

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## In Conversation: Betty Woodman with Phong Bui by Laura Allsop

On the occasion of Betty Woodman's two simultaneous exhibitions, *Breakfast at the Seashore Lunch* in Antella at Salon 94 (January 21 – February 26, 2016), and *Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic* (February 3 – April 10, 2016) at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London (her first solo presentation in the U.K.), she spoke with Phong Bui before an audience at Salon 94. Following that cold, Valentine's Day Sunday, the two spoke again back in New York, at Woodman's Chelsea studio. The following is an edited version of their two conversations about her life, work, and evolving process.



Portrait of Betty Woodman. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.

Phong Bui (Rail): The late Arthur Danto's essay, "Communicating Vases," in the catalogue for your 2006 retrospective at the Met, not only illuminated my understanding of your work, it imbued the objects you have made with dignity. To paraphrase Danto's wonderful description, your works often consist of two or more vessels, unified by surface patterns and the implied gestures of their appendages, that are simultaneously juxtaposed, as if they were engaged in some kind of performance whose meaning is reflected in the way their shapes and sizes relate to one another. They're ensembles of internally co-responsive parts—a duet or trio in music, or an intimate conversation between two people. Danto brought up Matisse's great painting *The Conversation* (1908 – 12) which shows the painter standing in profile, like a Doric column, dressed in striped pajamas, talking to his wife, Amélie, in opposite profile sitting on an armchair, dressed in a robe de chambre. It

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

looks as though he were telling her, "I love you dear, but I love painting more." That's a good place to start. In other words—did such a conversation ever happen between you and George? [Laughter:]

Betty Woodman: It happens frequently, even though we've been together for sixty-three years and we love each other. When we go to work in each of our studios, we're not busy knowing each other, we're only busy knowing what we're doing. We're concentrating on our work, so we would both agree that our works are the most important. It's a mutual understanding that we're constantly cultivating.

Rail: It's amazing that, in your very first pottery class in high school, you instantaneously felt the magic of ceramic glaze—how the application of a dry, rusty color becomes a shiny, green-and-black glaze after firing in a kiln. You immediately wanted to become a potter. You were barely sixteen.

Woodman: There was no question that I really responded to this material. I had been interested in music and art, among other things, but I had a visceral and profound response to the way clay felt in my hands. I had a wonderful teacher in high school, Miss Miles, who helped me look for a pottery school because I decided I really wanted to be a potter. I wasn't interested in being an artist at the time. I wanted to make functional objects that would better lives by virtue of the pleasure of beauty. I was very interested in the whole issue of keeping craft traditions alive. I should add that the loss of control when the object that you've just made is put inside a kiln and you don't know how it will turn out is a big part of the magic that I love. Later, when George graduated from Harvard, where he went as an undergraduate at his father's insistence—

Rail: To study philosophy!

Woodman: Not exactly! George was always a painter. But Harvard didn't have painting classes in those days, so he ended up studying philosophy instead. That was when I met him, while I was teaching pottery classes at a studio, which used to be the swimming pool of a dormitory, after studying at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University from 1948 to 1950. As soon as George graduated in 1953, we got married and moved to Albuquerque, where he went to graduate school in painting at the University of New Mexico, and I started a pottery business with Elenita Brown called Roadrunner Pottery. We produced all sorts of domestic objects and trotted them around to various stores to try to sell them. I didn't think of myself as an artist, or of having my work seen in the context of other works of art, until we started spending more time in New York in the 1970s.

Rail: That was just about the time the P & D [Pattern and Decoration] Movement gained visibility and momentum, which was very connected to feminist art, in rebelling against Minimalism and Conceptualism. Before moving to New York you had a Fulbright grant to Italy in 1966, and you met Richard Serra in Rome—he was also a Fulbright recipient that year.

Woodman: The four of us—me, George, Richard, and Nancy [Graves]—spent lots of time together. We practically lived together for the year. I'll never forget when Richard decided he wanted to have a live pig at a gallery in Rome where he was invited to do a solo show.

