

Symphony of Shards Rick Dillingham's Legacy

By Garth Clark



A.

A.
Rick Dillingham
Large Bowl, 1989
earthenware
14.75 x 18.5
photo: Anthony Cunha

B.
Gas Cans, 1982
glazed stoneware
with metallic leaf
various sizes
photo: Mark Freeman

I recently spent a year spent examining ceramics in the Southwest from the Pueblo Grande and Four Corners areas working on a project for Europe, Free Spriti the New Native American Potter. My research unearthed more than just shards by Indian potters. It also revealed to me how the legacy of a past master, Rick Dillingham (1952-1994) has fared. Dillingham was not just an artist but one of the most respected and knowledgeable dealers in Indian pottery. He was a good scholar as well and his 1974 book *Seven Families in Pueblo Pottery* (re-issued and updated in 1994 to fourteen families) sold over 80,000 copies and became a standard text for the field.

His name came up everywhere, with grudging admiration from fellow dealers and unstinting praise from native artists. The grudging side of the admiration had to do with the fact that one would not describe Dillingham as "easy." He was informed, highly competitive, passionate and just a tad arrogant, a volatile mix. The Indian potters remembered him warmly and without reserve. (No pun intended.) In his dealing, trading, and art making he treated these potters not just with the respect they deserved but with a sensitivity to their cultural differences. There was never a hint of Anglo paternalism and that was appreciated.

They also admired his work even though it drew from their legacy, albeit indirectly, normally a touchy issue on the Pueblos. In some ways I think that they also envied him. Dillingham had freedoms they did not enjoy as artists. The Indian

market is strictly proscribed by the tastes of a conservative, ageing marketplace. Any potter wanting to sell has to accept the rules. The cardinal one was refinement, pushing surface finesse to the point of perfection, rarely a virtue in art. Indeed it is not just amongst the Native American collectors that we find this approach. The mainstream American market also worships at this temple. But at least in Dillingham's case the market was broad enough to accommodate him as well.

This reverence for Dillingham got me to go through my papers on him and I came across a piece I wrote about him in 1993, the year before he died of AIDS. It still rang true and in a way served as a metaphor for the battle of the Indian potters to escape the yoke of the revival pottery movement, now in its 125th year:

Many ceramists search for perfection in an unblemished wholeness or unity of form: clays without impurities, glazes that are even and well-behaved, firings that produce pots without cracks. Many collectors enjoy much the same taste. They shy away from as much as a hair-line crack on an otherwise dramatically beautiful vase. Perhaps they do not want to be reminded of the fragility of costly man-made objects or maybe they are trying to avoid confronting their own mortality.

Rick Dillingham's pots stand as a rebuke to the urge for perfection and a commentary on our fragile impermanence. However, in common with

the pierced burial pots of the Mimbres, they also have an optimism seeing loss as an essential part of a life-giving cycle of birth, death and resurrection. Dillingham begins by creating a flawless vessel which he then tenderly and carefully destroys only to reassemble the fragments and retrieve the shape but with the raw scars of life's experience evident on the fissured surface. The implications of this process are multifarious but the bottom line is that the critic or collector is being invited to take seriously and revere what is essentially a broken pot.

This presentation of "damaged goods" is as evocative as it is challenging. We have all experienced reassembled pots in museums when looking at the wares of Pre-Columbian, Greek, Roman and other ancient cultures. In this hushed and academic environment the damage takes on a romantic, archeological aura. We know that the hand of the scholar and the restorer have lovingly collaborated to bring the object back to life. The care that has gone into this process of reconstruction further instructs us that the object is worthy of the cost and labor of preservation and so heightens its status to that of cultural treasure.



B.



C.



D.

C.
Cone, 1984
glazed stoneware
with metallic leaf
14 x 12 x 12
photo: John White

D.
Large Globe, 1987
honey colored stoneware
with gold
11 x 16
photo: Mark Freeman

The vessels by Dillingham also evoke this preciousness of context to some degree and this gives them a mystery, drama and potency. Conceptually, his pots become part of a lineage of worthy ceramic forms that have been retrieved from death. However Dillingham's work, seductive as it is, is not always received positively and particularly not by those coming upon it for the first time. Some find the act of breaking and then rebuilding to be profoundly disturbing, an infuriatingly arrogant gesture that is less creative than confrontational. Certainly arrogance is one of the colors in Dillingham's emotional palette and he enjoys challenging the status quo. But his arrogance is neither irrational nor destructive, it is a calculated act designed to take one's breath away and in the stasis of that momentary vacuum challenges one to look at the art of the potter in a new and exciting way.

Dillingham directs one to *first* acknowledge the vessel's parts before one can appreciate it as a whole. This is a radical step for it completely reverses the process by which we have traditionally looked at pots. For this reason his work has had considerable influence in encouraging today's increasingly deconstructive approach to the vessel. However, Dillingham's genius does not exist solely within the notion of reconstructing pots. The idea, innovative as it is, could easily have become tired and pointless. It is just a starting point and so his pot can only be as interesting as the journey that follows.

He achieves this interest through his unique skill as a painter on a three dimensional "canvas." Dillingham has an eye for unconventional composition that approaches the style, freedom and energy of assemblage. Each shard has its own character and identity, sometimes painted to overlap into other shards and sometimes to stand

alone. Each relates to other shards (and not necessarily those that are directly adjacent) in ways that are cunning and subtle while at the same time responding to the overall architecture of the pot. This symphony of painted shards, a masterfully directed merging of textures, shapes, colors (from earthy orange slips to hedonistic gold leaf) is Dillingham's real gift and more than twenty years since he decided to smash his first pot, and bring it freshly to life.

Garth Clark
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Garth Clark is a widely published ceramic arts historian, critic and dealer. He was this year's recipient of the prestigious Mather Award, the College Art Association's highest award for art criticism.

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E.



F.

E.
Globe Form, 1980
raku
10d
photo: Mark Freeman

F.
Untitled Vessels, 1978
earthenware
various sizes
photo: Mark Freeman