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Caressing Light

Brian E Miller discovers unexpected depths in the porcelain ceramics of American ceramist Curtis Benzle.



In a gallery in the artsy neighbourhood of downtown Columbus, Ohio's capital city, I discovered a wall of striking vessels. Shaped like cups and saucers or boats with thin walls and scalloped edges, they seemed to have sprung from the sea, like shells that drifted up on the shore. They were the work of Curtis Benzle, a potter who has long worked with porcelain. The pieces seemed to be fashioned as much by nature as the hand of the artist – a subtle, alluring, masterful hand. This is achieved with muted images of fish, leaves, and flowers veiled under layers of translucent porcelain. Another factor is the fluid forms, some of which undulate like reeds swaying in the tide, and with colours suggestive of rainbows, the soft glow of a campfire, or autumn leaves.

In *Softly, As In a Morning Sunrise*, fish fashioned with the Japanese nerikomi technique swim amid a yellow blue haze, veiled under a screen of black dots, a motif that permeates his work. In *Early Autumn*, the light brings out the red and yellow of tumbling leaves. With strong backlighting, the affect is dramatic. The back wall of *Celeste* emits a lava-like reddish glow. Benzle says his work is 'primarily painterly in orientation. It is surface that I am fascinated with. I want forms to carry information and not be dominant.'

When the images are not embedded, but in a surface layer, they stand out, as do the blue reeds in the front wall of *Softly, As in Morning*

1 *More Than Meets the Eye* (detail), porcelain coloured with refractory stains, alumina frame, acrylic substrate, fluorescent light; painted and hand formed, H121cm
 2 Curtis Benzle of *SOFA 2006*. 3 *Avaton*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed,

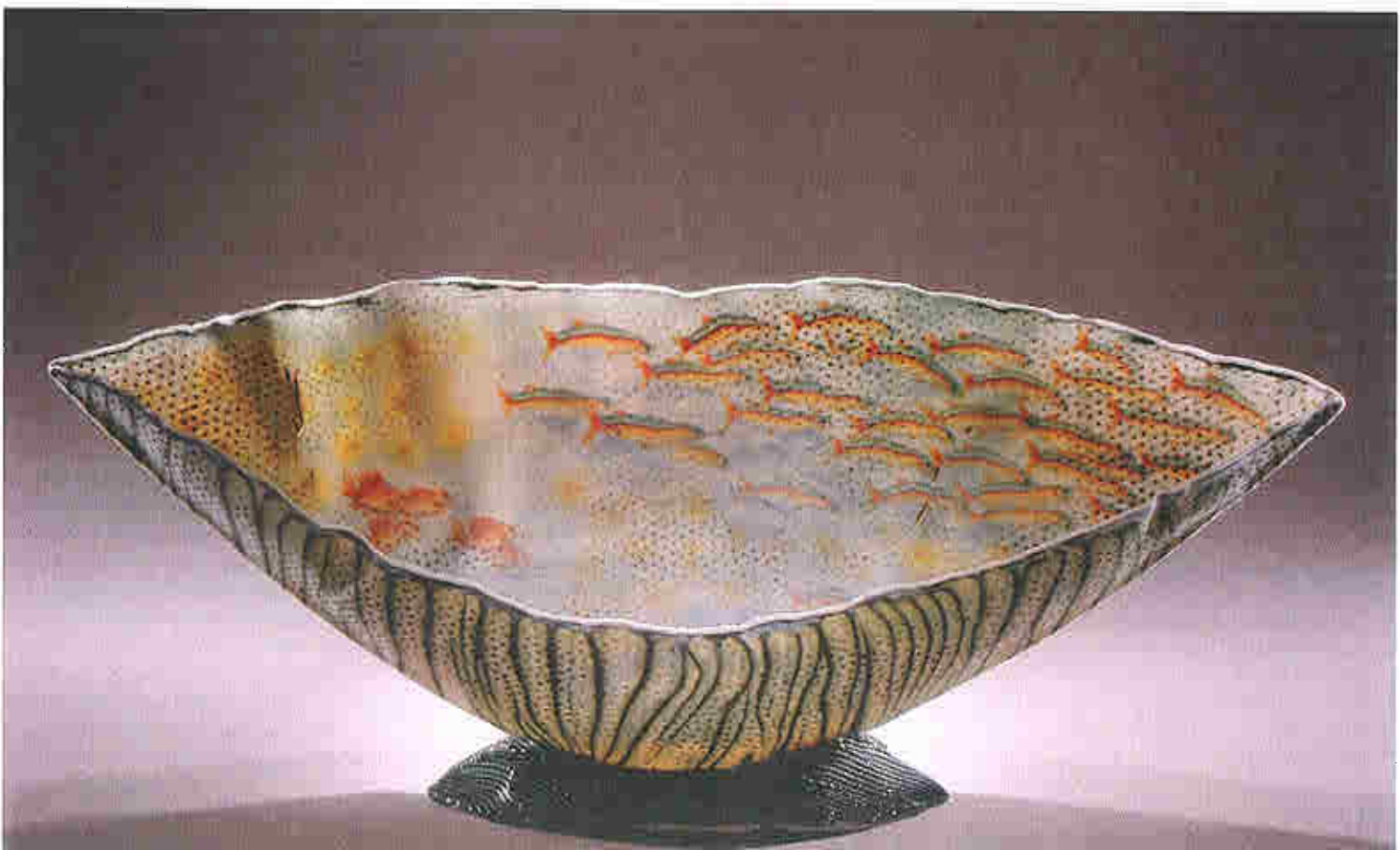
saggar fired, H20cm. 4 *Love Lives*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H13cm. 5 *Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H20cm

Sunrise. The combination of surface and embedded layers give his pieces an almost 3D feel. When I came for a visit to Benzle's studio, about a dozen boat-shaped vessels were lined up on the sill of a window, taking advantage of the backlighting. Peering over the low-slung front walls, I found myself looking into subtle panoramas of fish, leaves, and abstract images. 'Clear transmitted light – transparency – excites the senses', Benzle said on his use of translucency. 'Caressed light – translucency – soothes the senses. My aesthetic intention is to provide a visual sanctuary. Translucency is a vital tool required to realise that intention.'