Rail: Galleria La Salita. Yes, it was his first solo show since his graduate work in painting at Yale. After seeing great paintings in museums in Europe, and being exposed to Giacometti's and Brancusi's sculptures in particular, he gave up being a painter altogether. That first show was an attempt to get away from his academic origins. There were stuffed and live animals together: chickens, rabbits—

Woodman: —and a live pig. Exactly! A big live pig in a dog cage, which Richard and Nancy had taken from the zoo in Florence and placed in the middle of the gallery. There's a long and memorable story about the pig, but what was important was that the show got onto the evening news on television. It was controversial, yet many

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

people saw it. It was also an important year for Nancy, because it was at the Rome zoo that she became interested in the camels.



Installation view: Betty Woodman: Breakfast At the Sea Shore, Lunch in Antella, Salon 94, January 24 – February 26, 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Je Elstone.

Rail: When did you first come to New York?

Woodman: We came to New York for a semester in 1977 so that George could meet artists, critics, and galleries interested in P & D and show them his work. He had been involved in pattern-based painting for many years. There was a group called Criss-Cross in Colorado that was interested in pattern to which he had been a mentor and tutor. It was through George and the critic Amy Goldin that I met all of those wonderful P & D artists, Joyce Kozloff, Bob Kushner, Miriam Schapiro, and Cynthia Carlson, among others. It was an exciting time—all of us were visiting each other's studios, looking at and sharing what we were doing. When I finally came to New York in 1980 there was a ceramics studio on Jones Street called Clayworks Studio Workshop, set up by Susan Peterson, who I knew through the clay world. I invited Joyce and Cynthia to do collaborative projects with me there.

Rail: At the time, Amy was immersed in the study of Islamic art; she became an eloquent, supportive critic of the P & D Movement.

Woodman: Exactly! Amy was the voice and Holly Solomon was the gallery that showed the works. They both championed the P & D Movement and its artists.

Rail: What sort of work did you do at Clayworks Studio Workshop?

Woodman: My two collaborations with Joyce and Cynthia.

Rail: Can you describe your first, with Joyce?

Woodman: It was fascinating because we talked about my point of view from a crafts background, and her point of view from an arts background, and how those differed. Her use of clay, for example, was partially a feminist gesture. She thought that clay was something that women were involved with. And my feeling was that the world of clay at that time was totally dominated by men. Of course, in some societies, clay was something that women did and in others something that men did. I don't think it's gender-specific.

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

Rail: It was certainly true with the California Clay Movement—the participants were all men: Peter Voulkos, Stephen De Staebler, Kenneth Price, Robert Arneson, Billy Al Benson, Jim Melchert—

Woodman: —It was primarily, of course, happening in the West Coast. I was living in Colorado, and I think Colorado looked more to the West Coast than to the East Coast in terms of what was going on in art at the time. But I also think it was affected by the fact that when the ceramics movement in the United States developed, at the end of the Second World War, there was all sorts of funding given to universities to accommodate GIs returning from the war, as well as people in general. So, these art departments started to include ceramics as a discipline. And there was always a male teacher.

At any rate, in my collaboration with Joyce I made the forms and she decorated them. It developed as we went along. There were a bunch of pieces where either she or I would puncture holes, and she would reattach the small pieces from the holes. Later we had a show at Tibor de Nagy in 1981. But the first thing we did together was a series of little puffy porcelain cups that I made in Colorado and dropped off in her loft in SoHo while I was on my way to Italy so she could paint them. I remember feeling bad about our collaboration because a dozen cups was an afternoon's work for me. But for her to decorate them took three months. Anyway, we had a long discussion about how much money we should charge, and how we were going to split it up. It was very funny because I was just telling Joyce I had just been to Tiffany's and I said, "I saw cups that were 100 dollars each!" Tibor came down and said, "Charge whatever you want, but zero percent of 100 is zero." We decided that we would charge 100 dollars a piece, which seemed like a lot of money, but we figured a few of our friends would buy some and it would be fine. Sydney and Frances Lewis, the owners of a now defunct chain called Best Products from Richmond, Virginia, with whom many artists traded art for washing machines and so on, came in and bought them all.

Rail: What about your collaboration with Cynthia?

Woodman: Cynthia was doing wonderful things. She was doing work with extruded paint, using a technique she learned from her friend's father, who was a cake decorator. We made all sorts of tiles and flowers, among other things, which then led to a huge installation, *An Interior Exchanged* at the Fashion Institute of Technology in 1982. It was in a great long corridor that opened up into a room, which in some ways changed the whole interior of the building. It was another product of the difference between the way craftspeople and artists think. For a craftsperson, material is the most important; for an artist, the concept seems to be the most important.

