

The Contemplative Curiosity of Gustavo Pérez

[Joe Molinaro](#) • August 4, 2017

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1 Untitled, 94/5 in. (25 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2016. *Photo: Mayer Shacter.*

While sitting with Mexico's premier ceramic artist, Gustavo Pérez, in the Galeria Atotonilco (www.folkartsanmiguel.com), a celebrated venue in the nearby town of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, that represents some of the country's finest artists and craftsmen, a simple question came to mind: "How do you want to be remembered?" Without hesitation, Pérez quickly responded, "I want to be forgotten, only that my pots survive." In a time of instant media gratification and easy access to online venues, galleries, websites, not to mention the ever-present Facebook and Instagram where an artist can promote their work, it was refreshing to hear such a simple response to a question of how an artist wishes to be remembered.

Three Dimensional Canvases

Gustavo Pérez lives and works in Xalapa, the capital city in the central Mexican state of Veracruz. Throughout his career he has investigated how to create forms that serve as three-dimensional canvases, where incised surface treatments enable ordinary pieces to transcend everyday aspects of utility. Primarily wheel-thrown vessels, seemingly simple in the overall architecture of form, come to life with sophisticated surface treatments not unlike the body scarification often seen in West African societies.



2 Untitled, 9 in. (24 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2016. *Photo: Mayer Shacter.*



3 Untitled, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, glazed interior, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2001. *Photo: Mayer Shacter.*

Deftly slicing into the clay with symmetry and precision using a utility knife, Pérez explores surface on forms that otherwise sit quietly awaiting recognition. The patterning established through “the gentle cuts,”¹ a reference the author and critic Garth Clark once used to describe Pérez’ process of incising, carry the visual weight often seen in textiles. However, it is the soft pushing outward in select areas of the cuts that transcends simple surface patterns, bringing it into a more sculptural realm of being. While the original clay piece starts as a static form, Pérez has found a way to activate the skin of the pot to create a dance on the surface that is choreographed to allow three-dimensional manipulation to activate a two-dimensional surface. The patterns created through the cuts become background for the careful pushing from the inside, thus creating another layer of repetition that further defines the form as a more sculptural object. These new patterns, while not directly influenced by nature, are ones he saw in his mind and transferred onto the forms.

After meticulous cutting and manipulation of the wet clay, drying, and then bisque firing, glazes are meticulously injected into the sliced openings to further enhance both surface and form. Minimal coloring added to the form via these sliced openings serves as contrast to the background of unglazed clay, creating a tension of surface and color that both unite and enhance the overall form.



4 Portrait of Gustavo Pérez. *Photo: Mayer Schacter.*

Pérez' work with incised pots, along with his initial discovery of working in clay, did not come about easily. After beginning his studies in engineering, mathematics, and philosophy at the University of Mexico, he later discovered his love for ceramics while taking classes at the Escuela de Diseño y Artesanías in Mexico City (1971–73). After working as a ceramic artist for ten years, Pérez received a grant to study for two years at the Sint Joost Akademie voor Beeldende Kunst, in Breda, The Netherlands. Staying on for an additional year, his experience abroad opened his eyes and mind to others working in clay from many diverse backgrounds.

After returning to Mexico to make functional pottery and trying to survive as a practicing artist, his later discovery of how to incise and manipulate a form with touch and glaze opened doors, with the best galleries in the world wishing to exhibit and sell his new work. When asked about this discovery of the incising, pushing out, and selectively glazing the pots' surfaces, Pérez admits it was an accident. "I was following my curiosity, being attentive to the pleasure this new process gave me." This new process took time to develop, especially in figuring out how to carefully place the glaze pigment into the lines.



5 Laberinto, 15¾ in. (40 cm) in diameter, stoneware, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2014.



6 Untitled, 10 in. (26 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2014.

Photo: Mayer Shacter.

For ten years, precision and craftsmanship dictated his success with this new technique. Continually inventing patterns based on his love for mathematics, Pérez was able to sustain his intellectual interest in how surface might invigorate form. Once his process was understood and the craftsmanship perfected, successful pieces emerged on a regular basis. Unfortunately for Pérez, and acknowledging that complacency is unacceptable, this success created hardship. As Pérez admitted, “there was a point when 100% of the pieces were perfect, and it was depressing and disappointing.” To him it felt very strange being too safe, and he felt static in his own work. Pérez stated he has always felt that “if you open a kiln and nothing is wrong, then something is wrong.”

Finding Pleasure in a New Process

With a sense of needing to develop his work further, Pérez decided if he wanted to see something new, he must make something new. As a result of this unsettled time with his work, Pérez deliberately began an examination of the form itself and started to gently manipulate the plastic clay in an effort to discover new shapes. Again, he found pleasure in a new process of looking differently at the wheel-thrown pieces he made, and in doing so, discovered a sculptural presence in the forms he had not seen before. He began to fold and manipulate pieces and then glaze them to divide the clay surface in a way that explored the delicate relationship between organic forms and their surface, something not seen with his earlier incised work. The architecture of form and the incised patterns created with the earlier pieces gave way to a more biomorphic pot. The glazed

surface took on a fluid character of its own, working in a symbiotic manner with the gently manipulated form. Pérez admits that the earlier incised pieces that were softly pushed outward suggested the beginnings of how he might pursue a more aggressive distortion of form in these later pieces. Minimal traces of incisions were introduced into this new work, melding thoughts from years of exploration that ultimately tied his pieces together, past and present, in a way that provided continuity to his voice in clay. In the end, a body of work focused on vessel making that explores unique aspects of form, surface, and touch helped define a career of curiosity and thoughtful contemplation that even today manifests itself in all the work he produces.



7 Untitled, 11¾ in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2013.



8 Untitled, 17¾ in. (45 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2016. *Photo: Mayer Shacter.*

Spiritualized Functionalism

Pérez' ceramic works often appear as a type of spiritualized functionalism, a term sometimes used to describe other artists' work in vessel making, most notably British potters Hans Coper and Lucie Rie. It is applied to objects rooted in the traditions of functionalism that transcend utility by expanding one's understanding of what function can mean. Like Coper and Rie, Pérez' functional ceramic vessels are best suited when their utility is to serve as objects of contemplation and reflection. The ceramic work of Gustavo Pérez presents itself with both subtlety and visual strength. As he proclaims, "my work does not mean a thing, and I do not want to comment on history, religion, philosophy, or any other ideology." Instead, Pérez wants his clay vessels to be visceral, and he hopes people want to touch his pieces and feel the textures, sensuality, and volume he embeds in each form. He hopes his work reflects his deep appreciation of music

(Schubert being his favorite), allowing the viewer to sit back and enjoy his vessels more through their body than their mind. While it is certainly doubtful Gustavo Pérez will one day be forgotten, the many clay objects he continues to produce today in his Xalapa studio are, like the artist himself, certain to maintain relevance far into the future within the cultural landscape of Mexican ceramics.



9 Untitled, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2013.
Photo: Mayer Shacter.



10 Untitled, 10 in. (26 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, gas fired to cone 9 in reduction, 2016.
Photo: Mayer Shacter.

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1. Note: Garth Clark, "The Kindest Cut", pp. 82-83, Gustavo Pérez: Cerámica Contemporánea, Artes de Mexico, #74, 2005.