



# Peace/War, Survival/Extinction

## An Artist's Plea For Sanity

I HAD SOME KNOWLEDGE OF RICHARD NOTKIN AS A CERAMICS artist before. His craftsmanship, technical execution and ability to manipulate and bring clay to life are well-known among potters. It was when I attended his exhibition *Peace/War, Survival/Extinction: An Artist's Plea For Sanity* at the Holocaust Museum in St Petersburg, Florida during the 2011 NCECA conference that the significance of his work became a reality for me. It was one of those rare opportunities to observe an artist's lifelong artwork all in one place, reading it like a book. Except that Notkin does not write books. His language is built from symbols, which become the building blocks of his art; the perfect medium for him to express his social and political viewpoints about different incidents in history.

In the early beginnings of his career, the late 1960s, acting as an active anti-war organiser, protestor and draft resister, Notkin already started using his art and craft as a medium to protest against the Vietnam War. As part of the *Bell Jar* series, *And They Shall Beat Their Swords into Plowshares* was created in 1974, just after the war ended. Notkin himself considers this piece as one of two of the more important works included in this show. It laid the foundation for his narrative sculpture, influencing his choices of images as well as the methods by which he mixed and manipulated them to establish his unique aesthetic.

From the top a horse-drawn plough (opening up the fertile earth for new growth) crowns the work, indicating prosperity and peace. This is followed sadly by destruction while the story reverses itself

when observed from bottom to the top. In this piece, the observer may speculate that Notkin was optimistic after the Vietnam War, hoping that all in the country would return to normal and that it would again prosper.

Already pointing to his later works, particularly some of his later teapots and murals in which he combines loose components to tell a story, the 'tinker toy' approach had symbolic meaning. His work became bolder; a skull, military weaponry and fragments of building materials and imagery of destruction became signature elements, used in one way or another. Looking at the overall show, this *Bell Jar* piece makes an opening statement, preparing the viewer for what to expect from his continuing works.

**TEAPOTS:** Including the piece *Tea set – Iraq*, there were eight teapots on display, created from 1987 and representing a period of 20 years, a strong indication of the important role that teapots play in the artist's portfolio.

Notkin, born in 1948 in Chicago Illinois, was introduced to Asian art at an early stage of his life when his father, an immigration lawyer, was often given gifts of art in various media of Chinese origin. Works of intricate detail and tight craftsmanship in the form of a Cloisonné vase, wood or ivory carvings and porcelain pots are all part of the artists earlier recollection.

The teapot was first developed in Yixing, China, in the mid-Ming Dynasty, approximately 1500 AD. Notkin was introduced to Yixing teapots while studying at Kansas City Art Institute, in the collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and later during

### A Review by Antoinette Badenhorst



his graduate studies at the University of California/ Davis when they took field trips to the De Young Museum. Yixing teapots became an important part of his inspiration. Loving the playful charm and emotional content of hospitality and hominess that these Yixing teapots have radiated over many centuries, Notkin borrowed from their character to create the first heart teapots in 1986 making the association with the life that each one of us carries in us and our responsibilities in this world.

With pieces such as *Ironclad II* (1988), *New World Order* (1999) and *Hostage/Metamorphosis IV* (2006), (which carry direct references of war and military gear) and *Sharpeville Krugerrand* (referring to the Sharpeville Massacre in the gold mine region close to Johannesburg, South Africa) he exhorts the viewer with imagery to pay attention to the betrayal of the heart, the place where good and evil are conceived.

In 1981, Notkin created *Universal Hostage Crisis*, a multi-media ceramic and porcelain construction topped with a television set. On the screen, an atomic mushroom cloud rises above Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands on July 25, 1946 as part of the US military's Operation Crossroads. A stark outcry against the anarchy that follows, it again appears in later years, becoming part of a larger and more intense art series beginning with *The Gift* from the installation *Passages* (1999). An interrupted chess game (which indicates social and political gamesmanship) seems to be substituted with a dice, one of the defining symbols that runs through Notkin's later works.