Rail: One of the joyous aspects of your work is that it intensifies a sense of both pleasure and growth. The wall installation, for example, reveals what you have learned from your friends and your environmental awareness—it reflects your willingness to experiment and your curiosity about process over result.

Woodman: For me, environmental work, and work that relates to architecture are absolutely within the tradition of clay. Collaborating with Joyce and Cynthia reinforced my awareness of it. It was a matter of opening my eyes to Islamic tiles and mosaics from other cultures outside of the United States, among other things, that the P & D artists were interested in.

Rail: Would you say that George approached P & D from a different perspective?

Woodman: During those years, George's paintings evolved from an interest in pattern as a formalist and minimalist stance rather than decoration. This was encouraged by his studies of philosophy and the mathematics of tessellations. His difference of perspective brought a significant contribution to the study of pattern. At that time I was still making functional things. Actually, after we decided to live in New York City part of the time, I realized I could not keep making functional pots at the same time that I was making works of art that were shown in galleries in New York. It meant that I was dividing my time into four months in Colorado, four months in New York, four months in Italy.

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

I had to give up making functional pots, because that was the hardest thing to do for four months and then stop. It is something that one does with a sense of rhythm; you don't just start it and stop it. So, I decided to make this dinner party called Presenting Food at the Fabric Workshop when Kippy [Marion Stroud] had a space in Chinatown in 1985. It was a crazy collaboration with a good friend, the master caterer Daniel Mattrocce. I made all of the dishes, vases, pitchers, and platters, and he made the food. We invited fifteen people from the art world to participate in this dinner.

Rail: Was it Gerrit Lansing's place?

Woodman: Yes, it was his place, the temporary space of the Fabric Workshop. I made a proposal to Kippy and she embraced it. It was lots of fun. It was eating as a kind of performance, what Rirkrit [Tiravanija] is doing now with his social practice. I've been doing social practice all my life! I think that the art world, when they take something, it becomes theirs, and they change the rhetoric.

Rail: One thing that most of us familiar with your work would agree with is that you have what could be referred to as a promiscuous appetite for influences—the opposite of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. You seem to absorb everything, whether Greek, Etruscan, or Roman vessels; 18th-century porcelain or Classical pots; Tang Dynasty pottery or Japanese oribe pottery; Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, Gauguin, or Fra Angelico—the references are endless. How do you mediate all that? How does it manifest in the moment that you begin to make a work? How does the image emerge and where do you begin? With a line or a wash of color, consciously or unconsciously?

Woodman: My first approach to any work of art is to think about material and process. I ask the same question that you ask, "How do they do that?" I also work compulsively. People often ask me, "How do you stay on working at your age?" What else would I do? This is what I love, and it's what I'm really very interested in. You mentioned Fra Angelico, who was an amazing colorist. There's a little 13th-century painting that I saw at the San Marco museum in Florence that I just thought was wonderful. So I wrote out a list of all the colors in it, and used those colors in making a piece, *Fra Angelico's Room* (2012). And I've done this with other works of art. For a while it was Gauguin whose use of colors captured my interest. So I tried to reference those colors in another work of mine, *Balustrade Relief Vase 04 Gauguin #1* (2004). The paintings in the show involving images of a table—*The Kitchen Table* (2014), *The White and Black Set* (2015), and *Sicilian Dining Room* (2015)—come directly from Bonnard paintings. Every work of a certain period is of a table with important objects on it, so I took off from that reference. I've done a whole series of pieces of the table motif for about two years. It's grown and become more abstract, so that the table protrudes into three dimensions, which pushes the perspective in bizarre ways. These pieces have also grown when I've felt the need to integrate clay. The ceramic elements are more realistic, in a way, because of the kinds of things that are on the table: the pitcher, the teacup, and so on. I worry: "Is it a caricature? No? Yes? What am I doing?" I just get involved with the piece itself.

