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NEWS & FEATURES

May 09, 2006



"The Bathers Revisited Triptych," 2004
Betty Woodman

The AI Interview: Betty Woodman

by Robert Ayers

NEW YORK, MAY 3, 2006—No one else works like Betty Woodman. She makes exuberant ceramic sculptures that are often discreet jugs, pots or urns. But equally often, her ceramics gather in groups, clamber up walls or describe spaces that can be entered.

Woodman's achievement has been recognized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is presenting her first U.S. retrospective (and the first retrospective that august institution has ever granted a living ceramics artist). "The Art of Betty Woodman" is on view through July 30.

Woodman has shown with the Max Protetch Gallery since 1983, and to coincide with the Met retrospective, the gallery is presenting her "New Works" at its Chelsea space until May 27. In addition, The Monacelli Press has published a gorgeous monograph—largely designed by Woodman herself—with essays by Janet Koplos, Arthur Danto and Barry Schwabsky.

Woodman spoke with ArtInfo in her Chelsea studio, just as she was opening her kiln to reveal two large figure pieces.

"This is an exciting moment," Woodman says, as she opens the kiln. "It doesn't matter how much experience you have, you just don't know what you'll find. When I paint these pieces, the colors, the surface, everything is very different. [She points to the blue robes worn by some figures emerging from the kiln.] This is cobalt sulfate; it's like a pale-pink wash when I put it on. I'm never sure quite how strong a blue it's going to be. You think you know what you're doing—and at the moment usually I do—but really you don't!"

Standing here in front of your kiln prompts my first question. Your show at the Met has raised all those problems again about where your work sits between craft and art. That must be something you're very conscious of, isn't it?

When critics write about my work for the first time, they make this ridiculous disclaimer, "I don't know anything about clay, but..." If you're writing about painting you don't say, "I know nothing about paint."

But before you came to work in New York City in 1980, you made work that was far nearer to the crafts tradition, didn't you?

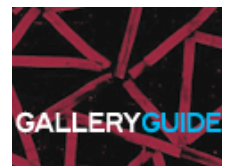
Yes. Most artists don't admit this. A lot of artists begin by doing something else, but then they drop it when they have their new persona. But my husband George and I both taught in Colorado, where I was a production potter. I made dishes and casseroles and all kinds of things to make an income. That was our bread and butter.

But at the same time, I also had a studio in Italy, so I didn't try to

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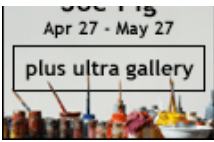


As yet untitled figure sculptures in Betty Woodman's kiln.



"Roman Windows Trip," 2006
Betty Woodman





duplicate what I did in Colorado in Italy. Why bother? In Italy I wasn't involved in functional work, so I was involved in things that were more experimental in the use of color.

So would you say that the beginnings of the work you're making now were discovered in Italy?

Yes. I went to Italy when I was very young, so I think that I have a way of looking that is colored by that. But there were also technical things that I discovered in Italy—an awareness of the low-fired tradition and an understanding of the kinds of things that you can get away with when you fire clay at a low temperature that you can't at a high temperature. Particularly in the use of color. When I was in college, everybody wanted to do higher-temperature stoneware which was much more limited in its color. I went off to Italy after I graduated and I saw all this stuff like Etruscan pottery that was very important to me.

But then as soon as you got to New York, you were accepted by a gallery.

Yes. I walked straight into the arms of a gallery. And after a few years, Max invited me to join his gallery. People in galleries are always looking for what might be the next thing, and the buzz was that it might be ceramics, but Max was interested conceptually. He was taking my work as art, and presenting it as art.

But it still belongs to a tradition of vessel making, it seems to me.

Yes. That's a given. When I stopped making those pots in Colorado—and I made tens of thousands of pots—I didn't want to let go of that huge experience. Why not figure out how to keep that experience in my work? The first pieces where function was essentially their subject matter, rather than how they were used, they really came out of that.

But then you bring that tradition into the realms of sculpture and picture-making. In fact, it seems to me that your work sits midway between sculptures and pictures. Doing a picture of a sculpture is one thing, but making a sculpture of a picture ...

... Is what I do! Yes, you've got it. That's exactly what I'm doing.

And that's echoed in the way that you'll bring different media together in the same piece.

All of us make art in such different ways, but some things happen subconsciously and some things happen consciously. Everybody has certain things that are 'given.' The way I feel about working with clay is that it's something that I know how to do. It's a given. But you can't just do what you know how to do. You have to have different challenges. If it gets too easy, it's no fun when you open the kiln. You have to be on the edge; you have to be unsure of yourself.

And is that surprise factor why you sometimes paint your pieces completely differently on each side?

Well, some pieces are physically very different from one side to the other. But when I started doing that, I think what I said—and it clarified it for me when I said it—was that it's very much about the history of ceramics, which is the history of painted form, and the fact that you can change your perception of the form by how you paint it.

But at this point I think that the truth of the matter is that I really love the painting and I'm very interested in it. It's a lot of work making these pieces and it's like I have two different canvases, to be honest. I'm not sure they have to be seen all the way around, or that there's a relationship. I think really it's just simply that I can make two different paintings on this one object.

Images (top to bottom): Collection of Bunty and Tom Armstrong; Artinfo; Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery; Collection of the artist, New York; Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery; Carnegie Museum of art, Pittsburgh, PA; Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Newhouse (2); Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery (3)



"Etruscan Series Vase," 1966
Betty Woodman



"Italian Window #11," 1982
Betty Woodman



"Frivolous Vase and Shadow," 1983
Betty Woodman



"Floating Kimono Vases (view A)," 1992
Betty Woodman



"Floating Kimono Vases (view B)," 1992
Betty Woodman



"Balustrade Relief Vas,"
2005
Betty Woodman



"Balustrade Relief Vas,"
2006
Betty Woodman



"Aztec Vase," 2006
Betty Woodman