In 2000, Notkin created *Cube Skull Teapot (Variation #23)* a teapot built from square forms; an ammunition box at the bottom that forms the foundation, followed by a die as the binding factor between the foundation and a skull, the representative symbol for mortality. For the viewer, the blind eyes of the skull and those five empty 'eyes' on the die become symbols of desertion. A world that builds its trust on risk taking and the roll of a die is a world doomed to premature mortality. Is it coincidental that the handle is built from 17 more dice encircling a nuclear

*Facing page, top: It is No Use Shouting (Detail).*

*Below left: Teaset – Iraq 2007. Stoneware and glaze.*

*Below right: Blowin' in the Wind II. 2009. Blown glass, ceramic and glaze.*

*This page above: Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow (Detail).*

*Below left: Heart Teapot: Hostage/Metamorphosis IV. 200 \_\_\_\_ Stoneware and lustre.*

*Below right: Nuclear Nuts Teapot (Variation # \_\_\_\_). 200 \_\_\_\_ Terra cotta*

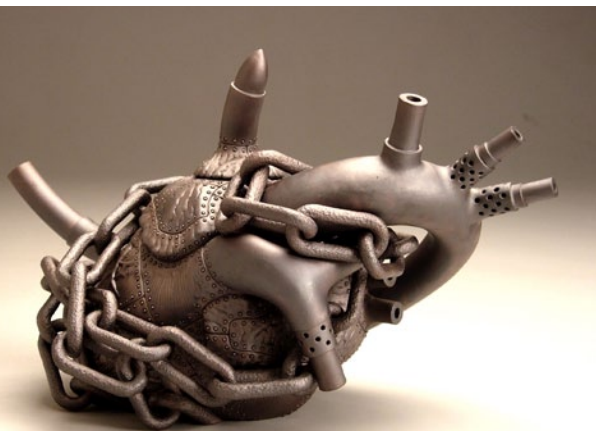
explosion? Or does Notkin continue his stern warning against nuclear weaponry and those who plan, control and gamble with life itself?

In the *Nuclear Nuts* teapot, two small dice found their way to the bottom (next to the nuts) forming the basis of the teapot, while warning signs of nuclear activity form handle, spout and lid. Was this careful placing of the dice next to the nuts an outcry against crazy souls that gamble the core existence of all life on earth?

With the next piece in this visual artistic journey, Notkin shifts the functional parameters of the teapot further away and builds a scene of destruction. Imagery of ruins, dice and cannon balls form the teapot body while cannon barrels become the spout. Using building bricks, ironically normally associated with growth, prosperity and strong foundations, Notkin predicts the effects of war with these wide spread scenes of destruction in the *20th Century Solutions Teapot Series: The Consequences* and *With or Without Reason*, both created in 2003.

**MURALS AND INSTALLATIONS:** The installation *Passages* 1999, consists of two pieces, *Legacy* and *The Gift* (represented in this exhibition as a copper plate etching with the same title). A wall mural consisting of 1106 three-inch square relief tiles with multiple images, familiar symbols from previous works, seems to form a bridge to the next phase of Richard Notkin's work.

Not coincidental timing for this installation, Notkin, just as the rest of the world, lingered on the threshold of the new millennium, while he reflected on history and the upcoming 21st century. His concern with the dangerous proliferation of nuclear weapons and the destruction thereby prompted him





Above: *You Shall Know Them by Their Fruits*. 2010. Terracotta, wood frame. 4.25 x 17.25 x 1.75 in.

Below left: *It Is No Use Shouting*. 2008. Ceramic, fired in sawdust-filled saggars, glaze, wood backing and frame. 80.5 x 58.5 x 3.75 in.

Below right: *Legacy (Detail)*. 1999. Various stonewares and earthenwares. Installation dimensions vary.

to find incidents of the past and forecast them into the future. This meditation of the transition of time became *Passages*.

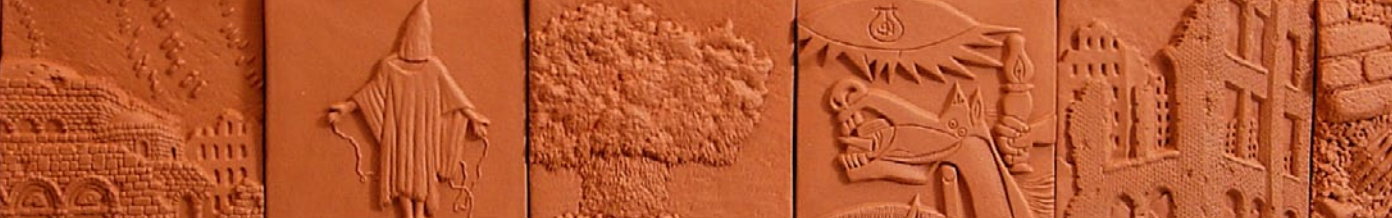
At first, *Legacy* looks similar to river rocks, weathered by water and wind. Then it becomes clear as a pile of approximately 1000 ceramic ears. The viewer makes the connection with fossils (once alive, functioning) and biological objects, now dismembered from human bodies. These ears range from  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 24 inches, formed from prototypes and the use of moulds with each one uniquely finished. Notkin experimented with different clay bodies, firing techniques and finishing processes to ensure the individualistic outcomes of each ear.

