

# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

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# ##117

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# Roberta Griffith: Street Stuff

Written by Faraday Newsome

It's 2am and I'm imagining ceramic artist Roberta Griffith in Hong Kong four years ago. She's walking, the throng of the city's honking commotion surrounding her, and she comes across a large pile of bamboo poles at the edge of a construction site. One of the poles is wrapped in bright yellow-and-black warning tape. This stops her in her tracks.

Considering it, photographing it, taken by the sudden understanding of the graphic warning on an object that is utterly foreign and new to her. Danger. The clash of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Those minutes of focused consideration, the city throbbing around her, became the genesis of Griffith's ongoing series *Street Stuff*, a project that has continued to hold her attention and has now spanned several continents of travel.

Griffith later learned that bamboo is a commonly used construction material in Asia. In this case, it was to be made into construction scaffolding, the temporary and often dangerous exoskeleton of a new building, used in the same way steel is used to make scaffolding in Western construction.

After the period of time when Griffith saw the warning-taped bamboo in Hong Kong, she was thinking about what to make and submit for the upcoming 2018 International Academy of Ceramics (IAC) Taipei exhibition, an association in which she is a member. Travel informs much of her work, and in this case, the graphically marked bamboo inspired her to construct *Street Stuff - Sai Wan Ho, Hong Kong*.

In early 2017, after returning home to Kaua'i, Hawaii, Griffith used porcelain to extrude a body of tubes with small ridges simulating the texture of bamboo. Using underglazes, she painted these forms carefully, realistically, using yellow and black underglazes to simulate the bright caution tape on the key pole.

She also made a *tromp l'oeil* roll of black-and-yellow caution tape as a secondary piece to enter in the IAC Taipei show. Unfortunately, the medium and high temperature clays at her home had gotten mixed up and much of the new work melted in the high-fire Cone 10 kiln, leaving only a few pieces of bamboo salvageable. These survivors were bundled into an installation, *Street Stuff - Sai Wan Ho, Hong Kong*, that was accepted into the 2018 83rd Annual National Juried Cooperstown Exhibition.

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*Street Stuff – Sai Wan Ho, Hong Kong* is a realistic bundle of high-fired porcelain bamboo rods trussed with traditional black hemp. One of the rods is wrapped in a bright barber-shop spiral of yellow-and-black caution tape, artfully rendered with carefully applied ceramic underglazes. A sense of danger emanates from this piece, akin to the sensation of spotting a dangerous individual in a group. Griffith's choice to work in a *vérité* style with these universally understood patterns and symbols of danger elicits a compellingly instinctive alarm reaction.

True to her indomitable spirit, Roberta Griffith resolved to re-make the unsalvageable work when she returned home from an upcoming trip to Cuba. While in Cuba, she again saw bamboo being used in construction, reinforcing her idea to re-create the original lost ceramic pieces. She did, with three new versions of *Street Stuff – Caution Tape, Hong Kong*, and this time the kiln firing went well.

*Street Stuff – Caution Tape, Hong Kong, No. 1* is a stridently graphic clay sculpture hand-built in the form of a roll of caution tape sinuously unfurling. It has a menacing snake-like feel, reminding the viewer that nature has long designed such bold and contrasting color warnings on the surfaces of biologically dangerous creatures. The scale of this piece is not grand, but the stark simplicity of the form

gives it a monumental feel. It was shown in the 2018 IAC Taipei exhibition and later accessioned into the permanent collection of the Yingge Museum, Taipei.

Griffith's "back-up" caution tape piece, *Street Stuff – Caution Tape No. 2, Hong Kong* was exhibited in the 2018 Art Kaus'i show at KSA Gallery in Lihue, HI. The tape does not extend from the roll on this piece, giving it a more restrained feeling. *Street Stuff – Caution Tape No. 2* received a special honor during the exhibition, the 'Recognition Award, Hawai'i State Foundation of Culture and the Arts', a purchase award for the permanent collection of the Hawai'i State Art Museum, Oahu, HI.

Griffith continued developing her ideas about universally recognized cautionary symbols, a study in semiotics, enlarging her *Street Stuff* series to include street signs and symbols. The artist states, "After encountering the bamboo bundles, I had also begun researching the meaning of the different colors and shapes of directional road signs after realizing that specific shapes and particular symbols were universally understood by people walking and driving. I was intrigued with this idea, so began photographing all kinds of street signs, signals and symbols that seemed like they could have appeared on almost any street, anywhere."

*Street Stuff – Sai Wan Ho, Hong Kong*, 2018, high-fire porcelain, underglaze, black hemp, 5.5 x 33 x 6.5 in (9 x 84.5 x 21.5 cm).





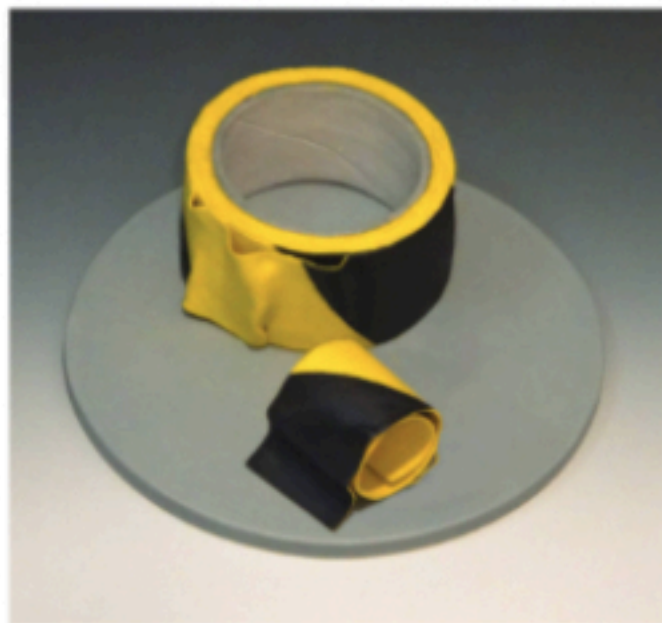
Griffith's most recent piece in the series is *Street Stuff - BUMP*. In preparation for this installation piece, the artist writes that she photographed "images of directional curve signs from Taipei, Hong Kong, Iceland, Kauai, and the mainland near my home in upstate New York. I focused on the directional curve signs from the various countries because they are so recognizable by almost anyone driving in a universal sense. They are clearly recognizable in the many diverse countries I've visited."

