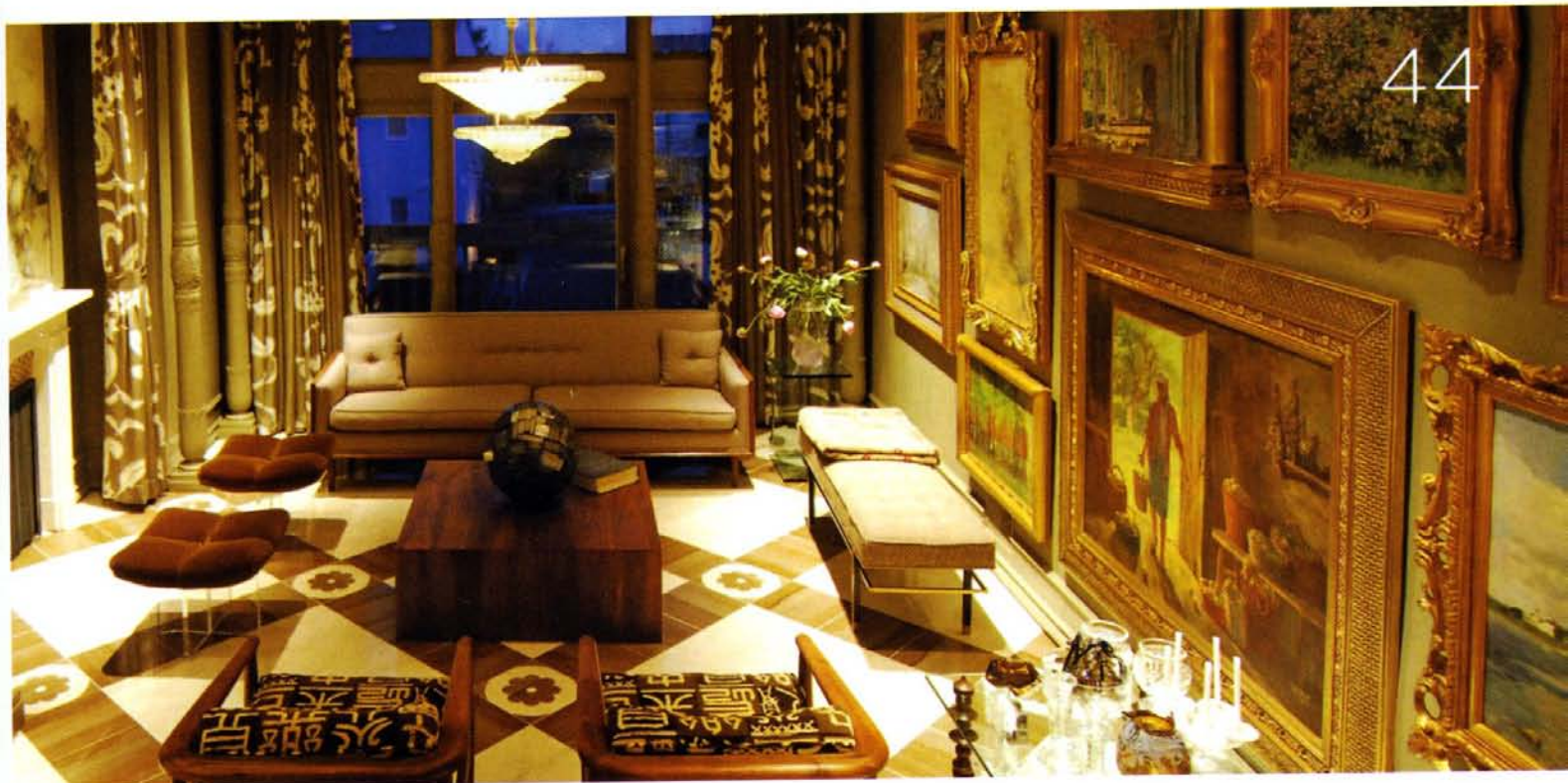




CHICAGO PRINT COLLECTION PLUS CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS



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Glazes of Glory

Collectors and curators alike are watching these six contemporary ceramists who are elevating the profile of their medium. BY MARILYN FISH



► Akio Takamori, "School Boy," 2001, stoneware with underglaze.

