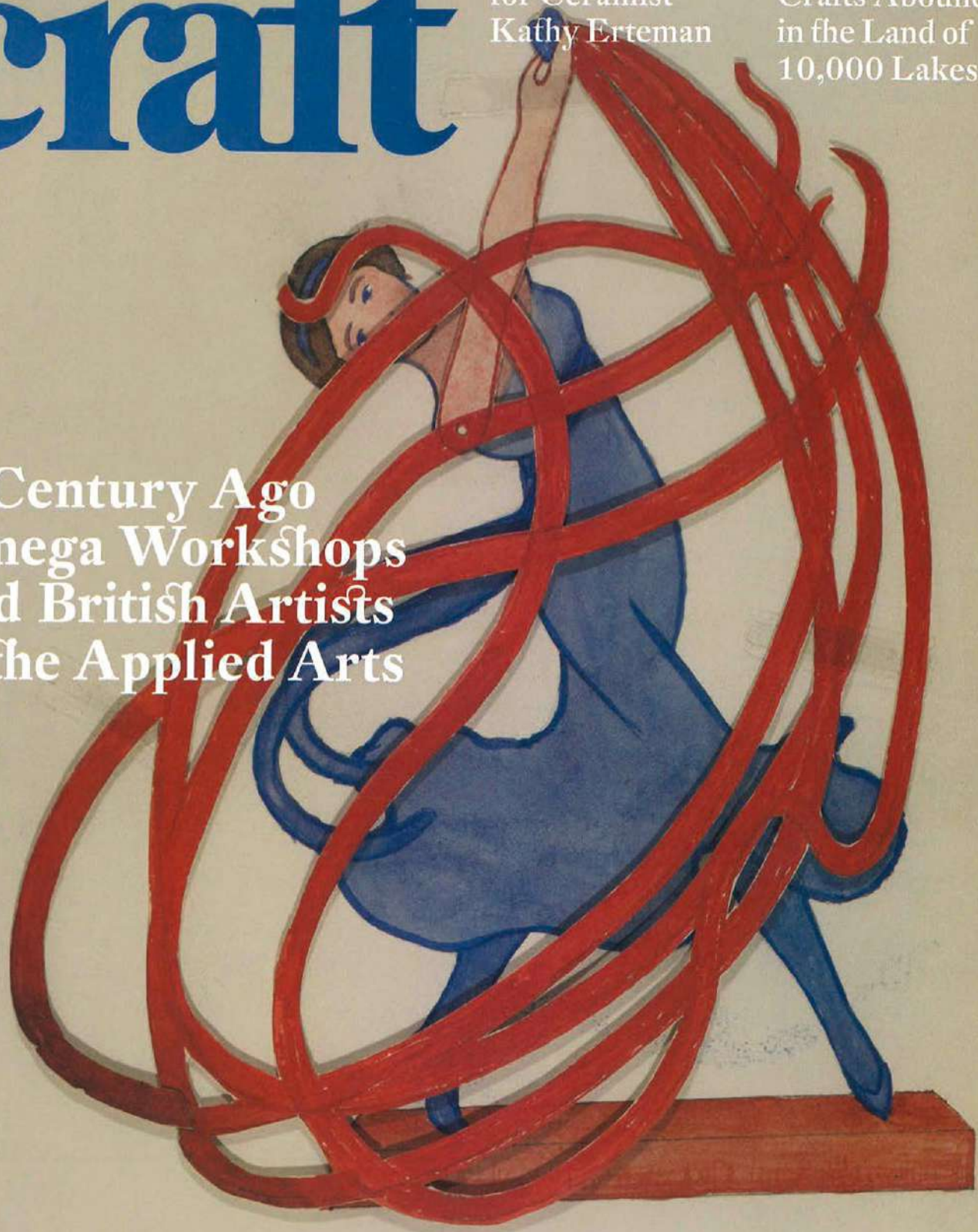


# american craft

New Horizons  
for Ceramist  
Kathy Erteman

Twin Cities  
Crafts Abound  
in the Land of  
10,000 Lakes

A Century Ago  
Omega Workshops  
Led British Artists  
to the Applied Arts





Features

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*Not Everything  
is Black and White*

In both design and studio works, New York ceramist Kathy Erteman adheres to a rigorous purity of form in which functionality is a transcendent concept. Andrea DiNoto reveals how she does it.

