



# Ken Eastman—Architectural Form

*Review by Patricia Degener*

IT WAS THE EXCESSES OF THE '80s ART THAT GAVE ME a new appreciation of minimalism, an appreciation which figures in my admiration for the works of the English potter, Ken Eastman. Eastman's pottery was introduced to an American audience in November, 1993, in an exhibition at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, Illinois, which offers a strong program in ceramics. The exhibition was guest curated by Horty Shieber and Michael Holohan of Pro-Art in Saint Louis, a gallery which, over the years, has shown not only outstanding work by the best American craftsmen but has introduced work to the US by potters from Great Britain and Australia.

Eastman's austere, flat bottomed, slab built, vertical-walled stoneware pots explore relationships in shape and volume, interior and exterior. Thoughtful and conceptual in nature, they are informed by the

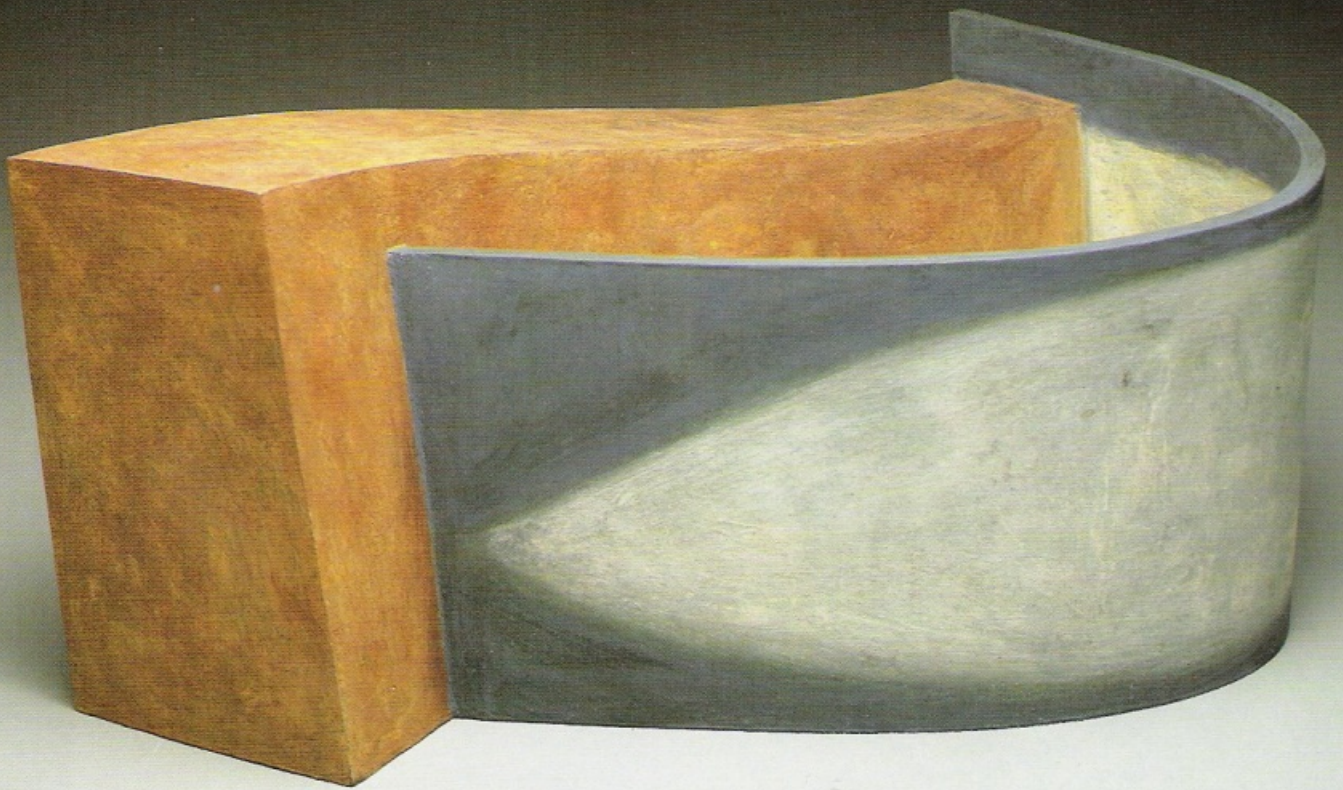
disciplines of architecture. In fact, I am reminded of California architect Frank Gehry's wonderfully fanciful guest house outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota on Lake Minnetonka. And Eastman delineates the complexity of his formal relationships, at the same time softening the severity of his forms with areas of surface painting in vitreous slips, much the way as Gehry paradoxically defines and at the same time unifies his complex of variously shaped forms by clothing each in a different surface material and colour.

If the viewer of an Eastman pot, after a cursory exterior glance, believes that what he sees is all that he gets, he is in for a surprise. Just as in architecture where interior space is, after all, what should be its primary focus, Eastman's interior volumes are full of surprises. One large pot consists of an open circular shape, its exterior slate blue has a pattern of white



Above: *Untitled pot*. 34 x 43 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art. Collection of Donna and William Nussbaum.  
Below: *Rise and Fall* (two objects) each 20 x 30 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art. Collection of Scott Jones and Ray Lauer





Left: **Untitled pot**. 26 x 46 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art. Above: **Untitled pot**. 20 x 43 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art. Collection of Karen Johnson Boyd. Below: **Untitled pot**. 18 x 44 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art.





*Untitled pot. 30 x 35 cm. Courtesy of Pro-Art. Collection of David Charak*

half circles to lead you visually around it. It is bisected by a taller, rust coloured roofed tower. But the surprise is found in the interior as the tower ends in an open horizontal slit where it meets the base of the pot so that one quite literally imagines the air contained by the open pot flowing silently into and filling this secret maze-like enclosed space.

The interior volume of other open pots is smaller than the often sloping exterior walls so one knows the form is double walled enclosing hidden space. Several pots are roofed with concave or convex slabs of clay so the entire volume is hidden though implicit.

As calmly satisfying as Eastman's curved and often elliptical forms are, it is his treatment of surface that raises them above the ordinary. His colours are muted rusts, slate blues, whites and grey greens. The vitreous slip surfaces are dry and seamless (in contrast to a glaze covering).

But somehow Eastman manages, through multiple firings, to make these rough surfaces luminous, even Rothko-like. He has said that he thinks more like a

painter but the colour treatment is always in relation to form.

The pleasure of these works lies in both their intimacy – they are pots – and their intimations of large scale mysterious enclosures. They exhibit rigour in their honed down expression and authenticity in an understanding of medium and the tradition of the pot as container. This is especially rewarding considering that so much of contemporary ceramics seems full of tired ideas and displays of technical virtuosity or banal content that merely winds up as vulgarity.

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Patricia Degener is a freelance writer, a potter, and the former senior art critic for the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*. An exhibition of the work of Ken Eastman will be shown at the Contemporary Applied Arts Gallery, 43 Earham Street, Covent Garden, London from 19 May – 24 June, 1995.