

Jamaican Hybrid

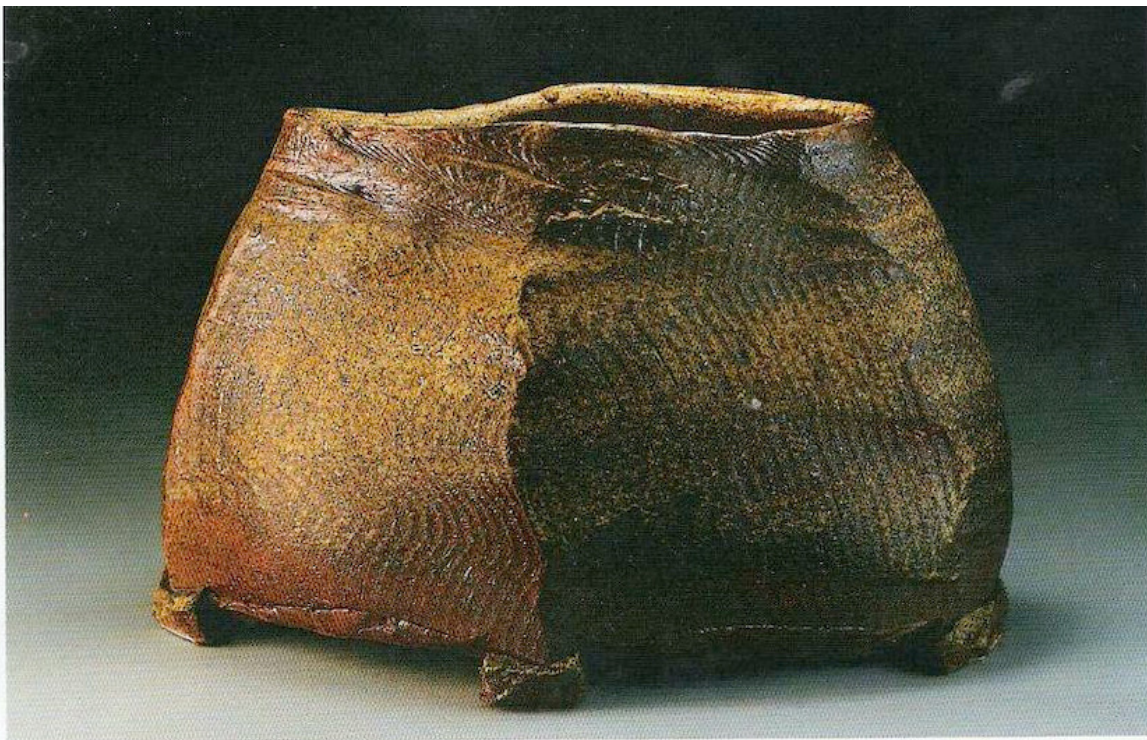


Article by Catherine Amidon

DAVID PINTO'S WORK EXPRESSES MULTIPLE LAYERS OF cultural identity from his Jamaican heritage to his international education. Traditions are grafted like the citrus root stock in his garden that sprouts tangerine, orange, lemon and ugly fruit; with experimentation, time and patience, the successful transplant bears fruit. Other potters have brought Eastern influence to Western culture, but the way he

approaches the process, informed by his own cross-cultural identity, allows characteristics of different stocks to remain visible while nourishing each other.

Hybrid forms, vessel grafted to vessel, knowledge to feeling, give volume and physical presence to this union of mind and matter. One concept of form leads to the next in series initiated in play, on paper, even large-scale chalk sketches on the wall of his house.



Contemplative. 1997. 17.5 x 25 x 15 cm. Stoneware, blend of clays. Anagama fired, cone 12.

This seemingly odd mix is appropriate as multiculturalism is not something new or postmodern in Jamaica. Several cultures that define turning points in colonial history live on the island that is situated between Spanish speaking Cuba to the north, French speaking Haiti to the east and British Caymans to the north west. It is an area of historic plantations, natural beauty and current socioeconomic problems. One cannot be there and be detached, nor does he try to be. His vigorous new work suggests tales of site, environment, history and people.

"The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important."⁶

There are forces extending beyond object presence, form now embodies something else, from a vast cultural matrix. Like the single stone on a mountain that emerges to the forefront by an inner quality emanating from physical presence. Pottery is no longer made to use but a pattern of awareness embedded in Jamaican experience, pulling the viewer into the familiar unknown of the aesthetic realm. Billowing form and naturally gradated texture of *Quilted* (1997) creates pattern that sets it apart by the interest it garners. Form pulses outward from within while being grounded by the gravity of earthy material also felt in the solid mass of *Contemplative* (1997).

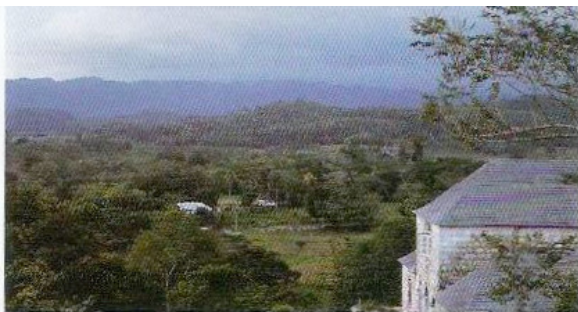
Surfaces are richly textured, patterned by the wood ash that collected in firing. *Contemplative* is thrown on

a wheel then altered and sculpted with strange little cutaway feet and a droopy uneven lip that pouts a kind of moodiness. So home grown, it bears mystery as the viewer moves in and out of the experience of knowing it is art and not a life form. In an era when the international artworld is a buzz with talk about virtual life in cyber space and artificial life, David Pinto breathes life the old way. He works to synthesise his native island heritage, nature, cultural experiences and levels of awareness through work permeated with living qualities. Both complicated and fundamentally simple his forms are truly the result of cultural hybrid.