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*The Omega Workshops  
1913–19*

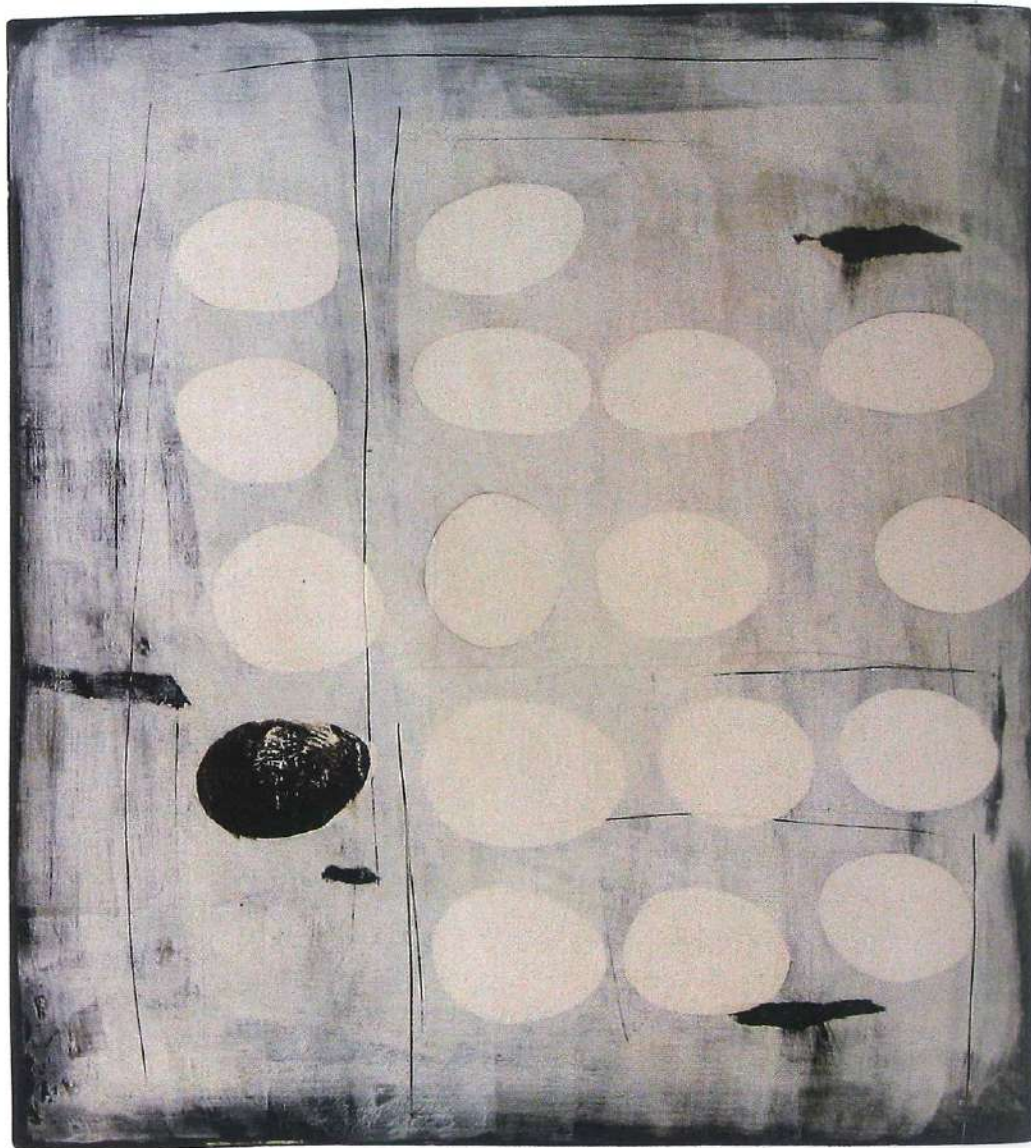
Through Omega, its founder, Roger Fry, aimed to infiltrate Post-Impressionist ideas into the conservative world of the English domestic interior. Julian Stair assesses this vivid foray by artists into textiles, pottery, furniture and other forms of the decorative arts.

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*Craft in Unexpected  
Places*

From opposite directions, two Los Angeles museums—The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens and the Museum of Contemporary Art—succumb to the charms of craft. Joyce Lovelace conducts this win-win tour.

