



## Introduction

My job at the Art Complex Museum is to assemble exhibitions. This involves looking at a great deal of work from either an artist or a group of artists and choosing things that work together in a way where one plus one equals something a little more than two.

I have been familiar with both Pat Gerkin and Steven Branfman's work for quite some time. I did not however, pair them up for this exhibition. They did that—and it's an inspired pairing. The artists, who did not know each other previously, connected when Gerkin exhibited as part of a three person show at Thayer Academy Gallery where Branfman has taught for 41 years. They saw immediately the connections in their work.

I like the way both artists work their materials. I like the awareness they both have of the history of their materials and techniques. I like that if you saw a Steven Branfman vessel or a piece by Pat Gerkin out of context you would still know it was theirs. Their work is identifiable because they have spent enough time to make it their own. But most of all, I just like the way their work looks, the textures, the colors, the depth— what Pat calls the topography. I like the weight of it. I like that when you put their work together, one plus one equals something well more than two.

## Craig Bloodgood

*Contemporary Curator The Art Complex Museum Duxbury, Massachusetts*

In 2019, when you think of contemporary artists who practice the American Raku firing process, only one name immediately comes to mind: Steven Branfman. Steven 'wrote the book' on this subject, figuratively as well as literally. He wrote three books on it. He also travels the world giving educational workshops about the process that he loves. He is the reigning American Raku expert in the Western ceramics field.

Psychologist Anders Ericsson and author Malcolm Gladwell speak about how those that are World-Class in their fields, no matter the area of endeavor, will have put in at least 10,000 hours of deliberative practice in the pursuit of mastering their craft. Steven's undergraduate studies at Cortland State University under John Jessiman, and his Master's degree earned at Rhode Island School of Design studying with Norm Schulman and Jun Kaneko set the foundation for the massive amounts of deliberative work that has come after. Those 10,000 hours, and more, are clearly evident in this exhibition produced by this late-career ceramic artist. Steven has devoted his entire life to exploring and mastering his difficult-to-master media. He has mastered it, and he truly is World-Class.

Steven's forms are powerful pure visual objects, yet in remaining as obvious vessel forms, are linked to thousands of years of traditional ceramic history and countless generations of ceramicists all over the world. While the roots of the Raku process are clearly Japanese, Steven's approach has taken that core process a long way away from the wabi-sabi teabowls produced by Tanaka Chojiro in the 16th Century. Even when making the Chawan that he occasionally does, Steven's teabowls are clearly contemporary interpretations of form and surface originating from this day and age, not re-hashes of the past.

In making pottery forms the Japanese often speak about how if you make the inside, the outside will take care of itself. Steven has taken this concept to heart. His bottle and vase forms are voluminous and all about what could be contained within. The appearance of them is that the insides are bigger than the outsides. This creates an illusion and feeling of lightness in what is an inherently heavy media.

Stark black. It is arresting. It grabs your attention. It draws you in. Steven plays that visual note like Yo-Yo Ma plays the cello. That Steven typically leaves a good portion of the clay on his forms totally unglazed and allows the deep soft matte black of the American Raku smoking process to dominate those areas, shows a boldness of approach and a clear understanding of color theory and human perception. He frequently combines this methodology with the added impacts of scale. Many of his works are large. When they are not that, they move to the intimate. When these two approaches are combined, first glances at the pieces are arresting. They will pull you across a room.

Frequently, his color choices of glaze also do not fit the typical approach one expects when viewing contemporary American Raku works. We don't typically find flashy copper lusters or interference blood reds in Steven's work. His glazes also certainly do not fit the subdued dull orange-red or quiet black of the Japanese antecedents, aka and kuro Raku. Instead we find soft spring-like flowery semi-gloss pastels, moss- greens, soft browns, rust reds, creamy whites, and the like. They mingle with limited pops of primary reds and yellows and blues. Crawled and matte glaze sits next to small areas of runny and glossy glass. All this set against the strong matte black areas of the form that provide contrast and an anchor to the visual movement created by the carefully considered but casual appearing applied areas of glazes.

Then there are the textures. Developed through both glaze quality and roughened clay surfaces, the central areas of the forms are frequently exhibiting what might be considered in some pottery settings as flaws. There is an aspect of stark ceramic materiality in the visual and physical texture in the middle sections of many forms that is in contrast to the smooth, controlled throwing of the black upper and lower areas. These textural areas are about serendipity and letting go. They evoke landscape, weathered wood and metal, the erosion of geologic time, age, and entropy. They allude back to the wabi-sabi roots of the Raku process from so long ago.

Comfortable in their existence. Bold, but not obnoxious. Colorful, but not too colorful. Controlled, but a little loose. Having a dark side and a light side. Solid, but having been beat up a bit. These phrases can describe not only Steven's claywork, but aspects of Steven himself. These are complex and sophisticated works to live with over time and explore with both the eye and the hand. Their vitality and fullness is not taken in quickly.

I would be remiss writing this if I also did not mention Steven's other very important works that are not evident in this show: his students. Steven has had an amazing impact on his countless high school students at Thayer Academy over the

many years he has taught there. On occasions visiting there, I have seen the love they have for him, and the kind of work that he has elicited from them. I've heard incredibly insightful comments from them about art. Not only a master ceramic artist, but Steven is also a caring and highly effective teacher. What he gives his students goes far beyond the art studio. He gives them tools to take with them into their developing lives.

From the work you see here in this exhibition, to the students that make their way out into the world, to the workshop participants he teaches about Raku, to his astounding leadership of Team Kermit in the Pan Mass Challenge, Steven Branfman is about caring and passion for all that he undertakes. He is a 'force of nature'.

**John Baymore**

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