TRADITION Curtis Benzle is part of Ohio's rich tradition in ceramic artists – a by-product of its clay deposits and abundance of natural gas to fire kilns. Benzle's father was a cartoonist for the Associated Press; his mother was involved in the arts. At Ohio State University, he chose art over philosophy, picking what he thought was a more practical subject, while admitting neither offered a very lucrative future.

While studying ceramics and glass there in the late 1970s, he developed an appreciation of both the light-emitting quality of glass and the malleability of clay. He found his ideal material in porcelain, though he struggled to find a clay body that would transmit light while allowing him enough plasticity to shape it and assemble it for firing. His eventual solution was a clay body with just twenty percent clay, but containing plasticisers that enabled him to work with it.

LAYERING In his studio Benzle demonstrated his technique of building layers – usually two to four – by brushing porcelain slip onto a piece of fabric. Then he either paints it using coloured slip (yellow, coral, green,





and blue are favourite colours), or arranges on it images developed using the nerikomi technique. By painting slip over images such as flowers, fish or leaves, he ties the design together.

In the nerikomi technique, the images are pieced together with fine bits of porcelain. Slip is used for the fine lines, such as the veins in leaves. Round slices of these images are piled one on top of another to form long columns. Slices are cut off as needed. The dots are formed by pressing a drill bit repeatedly into a layer of slip, brushing dark-coloured slip over it, and then wiping away the excess.

ASSEMBLING The biggest challenge is assembling the pieces because the walls are so thin and the proportion of glass-forming materials in his clay body is high. "You won't find porcelain any thinner except some antique Chinese "eggshell porcelain,"" says Benzle. With its high glass content, his material essentially melts during firing. To tame this, he uses a refractory firing sagger as a mould that helps him shape the piece and hold it together during firing. "This part of the process (forming) is actually physically exhausting, as it requires constant attention and takes up to two hours", says Benzle. "Were I to keep the scale in the miniature range – under 10cm – the whole process would be vastly simplified, but I would sacrifice the aesthetic impact I am after and some of the challenge".

In his cup-and-saucer shaped pieces, the thinness of the porcelain is particularly striking. The razor-thin lip seems to undulate like an undersea plant. The contour on the lip is formed as he assembles the slabs in the firing sagger. "Because the porcelain is very thin it dries quite rapidly, making this manipulation of the rim tedious at best", notes Benzle.

What most impresses Betty Talbott, director of the Ohio Craft Museum in Columbus, is Benzle's technical skill and control – his command of the chemistry of the glass-like material and the placement of the images within paper-thin ceramic walls. The museum's collection includes *After You're Gone*, a box-shaped vessel decorated with the nerikomi technique

4. *After the Rain Came*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H50cm. 7. *Sentimental Journey*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H21cm. 8. *Surfside Serenade*, porcelain

coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H18cm. 9. *Moving On*, porcelain coloured with refractory stains; nenikomi and slip painting, hand formed, saggar fired, H20cm

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that was a collaborative effort with Benzle's former wife, Susan. They donated it to the museum in the early 1990s.

Working with such thin walls, Benzle has come to expect cracking due to shrinkage during firing. At first he saw these cracked pieces as defective and tossed them out, but, after thirty years as a ceramic artist, sees cracks as a natural by-product of his work, a documentation of the history and life of the piece. Instead of tossing them, he fills the cracks with 24k gold leaf after applying an epoxy resin. The gold leaf forms long veins that sometimes run from top to bottom of a wall. Some resemble a bolt of lightning.

In *Phoenix*, a deep vessel decorated by an abstract pattern and fish, a web of gold veins adds a blaze of the unexpected. Benzle strives to keep the gilded corrections in aesthetic balance. 'If they are repaired with a respectful attitude, nine-tenths of the time the piece will look better. Things break rationally'. Nevertheless, in some pieces, the gold-streaked repairs seem to intrude on the delicate design.

Benzle's approach has changed little over time. While his older vessels are not meant for practical use, he embraces the idea that art can be functional and beautiful at the same time. At one time he supported himself and his studio making ceramic jewellery such as necklaces and earrings. A case in point is *More Than Meets the Eye*, a piece that functions as a kind luminous sculpture, providing at once light and beauty. The piece consists of thousands of individually cast porcelain leaves mounted on a plastic form and backlit to reveal their veins and dark and light areas in shades of green and red. 'A piece like *More Than Meets the Eye* is, in the end, far more difficult to create than a straight up sculpture, as it must succeed on both a sculptural/visual level and a practical/functional level,' says Benzle. On the underside of each leaf in braille is a rough description of the piece.

One of Benzle's favourite stories is about a Chicagoan who bought one of his vessels and was thrilled with it. When Benzle met him some months later, the buyer had a revelation to share. He had discovered,



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embedded in a layer of porcelain, thousands of fish he had not noticed when he bought the piece. 'I like an inanimate object that can interest and fascinate long after the buyers think they have figured it out', says Benzle. ☐