*In both design and studio pieces the work of New York ceramist Kathy Erteman evokes sculpture and painting.*



Kathy Erteman's *Loner*, 2008, slip and glaze on whiteware (h. 18 in, w. 16 in), highlights her modernist sensibility.

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# NOT EVERY- THING IS BLACK AND WHITE

**STORY BY**  
*Andrea DiNoto*

Opposite: *Arc*, Texture Monoprint Vessel, 2008, one of Kathy Erteman's wheel-thrown and altered whiteware pieces (h. 8 in., w. 23 in., d. 6 in.).





It's a cool day in early spring, and Kathy Erteman is standing in her light-filled New York studio pondering a low, oval ceramic vessel. The undulating sides suggest a Serraesque sculptural monumentality, while the



Throughout her career, Erteman has steadily maintained her studio work, which she sees as bridging the worlds of design (planned, intentional) and craft (spontaneous, material driven).



textured outer glaze presents a crusty, expressionist chiaroscuro. An example of Erteman's new work, such a piece, she explains, begins life in a fairly usual manner. She throws a form on the wheel, then "I pick it up at a certain time and stretch it, guide it into the basic shape, then take a look at what the clay wants to do, and we strike a compromise." A slab bottom is created, and the interior is given a black matte glaze. Most arresting is the vessel's decidedly modernist surface: multiple firings, the application of a variety of slips, glazes and surfactants, and finally the graphic technique of monoprinting, all conspire in the creation of the painterly result, albeit one that no mere painter could reproduce. Reflecting on the piece, Erteman comments: "There's some chance and risk in it. It's what I like, what I'm interested in right now."

The painter Robert Kushner exclaims over this new direction in Erteman's work: "It's so rich and unique I can't stand it!" Kushner has collected Erteman's pieces for years and has been encouraging

her "sense of discovery." The results can be seen not only in Erteman's vessels, but in a series of wall pieces in two distinct forms: flat panels in the mode of Japanese sectional screen painting, and sets of modular, three-dimensional forms—one a boxlike group of six-inch squares, another an arrangement of small cushion shapes—designed to be mounted as multiples in a grid to Erteman's specifications. She has also been producing works on mulberry paper, whose fibrous texture reminds her of clay. Using tempera and gouache, she is creating black and white images that relate to her ceramic surfaces, but, she says, "now I understand the decisions painters talk about. When you're working, you're working directly. There's not the chance to pause as with clay."

Erteman began to work in this mode around 2005, diverging from the type of bold, functional vessels for which she is well known: vases, bowls and teapots with carved sgraffito-like black and white surface treatments, typically geometrical motifs that

#### Pottery on the Tibetan Plateau

When Kathy Ertemann arrived at a village in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Yunnan, China, as a consultant through the auspices of Aid to Artisans/Mountain Institute/USAID, for a two-week sojourn in 2007 with local potters, who hand-built their Nixi black earthenware the way it has been done for 2000 years, she first just watched. "I couldn't tell how pieces were made,"







Opposite: *Rust*, 2009, detail, wall square installation of glazed whiteware (h. 18 in, w. 21 in, d. 2 in), one of Erteman's modular wall pieces.

Above: *Duet*, set of carved nested bowls with slip and glaze, designed in 1998 for Tiffany's (h. 7 in, w. 20 in, and h. 6 in, w. 15 in).



Duet photo/James Dee.



Below: *OpenStock Nesting Bowls*, 2000-2004, slip-cast, hand-carved stoneware (largest h. 2 in, w. 14 in), from a collection that Erteman designed and produced in Peru.