Exploring several issues, *Legacy* becomes a monumental piece of art. The artist grew up among Jews who outlived the Holocaust and often discussed the atrocities committed against their people. He makes an association with piles of worn personal belongings of people who unjustly vanished from this earth and the connection with fossils refers to cycles of life and death, human lives that became despised trophies of

war. Ears created from stoneware clay become 'stone deaf', hinting at unlearned and unheeded lessons in the 20th century.

It is at this point that the bridge from *Passages* to *It Is No Use Shouting* (After Goya) becomes clear and it is here that this exhibition reaches its climax. Notkin combines all of his previous concerns (politically and socially) in this single piece which consists of multiple tiles, each telling a story of life and death, hope and despair. Once again the artist uses symbols that now become known to the viewer, as a language learned after examining many of his artworks. If *The Gift* was an important statement, Notkin intensifies the message in *It Is No Use Shouting*. There is once again a familiar mushroom cloud image (this time from Hiroshima). Then the viewer is drawn closer to observe details, fragmented images of skulls, feet, barbed wire, dice, sperm cells, heart tissue, bombed out buildings, replicas of works by Picasso (refer to the painting *Guernica*) and Michelangelo and a reference to the tortured prisoner at Abu Ghraib. All transport the viewer into a world of chaos, despair and abandonment; the results of war. There is a meticulous neatness – a crispness – that leaves no uncertainty about the image presented in each tile; frozen witnesses of an artist's passion to bring a





message home. He goes further to frame the mural with ears; this time glazing them in variegated reds on top of terracotta clay tiles. Just as in *Legacy*, he not only opens it up to many interpretations but, by choosing the red ears, he adds further comprehension as the red, black and white combination of colours refers to the propagandistic spirit of the 20th century.

While *It is No Use Shouting* is the high point of the exhibition, there are other murals also presented. *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* comes as an afterthought, while smaller tile combinations, *You Shall Know Them by Their Fruits, This is What You Were Born For* (after Goya) 2006 and *The Sleep of Reason* (after Goya) are echoes of the overall theme.

The show makes its final statements with two pieces from the series *Blowin' in the Wind*. Cannon balls presented as crying baby heads sitting in a splash of blood red blown glass represent another outcry against war and the effects thereof. In his song *Blowin' in the Wind*, Bob Dylan asks the question, "How many times must the cannon ball fly, before they're forever banned?" and "How many ears must one man have, before he can hear people cry?" Borrowing from this song, Notkin took the familiar symbols from previous works to which he adds another dimension. Working for the first time with glass during the summer of 2009 at the Tacoma Museum of Glass and Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State, the artist proves that he is willing to adapt new approaches to drive his point home. In the artists own words:

"I have always chosen materials, processes and techniques that I find challenging and enjoyable. I love to carve clay, on many different scales. I feel that an artist should work with materials and processes that provide joy and enable the artist to advance in his or her work, to evolve, to constantly expand the aesthetic and technical limitations that we all face at all moments of our creative lives. The territory beyond these limitations can seem foreboding but the risks taken in pushing one's art to new levels of achievement are well worth the

*Above: The Sleep of Reason. 2006. Terracotta, wood frame. 4.25 x 20 x 1.75 in.*

*Below: Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow. 2011. Ceramic, fired in sawdust-filled saggars, glaze, wood backing and frame. 43 x 51.5 x 3.75 in.*

occasional failures. Without these failures, how would an artist know that he or she is truly growing in significant ways? The lack of failure should be viewed as failure itself."

With the *Blowin' in the Wind* series, Notkin shows that he not only takes the risks but that he utilises the materials around him to be successful. He believes that the primary responsibility of an artist is to make aesthetically strong art; the only way that he can reach an intelligent audience with works of art that express social or political concerns.

It is no wonder that Richard Notkin is considered one of the most influential ceramics artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. Uncompromising in his beliefs, he incorporates history as well as art history into his work and creates intelligent and powerful imagery. Spanning 40-plus years, there were bridges built piece by piece toward this exhibition, a well curated synopsis of this brilliant artist. As he moves deeper into the fifth decade of his art career, *Blowin' in the Wind* may be an early prediction of where his future art will take him.

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Antoinette Badenhorst, a potter for almost 30 years, emigrated from South Africa to the US where she earned international recognition with her porcelain work. Although her native tongue is Afrikaans, she writes and teaches in English.

