Terracotta Magazine*, January 2007). All this for one cup?

Laura O'Donnell, reviewing Smith's 2006 exhibition in Champaign, Illinois, is more skeptical of Smith's sampling. Writing of the Cloud Cup Series' "back splashes mediating the space between the wall and the work...this relationship seems arbitrary, as if the back splash could be switched from one work to another" ("Touch and Circumstance: Recent Work by Malcolm Mobutu Smith," O'Donnell, *Critical Ceramics*, April 2008).

Following on the artist's 2000 trip to China, *Tripod Arabesques* has indirect references to African pottery and Tang dynasty tripod vessels (shades of Rick Hirsch). *Tripod Arabesques* moves beyond the vase, vessel and cup into a territorial realm that is a cultural hybrid of elegant ambiguity and indigenous forms. Less sampling now than a mastery of global influences, Smith's work may be moving into a new phase, one more spontaneous and informal, shying away from the pressures of postmodern critics to belabor social content over formal qualities. If so, the preceding combinations of cultural references and thrown-and-altered container shapes may lead to an art of greater subjectivity and a deeper, less-obvious dependence on tagging and graffiti as compulsory artistic identities and strategies.

For more information about Malcolm Mobutu Smith, and to see more images of his work, visit www.malcolmmobutusmith.com.

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