Right: *Painted Boat*, 2005, handbuilt white-ware, with layered slips and glazes (h. 3 1/2 in, w. 24 in, d. 10 in).



have the look of brushstrokes. “Before they were fired,” Erteman explains, “I would coat them with black clay slip, then carve the surfaces very spontaneously.” Each piece was finished with several layers of satin matte glaze to impart an elegant sheen in the final firing. But, at a certain point, Erteman felt she had fully explored this approach and began to seek new ways of working the surfaces. “Instead of carving,” she says, “I began adding layers of slip and resists, building up, sanding back and scumbling. I didn’t exactly know what I was after, only that I wanted a deeper, richer surface.” As well, she wanted to carry forward the iconography of circles and lines she had developed for the carved work. This led to experiments with monoprinting—a traditional technique in which images are transferred from one paper surface to another. Working first with an oversize platter form, Erteman used paper painted with slip to print dots and other forms on the surface. She also devised a unique method for using clay itself as the transfer medium because,

as she explains, “I could apply texture to the clay and cut out shapes very easily.” She went on to use the technique on new forms, including tall, cylindrical, slip-cast vases that can reach gravity-defying heights. The graphic treatments can sometimes be viewed as linear abstract landscapes, or in the case of the platters, visionary aerial views that Erteman has come to associate with her own subconscious interpretations of Aboriginal dot paintings. The slab wall pieces, with their groupings of abstract black forms, suggest familial relationships, while the grid modules—each one different in glaze and texture—demonstrate how effectively an assemblage of purely ceramic identities can function within a minimalist geometry.

Ward Mintz, an independent curator and collector who owns and treasures several of Erteman’s carved pieces, finds himself “drawn to Kathy’s strong modernist impulse.” He adds: “Some of her glazes remind me that she’s an heir to a California ceramic tradition that I associate with the great duo Otto and Gertrud Natzler.”

Although Erteman does indeed boast California roots, she is of Dutch and Viennese heritage. Erteman’s mother was a fashion designer and commercial artist, while her father inherited artworks from uncles who were art collectors in Amsterdam. The Natzler name was an oft-repeated mantra in her home. “When I was very young,” says Erteman, “I saw photos of the Natzlers working in their modern home studio. I thought ‘That’s how I want to live.’”

Erteman came of age as a potter in the 1970s during the ferment of California’s ceramic revolution, whose avatars—Peter Voukos, Robert Arneson and others—were declaring the functional vessel *DOA*. “In my 20s in school in the Bay Area,” says Erteman, “you weren’t even allowed to make functional pots.” But that point of view didn’t resonate with her. “I saw things as either sculpture or functional pots, and sculpture could be made out of any material,” she says. “It didn’t need to be clay.” Erteman committed herself to the vessel form and has pursued functional, well-designed ceramics throughout her 30-year career. At times she has felt herself pigeonholed as a “designer,” perhaps because her stylish pots were sold







Erteman's New York studio, 2008, with work in progress.



she says, so it was important that she had the skills of both a maker and a designer.

The potters, all men, made traditional items such as yak butter tea pitchers, vases and hot pots for cooking. In a local instance of recycling, the white decoration on some pots is created by inlaying fragments of factory-made porcelain bowls into the wet clay. Their pots are pit-fired with wood and

sawdust up to 200 degrees Celsius.

"After observing methods of making for a week," Erteman says, "I was able to direct them to new designs using their traditional techniques." Her hope was that new designs would "appeal to the local Tibetan markets and tourists."

Among the new designs were condiment containers for chili oil and barley powder and





Left: *Bucket Vessel*, 2007, wheel-thrown and altered terra-cotta with slips and glaze [h. 7 in, w. 11 in, d. 9 in].

## Erteman's surface applications conspire in the creation of the painterly result, albeit one that no mere painter could reproduce.

at commercial outlets such as Barneys. Erteman also created a set of limited edition carved nested bowls for Tiffany's as part of a special marketing program for handmade objects in the manner of Louis Tiffany. She now designs tableware only on commission, or on a consultancy basis, as she did for Crate and Barrel, working with a factory in Thailand. Throughout her career, she has maintained her studio work, which she sees as bridging the worlds of design (planned, intentional) and craft (spontaneous, material driven).

Unlike, say, Betty Woodman, whose exuberant, brilliantly painted deconstructed vessels represent a paradigm of contemporary art-based ceramics, Erteman adheres to a rigorous purity of form, in which functionality, though retained, works as a transcendent concept. There is no pretension to sculpture, but the sensibility is there, nonetheless. The restraint Erteman shows in her work extends to her palette, long restricted to black and white and neutrals. Now touches of ochre and, more dramatically, a vivid Yves Klein

blue are being used for some pieces. "I am a person not interested in blue at all," says Erteman, but "for some reason I was interested in that inky indigo as related to black."