With the prices of antique ceramics going through the roof (a Zsolnay luster vase at the Jason Jacques Gallery in New York is listed at more than \$250,000 and a Ming vase sold at Christie's Hong Kong on May 30, 2006 for \$10,207,600), the prices of technically perfect pieces of modern manufacture seem reasonable. And these works with eye-catching forms and decorations are capturing a significant share of the new collectors market.

Beyond technique and beauty, look for subtle meaning, which can come in the form of historical references, political commentary and even humor. To quote a famous Aesthetic-era joke (*Punch*, October 30, 1880), a bride admiring a wedding gift says to her husband, "Oh Algernon, Let us live up to our teapot." The mandate seems to be reversed. Your "teapot" must live up to you, and to do so it should match more than your wallpaper. It must also reflect your aesthetic expectations, the Zeitgeist and your personal point of view.

When it comes to discovering the best in contemporary ceramics, Akio Takamori, Gregory Kuharic, Michelle Erickson, Ken Price, Paul Katrich and Richard Notkin are names to investigate. At first glance, these artists seem to have little in common beyond their passion for clay. Consider: What could be more unlike a dead-serious teapot by Notkin than a whimsical gourd by Kuharic? But these artists share an interest in connecting past and present and a delight in ambiguity—and in doing so are capturing the attention and imagination of collectors. Akio Takamori credits his upbringing—he is the son of a provincial Japanese physician—with his interest in exploring the human condition. As a youth, Takamori acquired empathy for people of all social strata and broadened his horizons by studying his father's library of international art and medical books. After graduating from Musashino Art College in Tokyo, he apprenticed in the manufacture of traditional production



Michelle Erickson
"Virginia,"
2006, decorated
earthenware

pottery at Koishiwara, Kyushu, but altered his course after seeing an exhibition of contemporary ceramic art from Latin America, Canada and the United States and being struck by what he called their “anti-authoritarian” quality. This inspiration was reinforced when renowned potter Ken Ferguson visited Takamori’s workplace and, impressed by the younger man’s skills, encouraged Takamori to study with him at the Kansas City Art Institute. Takamori obtained a B.F.A. and then an M.F.A. from Alfred University, in Alfred, New York, in the late 1970s.

After working as a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, Takamori moved in 1993 to Seattle, where he accepted a position as associate professor in the University of Washington’s ceramics department. His work can be found in the collections of museums in the United States (such as Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, and the Museum of Ceramic Arts at Alfred University), Japan and the Netherlands, and he has been recognized with awards from the Flintridge

Foundation (2003) and the Joan Mitchell Foundation (2006).

Some of Takamori’s earlier flattened vessels and more recent three-dimensional sculptures are interpretations of earlier Eastern and Western art, while others are rather literal representations of his remembered youth. The vessels are pinched ovoids in section, with front and back walls of varying heights. This allows a complex interplay of interior and exterior decoration that invites multiple, at times contrasting, interpretations. The sculptures depict Japanese courtesans and their well-endowed lovers, Velázquez’s Infanta Margarita and Bruegel’s Dutch peasants, as well as earnest Japanese school children and whimsical large-headed babies. “Takamori’s work deals with love, lust and memory, and the interaction of cultures,” says Frank Lloyd, a dealer in Santa Monica, California. “He is interested in the contrast of iconic female figures from different cultures.” His work ranges from \$5,000 to \$15,000.