REFERENCES:

1. Victor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique*, originally published as *Iskusstvo kak priyom*, in *Sborniki*, II, Petrograd, 1917 English translation in L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis (eds.) *Russian Formalist Criticism*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965, reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, 1995, p. 277.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
4. Martina Margetts, 'The Eloquent Art of Synthesis', *Crafts*, no. 112, Sept-Oct. 1991, p. 25.
5. Shklovsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 277.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

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Coach House, Good Hope, Jamaica.



Cotton Tree at Good Hope.



Valley at dawn, Good Hope.

Progression is about the feeling of form rooted in his previous work and the surroundings. Fruits, nuts, tree roots and leaves organically emerge out of the clay without a hint of intent as the process of letting go and working with the muddy material takes over in his studio. He avoids apparent narrative, yet stories are told, lives recreated. *Best Foot Forward* (1997) seems to saunter across the surface on root stock legs supporting aboriginal form. Suggestive personification allows a playful relationship to develop with the viewer hinting at the nature of the maker. Clay fired in a wood kiln, fuelled by trees from the surrounding farm, transforms home-grown to home-made.

Indigenous qualities are embedded in the clay. When Pinto established his studio four years ago at Good Hope, Jamaica, his intent was to work entirely with local materials. The impurities that other Jamaican potters work with seemed insurmountable to him, revealing a point at which he is no longer open to the random occurrence. Now he works with a combination of local clay he digs and both imported and local commercial clays. With various blends and stocks of

recycled, his clay now run at 50 per cent to 80 per cent local, although at times he works exclusively with local or commercial clay on a piece as he constantly renegotiates the balance between chance experience and control in the material and with the woodfire process that follows. Control is a vestige of EuroAmerican patterns he must balance as he reconnects with the sounds, textures and sensations of his homeland. "Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war. If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then their lives are as if they have never been. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony."¹

Pinto's studio, far from the habits of the art world, is nested into a quiet valley on an 18th century plantation overlooking lush tropical land and a stream. The flora and fauna are an experience unto themselves making Good Hope a haven for tranquil work. His house and garden are across the dirt road from his studio. Vessels rest in nooks and on shelves throughout both, his yard is full of experiments in botanical grafting and small lizards add a moving display of colour. Jamaican heat and intense rains punctuate gentler rhythms of nature. His studio and gallery (a renovated 18th century structure) are half an hour up the dirt road that turns to mud with each good rain, removing him from the nearest town as well as the traditions of England and New England and the confines of New York where he was educated and trained.

Shifting to a natural world of limited control is an important part of Pinto's artistic path. His love of clay goes back to high school days in Bristol, England, and winter sessions in college. Practical, he earned a BFA in Industrial Design from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and went to work in that field in New York after graduation. In the day, he designed products to be made somewhere else by someone else. At night, he spent his time with clay at the 92nd St. YMHA. His day job resulted in working for Porcelli designing a number of products, including ceramics for Dansk. Pristine forms fabricated in another country, the antithesis of awareness and experience transmitted through cultural artifacts and creativity.

Pinto speaks highly of the impact this work had on his understanding of form. Still, it was simplified northern design, a mode of rationalisation derived from an economically driven system resulting in object relations described by Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky: "By this algebraic method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognise them by their main characteristics."²

The more nights he worked in the clay studio of the YMHA with Jeff Cox, the less marketable shapes filled the void. Pinto was there for years as a studio assistant before he started team-teaching classes, then



Quilted. 1997. 22.5 x 22.5 x 12.5 cm. Stoneware, blend of clays. Anugamu fired, cone 12.

teaching on his own. The New York frenzy, day job, nightly clay passion lead to cultivating his dream of a Jamaican studio and the ability to work in peace. As negotiations, logistical plans and saving for the Good Hope studio continued, he applied to study ceramics in Tokoname, Japan. He stretched a six week program into a three month stay and the start of a life transition. His work moved even further from practical pieces, often informed by his design background, to craft.

He didn't broaden his vocabulary so much as change language; not English to Japanese but from algebraic method to a poetic process expressed in Japanese culture and language in ways that don't exist in English. "The fact that Japanese poetry has sounds not found in conversational Japanese is hardly the first indication of the differences between poetic and everyday language"³ or of the magnitude of the shift.

First he learnt the universal characteristics, a basic vocabulary of poetry, almost a textbook description of Japanese ceramics: "The absence of representational imagery, the virtuoso treatment of surface texture, the

large, even huge scale, the abstract language of space and time and the delicate attention to details."⁴ Then he worked to make it his own. The Japanese experience was an important impulse of synthetic, process-oriented creativity into his rational thought structure; an important bridge in his journey as a maker from industrial designer to potter. Abstracted, pushed and paddled, his work moved off centre while moving toward the core of his existence; mind and matter worked in new ways as feeling melded with knowledge. Still contemplating form, he started "to make the stone stony"⁵ and to bring in familiar sensations, making a return to Jamaica inevitable at many levels.

Mud and clay, West and East, design and craft became inseparable dualities. If one were to seek a high state of energy for such a conversion, the site of synthesis would be the wood-fire kiln. Four years ago, after returning from Tokoname, Pinto moved to Jamaica and built an anagama style kiln he had used in Japan and the reproduction of a 900 year-old kiln found its way to the tropical island where he was born just after independence from Britain.