Erteman's skills as a ceramist, along with her generosity of spirit, have led her into teaching—at Greenwich House Pottery, the Brooklyn Museum and as artist in residence at the American School in Singapore. In a project funded by USAID, she has also traveled to the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Yunnan, China, under the auspices of Aid to Artisans, an organization that helps connect artisans in emerging nations with their market. This project, operated in conjunction with the Mountain Institute, which supports mountain cultures worldwide, brought Erteman to the Tibetan plateau, where for two weeks she worked with local potters whose hand-built, pit-fired black Nixi pottery has been made the same way for 2,000 years. The object of the program was to help the potters—"They have no wheels and little electricity," explains Erteman—improve their wares for the new market of Chinese tourists who increasingly flood these formerly unreachable regions. Erteman taught them how to apply slip, make the pot lids fit better and keep the bottoms flat. She also conceived the idea for a new design based on the famous black and white agate dzi bead, which Tibetans revere for its believed amuletic properties. Erteman cut out paper templates for vases that delighted the potters, who could then hand-build them. The resemblance, in concept, to Erteman's early black and white carved pieces is undeniable, evidence perhaps that ceramic art, good design and art itself derive as much from organic, even intuitive, sources as from rationality and craft.

*Andrea DiNoto is a New York-based writer on art, craft and design.*

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Kathy Erteman's works will be on view at Greenwich House Pottery in New York City (October 5 – November 15) and the CAS Gallery of Kean University in Union, New Jersey (November 3 – December 27). [KathyErteman.com](http://KathyErteman.com).



objects such as incense holders and candleholders for domestic spiritual use. But what really resonated with the potters was Erteman's idea for a vase based on the dzi bead that Tibetans revere. "I learned that the potters were extremely receptive to new ideas and designs as long as they were Tibetan in spirit, that is, relevant to Tibetan culture in some way."

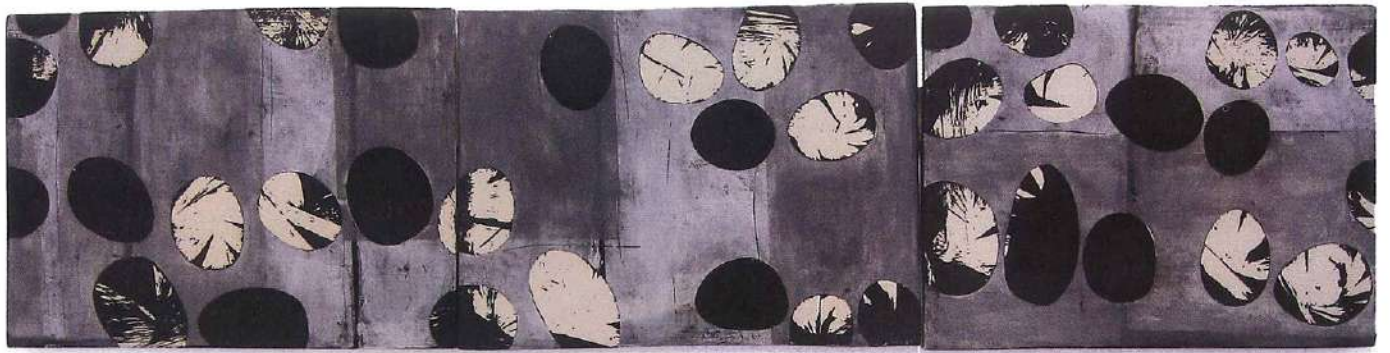
Gaining the potters'

confidence so that she was invited to sit on their side of the bench, Erteman (in red vest) was also able to show them how to improve their craftsmanship, making lids that fit better and creating smoother surfaces and flat bottoms. Their pots were displayed and sold in a room next to the working studio.

Though Erteman had the services of a translator, Sunn Ufo (woman

with white hat), in many ways she found that communication was not a problem. "Craftsman to craftsman we understood each other. Our daily practice and how we saw the world was basically similar. Whether you're on the Tibetan Plateau or in New York City, we were all committed to the life of making ceramics. We were able to understand that without words." +





Above: *Triptych*, 2008, whiteware with slips and glazes, painting techniques (h. 13 in, w. 52 in, d. 1 in).

Right: *Modern Teapot*, 1999, slip-cast white-ware, carved freehand (h. 10 in, w. 12 in, d. 4 in).