Like Takamori, Gregory Kuharic is inspired by historic forms, but instead of fashioning a global village, he creates fields of hybrid gourds, melons and fungi in borrowed or rented studios (most recently at the Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts in Edgetown, Maine), then sells his harvest in his Manhattan apartment by appointment. His vegetables have subtle anthropomorphic qualities and a group of them seems as much like a wacky family at a holiday table as the contents of a Thanksgiving cornucopia. In the late 1974, Kuharic graduated from the ceramics and sculpture programs at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and began producing functional stoneware and porcelain in his studio. In 1987 he moved to New York, studied American art at Sotheby’s and was soon appointed Sotheby’s vice president in the 19th- and 20th-century decorative arts department. While in that position, he became fluent in the language of world ceramics, focusing on Yixing teapots and French Art Nouveau stoneware. In 2002, with new insights at his command, Kuharic returned to the studio. Mary Roehm, head of the ceramics department at the State University of New York at New Paltz, was so pleased by the technical perfection and accessibility of his work that she accepted his application to be an artist-in-residence during the summers of 2003 and 2004. This enabled him to create a body of work while sharing his expertise with student potters.

Using high-fired stoneware clays and a combination of methods, Kuharic creates varying forms in his ongoing vegetable series, and his works range from \$800 and \$8,500. With some elements wheel-thrown and others hand-built, he assembles inventive shapes. The scale leans toward largeness, some vessels reaching a height of 18 inches, and surface decoration are texturally exciting combinations of glaze and sculpture. “The stems, either

▼ Michelle Erickson, “Knight Errant,” 2006, white earthenware





◀ Gregory Kuharic, a selection of soda-fired stoneware gourd-form vessels, 2007.

▼ Akio Takamori, "The Dance," 2001, stoneware with underglaze.



handles or finials, present an opportunity to create a gesture or attitude, and provide a sense of whimsical movement," he says.

Michelle Erickson's work is also humorous but in a far more satirical vein than anything by Takamori or Kuharic. She began working with clay while pursuing a B.F.A. at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Inspired by the ceramics taken from the earth near Colonial Williamsburg, she analyzed and experimented until she reproduced the materials and methods used by 17th- and 18th-century English potters to make the chargers and posset pots, mugs and figurines found in the average Colonial households. "When pieced together, the vessels and fragments of the past create a mosaic of human experience," says Erickson, who for 25 years supplied the shops of Williamsburg with convincing replicas made in her Virginia studio.

Sexual imagery and the fruits of the vine are rare in an oeuvre that quotes Delftware, slipware and porcelain

figurines and sweetmeat dishes. Instead, Erickson tackles the present political scene. If Staffordshire potters had chosen to depict Don Quixote astride Rocinante in lead-glazed earthenware or unglazed or salt-glazed stoneware, the meaning would have been clear to 18th-century viewers. Using the same materials, methods and general form, Erickson recasts the man-on-a-horse story as a political cartoon. Examples of Erickson's work take on terrorism, slavery and hot-button topics, always with enough ambiguity to make even the most savvy viewer stop and think. Jamestown 2007, an umbrella group that includes Colonial Williamsburg, recently commissioned her to create a gift for England's Queen Elizabeth II, and her work is featured at Williamsburg and also at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Garth Clark, owner of the Garth Clark Gallery in New York and recognized expert on 20th-century ceramics, says of Erickson, "Her technique alone qualifies as her a standout in the current scene." Erickson's work ranges from \$4,500 to \$40,000.



▲ Richard Notkin, "Heart Teapot," 1988, stoneware.

▼ Paul Katrich, "Midwestern Summer," 2006, luster-glazed earthenware.

"I want to explore colors in nature and the natural world is riotous with color, organic and inorganic. I recognize no limits in this regard."

—Paul Katrich

► Ken Price, "Sourpuss," 2002, fired and painted clay (facing).



Deliberate ambiguity is a common motif with these six artists. Takamori's sensual nudes can appear at once to be based on Picasso or Utamaro, the faces of his school children might be tearstained, or maybe that thin, drippy glaze on their cheeks is strictly an aesthetic choice. Kuharic's taut and spiky gourds suggest grenades, while a larger, more amorphous form could just as easily represent a fat, affable uncle as a watermelon past its prime.