Rail: I always felt that Picasso was envious of Bonnard for the latter's sensitivity to the minute subtleties that occur between things, and also for his sensitive treatment of colors, which generate intimacy particularly in interior scenes. Mercedes Matter tells the story of Franz Kline remarking to Guston that Bonnard's nudes would never be able to get out from those bathtubs. [Laughter.] Which brings me to my next question: your images are simultaneously floating and anchored. In Barry Schwabsky's essay, which also appears in the catalogue of your retrospective at the Met, he observes there is a co-existence of object/image that oscillates between what is considered flat, silhouetted, and what is three-dimensional. Did you always feel at ease working through such polarities in your work? Do you worry about what makes sense when you move between those two conditions?

Woodman: I am really a visual person: the decisions that I make are visual, and not necessarily intellectual. So that would be the difference between Picasso and Matisse, or Bonnard's fragile images. I just look at those

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016



Betty Woodman, Balustrade Vase 04 – 4, Gauguin #1, 2004.  
Glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, and lacquer; 60 × 40 × 10  
inches. Courtesy the artist.

nudes, for example, in the bathtub and don't worry about how they are getting out. [Laughter.] To me, Bonnard's nudes look right just as they are. In other words, each of my works has a different kind of balance each time. Sometimes the three-dimensional element is more pronounced. Other times it's not.

Rail: When did you become more aware of viewers looking at your work differently, as works of art rather than functional objects?

Woodman: I'm always a little tentative about what I'm doing and how people are going to look at it. I think all artists are. At the same time, I don't pay too much attention to it, because I try to follow the work where it takes me. I am using the word "painting" today, and I haven't dared to use that word before in my work.

Rail: They are painted on pre-primed, very finely woven canvases, with acrylic paint, right?

Woodman: Yes.

Rail: And they're painted mostly in one sitting?

Woodman: They're pretty much painted in one sitting. I paint on the floor.

Rail: Do you make small studies or do you just trust your spontaneous, direct rapport each time you begin a new work?

Woodman: I don't make studies, except for the large pieces. I have one piece now at the ICA that's ten meters long in four panels. That required studies, partly because I couldn't paint it all at once because of the size of my

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

studio. Otherwise, for the most part, I make decisions about color as I go along. Sometimes it's a decision to use color like Fra Angelico. Other times it's not. It's always one piece that feeds the next. These pieces are usually painted with acrylic, but I also use white clay.

Rail: Have you ever destroyed a work when it doesn't turn out the way you expected it to? You are so prolific that you remind me of Milton Avery, who sought to make a painting per day, and succeeded. Do you make a piece a day?

Woodman: I'll share a funny story about destroying work. Just think of it! How do you get rid of a clay object? You can take a hammer and break it into tiny pieces, then put them into a trash bag or bury them! Either way, it's a depressing experience. At one point in Colorado, I decided that I was being too self-destructive, so I decided to put the works out for the trash men to take away. First, my neighbor came out and took a piece. [Laughter:] I of course said, "No, no, no. You can't do that! I'm throwing these away!" And he said, "Well, I'll just take this piece." So he took one. Next, the trash men put the work in the cab of the truck. [Laughter:] And so I said, "Look I'm throwing these away. You can have that one, but the rest should be thrown away." I came back from Italy the following year and the Boulder paper [The Boulder Daily Camera] was listing items for sale. It listed a pink Cadillac and the next thing was a Betty Woodman pot. [Laughter:] God knows where it came from. So it's not so good just to put them out.

Rail: Can you tell us the genesis of the wall pieces? How they came about?



Betty Woodman, Aztec Vase and Carpet #1, 2012. Glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, paint, and canvas, 59 1/2 x 49 x 34 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Bruno Bruchi.

Woodman: That goes along with the story of not throwing things away! It started roughly in 2010. When I work with clay, I make slabs on the wheel, stretch them like pizzas, and then throw them on the floor. Then I cut them

The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016

into various shapes, some representational, some abstract. I started to become interested in the leftover pieces because they were different from what my eye and my hand would do. I put a couple of holes in a few of the leftover pieces, thinking I could probably use them as additional elements to something else. I came back from Italy one year and I just couldn't move in my studio. I had boxes and boxes of all these spare parts. So I asked my assistant to take a piece of brown paper, and to lay the pieces out to make a drawing, so I would at least know what was in the boxes. When he did that, the brown paper looked like a carpet, a rug, a runner. I thought it was really interesting. So I started to make simple ones, using one or two colors painted on canvases that could be laid on the floor like rugs. Some included cutout slabs, arranged as all-over patterns on top. Others would be a combination of three-dimensional and two-dimensional elements together. Then, somehow, I had a show at the gallery's Freeman Alley space and I wanted to give things away that everyone could take home with them. So I saved a wall and glazed a whole bunch of these pieces. I did it with no particular plan. Just, every time I fired a kiln, I left a few shelves and glazed a bunch of pieces: pink ones with red spots, green ones with yellow. Then I took a piece of plastic the size of the wall and laid them out in a pattern so that we could put it up in the show, and we announced that it was first come first serve. Everybody could take a piece.