*Street Stuff - BUMP* is based on these photographs taken in various locales. It includes five curved signs and an additional sign created from her imagination. Griffith explains, "To make my warning signs more interesting, I decided to add a sign of my own invention, using traditional [warning] colors with an orange background with black text, BUMP."

Griffith focused on the arresting retinal and graphic nature of universally recognized warning signs as well as in their interesting symbolic commonality amidst diversity. She explains, "This similarity among cultures pushes one's imagination regarding cultural expression." She also suggests that they may sometimes have spiritual meaning beyond their symbolic meaning, encouraging the viewer to consider the work in a metaphoric sense.

Griffith writes, "*Street Stuff - Bump* creates an illusory road with a sharp curve, one with five yellow-and-black signs ending with an eye-catching BUMP sign. It consists of a series of porcelain road signs on steel stands that indicate a curved, yet open, trajectory with an unseen, as of yet unknown, impediment lying ahead. They are effective metaphors for the trajectory of a person's experience of the road travelled in their lifetime, a road not travelled in a straight line, but one with unforeseen curves and humps along the way."

The sense of time as a linear flow is nearly universal. This psychological construct of an ultimately unknowable phenomenon as a line, a road travelled, becomes even more poignant when expressed by an artist with a personal vantage point surpassing eight decades.



Griffith was born in Michigan in 1937. Her first ceramics teacher was Marie Woo at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. It was an auspicious start for Griffith, who has gone on to see her work included in art journals, art books, and art museums in Spain, Mexico, Italy, England, Sweden, Japan, and the USA.

From Michigan, Griffith's personal road took her to the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico for a year. Then on to Chouinard Art Institute in California where she earned her BFA in 1960. While there she made fast, lifelong friends with fellow classmate ceramic artist Ralph Baccera.

After earning her MFA at Southern Illinois University in 1962, Griffith was awarded a two-year Fulbright grant to mentor with renowned Spanish ceramist Josep Llorens Artigas (1892-1980), Art Professor at Massana School of Art and Design in Barcelona, Spain. This was at the height of Artigas' ceramic collaborations with acclaimed Spanish painter Joan Miró (1893-1983).

*Above:*  
**Street Stuff - Caution Tape, Hong Kong, No. 2**, 2018, high fire white clay, 2.25 x 8.5 x 0.5 in (5.7 x 21.5 x 1.25 cm).

*Opposite:*  
**Street Stuff - BUMP** installation view, 2020, high-fired porcelain, each sign 49.5 x 10 x 12 in (125 x 25.5 x 25.5 cm).

All image credits  
Roberta Griffith.

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Griffith's friendship and knowledge of these two giants was beautifully presented in her lecture *Artigas and Miró* at the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) 2016 conference in Kansas City, Missouri, as well as at the 47th International Academy of Ceramics Congress (IAC) held in the Museo del Disseny (Museum of Design) in Barcelona, Spain in 2016.

When her Fulbright experience concluded, the adventurous traveller returned to the United States where she worked for a year as a ceramic designer at Design Technics in Stroudsburg, PA for their Manhattan, NY showroom. In 1966 Griffith moved into the field of education as newly hired Art Professor at Hartwick College in Oneonta, NY. Once at Hartwick, she taught until her retirement in 2008. Griffith kept her ties to Spain intact with her long-time and still current role as the North American correspondent for *Revista Cerámica*, a ceramics review journal published in Madrid, Spain.

As well as her continuing ties with Spain, Griffith participated in the 2017 4th Hong Juang Zi Qi Cultural Festival in Yixing, China for eighteen days. While in Yixing, famously known as the 'Teapot City' of China, Griffith created individual projects, learned about special local clays, and made new friends with artists from China, Brazil, Korea, Argentina, Turkey, and beyond. She was one of five Americans invited to participate in this event, along with 75 other ceramists from around the world.

Roberta Griffith's *Street Stuff - Bump*, the latest addition to her *Street Stuff* series, is an elegant, spare distillation of her observations and advice to upcoming generations: be adventurous, travel and take risks, but be smart and keep an eye on the signs. That fact that Griffith, an octogenarian who has presented thirty-three solo exhibitions and participated in two-hundred seventy-five invitational and juried exhibitions, is an active studio artist is an inspiration to all creatives. Along with a lifetime's worth of friendships and professional relationships forged with artists from around the world, friendships ever more frequently and bitter-sweetly ended by death, Griffith's life is, by any definition, an interesting road sublimely travelled as she continues to create drawings, paintings, and above all, her ceramic sculptures and installations. ■

#### About the Author

Parrady Newsome is a widely exhibited American ceramic artist who grew up in the redwood forests of California. She now maintains a home studio in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona with fellow artist and husband Jeff Reich. Newsome's artwork has been featured in numerous books and magazines, and is held in the collections of public art museums that include the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Long Beach Art Museum, Hocking Art Museum, San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, Ohio Crafts Museum, Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum, and Arizona State University Art Museum Ceramic Research Center, among others. ([www.parradynewsome.com](http://www.parradynewsome.com))



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