And Ken Price may have served as a role model for the others in his love of ambiguity. After receiving a B.F.A. in 1956 from the University of Southern California, Price studied at the Los Angeles County Art Institute and earned an M.F.A. from Alfred University in 1959. While Los Angeles County Art Institute (then the Otis Art Institute) Price was part of the Otis group, which was instrumental in transforming clay from craft into a vehicle for personal expression. The group, led by Peter Voulkos, incited a "revolution in clay" by questioning the tradition that ceramic forms must be utilitarian and by creating instead nonfunctional, sculptural works that gave the medium a new freedom of expression. But in the 1960s, when the ceramics avant-garde was producing large rough-surfaced work, Price preferred a smaller scale, brighter colors and a finer finish. The sea and the surf fueled his imagination but, as he captured the movement of water and foam, he also suggested giant amoebas, surreal human body parts and children's rubber toys. Lloyd calls Price "one of the seminal ceramists within the world of contemporary ceramics. His work was pivotal and addressed ceramics in a sculptural way that caught people's attention."

In recent years Price, a professor of art at the University of Southern California, has taken to hand-building, firing and painting biomorphic sculptures with successive layers of bright acrylic paint. He repeatedly sands the surface, finally leaving a textured residue that gives a piece the look of an artifact found on a distant shore. According to Garth Clark, Price, who became part of the so-called "Fetish-Finish" movement in Los Angeles, "is today one of the most celebrated and revered ceramists in the fine art." Price's works are in the permanent collections of The National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Seattle Art Museum, among others.

Paul Katrich's approach to color is similar to Price's, although his forms are simple, classical vases and bowls. "I want color back, I want beauty," he says as he entreats us to enjoy nature's glory. He uses glazes on his pots to take us on a journey deep into the earth's core, over its verdant surfaces and into distant galaxies. Schooled in art history and painting at Wayne State University in Detroit, Katrich became a conservator at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, where exposure

to pottery of various eras proved inspiring. He now extols anonymous potters from ancient Egypt, Persia and Greece; Americans Louis Comfort Tiffany and Theophilus Brouwer; and Europeans Clement Massier, Emile Gallé, Jacques Sicard and the Zsolnay factory.

"I want to explore colors in nature and the natural world is riotous with color, organic and inorganic," says Katrich, who taught himself to throw, glaze and fire and now lectures widely. "I recognize no limits in this regard." His glazes can be reflective or lumpy, quiet or flamboyant. With a fertile imagination and a mountain of skills at his service, he has vowed never to repeat himself. In 2006, the American Art Pottery Association recognized Katrich's command of clay by presenting his vase, "Midwestern Summer" to the Everson Museum, in Syracuse, New York, which owns one of the largest and most significant collections of pottery in the nation.

While glazes are vitally important to Katrich, Richard Notkin's best works are glaze-free. Using a dense clay that retains minute details, he guides us into a looking-glass world, where everything is the opposite of what it first seems to be. Polite tea parties are interrupted by nuclear explosions, and the future of mankind is determined by a careless toss of the dice. Yixing teapots inspired his technique, sense of scale, precise working methods and penchant for trompe-l'oeil. Originating in the Yixing region of China, 120 miles northwest of Shanghai, the originals were made in an array of naturalistic shapes commonly understood to symbolize good luck, long life and fertility. "The precise little details are extremely well-wrought," says Clark.

Notkin's personal vocabulary of symbols trumpets a warning to the global community: His shackled and thorny hearts are reminders that evil lurks within us all, and nuclear cooling towers and angular skulls allude to death rather than long life, a concept that can be interpreted as a retort to the cheery "good luck" pots of Yixing or as direct observations of the dangers of modern life. "My work is a visual plea for sanity," he says. "I consider myself a sculptor with a strong commitment to social commentary. We have entered the 21st century with the technologies of 'Star Wars' and the emotional maturity of cavemen—a very dangerous combination."

Although they have chosen the same medium, Takamori, Kuharic, Erickson, Price, Katrich and Notkin spin entirely different tales. Each in his or her own way fulfills Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's description in "Kéramos" of a potter as an artisan, who by "pursuing his own fantasies, can touch the human heart, or please, or satisfy our nobler needs." ■

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