Rail: What!

Woodman: Yep. [Laughter:] Where were you? It will happen again—or it may not. [Laughter:] But when it was finished, it was really beautiful and I didn't want to give it away at all. But I had already announced that I was going to give them away so I did. Then I started making other pieces. Actually Jeanne [Greenberg-Rohatyn] said she wanted a piece for the gallery on 94th Street [Salon 94] so that was the first one. It's grown since then. The one for the show in the ICA, which has a very complicated long corridor, has 300 parts in it. The wall piece is becoming more and more a part of my work, and it grew out of chance, not by planning ahead!

Rail: In his essay Barry also mentions that, similar to Matisse's use of scissors in his cutouts, you use a heavy needle, formerly used for sewing mattresses in Italy, to cut into clay. Looking at this particular wall piece *Wallpaper #10* (2015) now, several other references come to mind. Firstly, there is the ecological reference, to recycling. Secondly, there's an emphasis on negative space, the space between that allows the quasi-referential form to appear. Lastly, Arthur Danto, in his essay, referred to your work as a spirited communication, which was based on your comments about making objects that are both potentially functional and intended as works of art. He thought of them as "communicating vessels" because they exist between reality and a dream world. Arthur offered a wonderful reference to Descartes in his famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where Descartes argues that there may be no internal difference between dream and waking experience at all. Instead of sitting by a stove, snowbound in Germany, dressed in his warm dressing gown and writing his philosophical thoughts on paper, he might really be lying naked in bed, cozy under the duvet of his bedroom in Touraine, dreaming that he was snowbound in Germany. Whatever test he might use to tell the difference could itself be dreamt. There is, after all, no internal criterion to determine if something is real, so there need be no criterion of whether something is dreamt.

Woodman: When you're working on something, you always wonder, "Can I get away with this? Is it working, isn't it working?" It's the space between that I've been interested in for a long time, it's been important in the development of my work over time. I think that when I started to make, say, a triptych that came from an observation of a little Picasso drawing, the spaces in between became as important as the three actual pieces. It's especially true of the *Wallpaper* piece. But most of the changes in my own work really evolve from one piece to the next: from looking at my own work, the works of others, and things in my studio. It happens when you see something that you didn't see previously, like those scraps of clay that became the wall pieces. It's similar to the space that I've explored for years and years between artist and craftsperson, which is both interesting and challenging, and I don't think that one thing is inferior to the other. Each has a different goal, a different function. It's my responsibility how and where my work is viewed in different contexts.



The Brooklyn Rail, April 6, 2016



Betty Woodman, *The Summer House*, 2015. Glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, acrylic paint, canvas, and wood. 338 1/2 × 92 1/2 × 12 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Photo: Mark Blower.

Rail: How do you respond to ceramics becoming an accepted medium, even a popular one, in the last decade? Arlene Shechet, Joyce Robins, Nicole Cherubini, Cameron Jamie, Rachel Kneebone, and Sterling Ruby—just to name a few—are being celebrated these days!

Woodman: If ceramics wasn't enough, now fiber seems to be the next fashionable medium. It's fascinating that it has become the latest chic material and everybody has to use it. One thing I notice—with a few exceptions such as the artists you mentioned, whom I would describe as masters of their material—is that many artists using clay today are very careful to say that they know nothing about this material; they're just using it. There is a lot to know about this material. It's complicated, difficult, humiliating, fascinating. It's called the world's greatest hobby! I think that as things sort themselves out, artists who use clay will have to learn something about the material to use it in interesting ways. Remember that photography was not perceived as an art form until the last two decades. Now it's certainly a mature art form, and I think the same will happen with clay. Many artists who have always used clay are finally being acknowledged. I am very pleased that it's become acceptable, and that I am the beneficiary of that acceptance.