



RALPH BACERRA

Exquisite Beauty

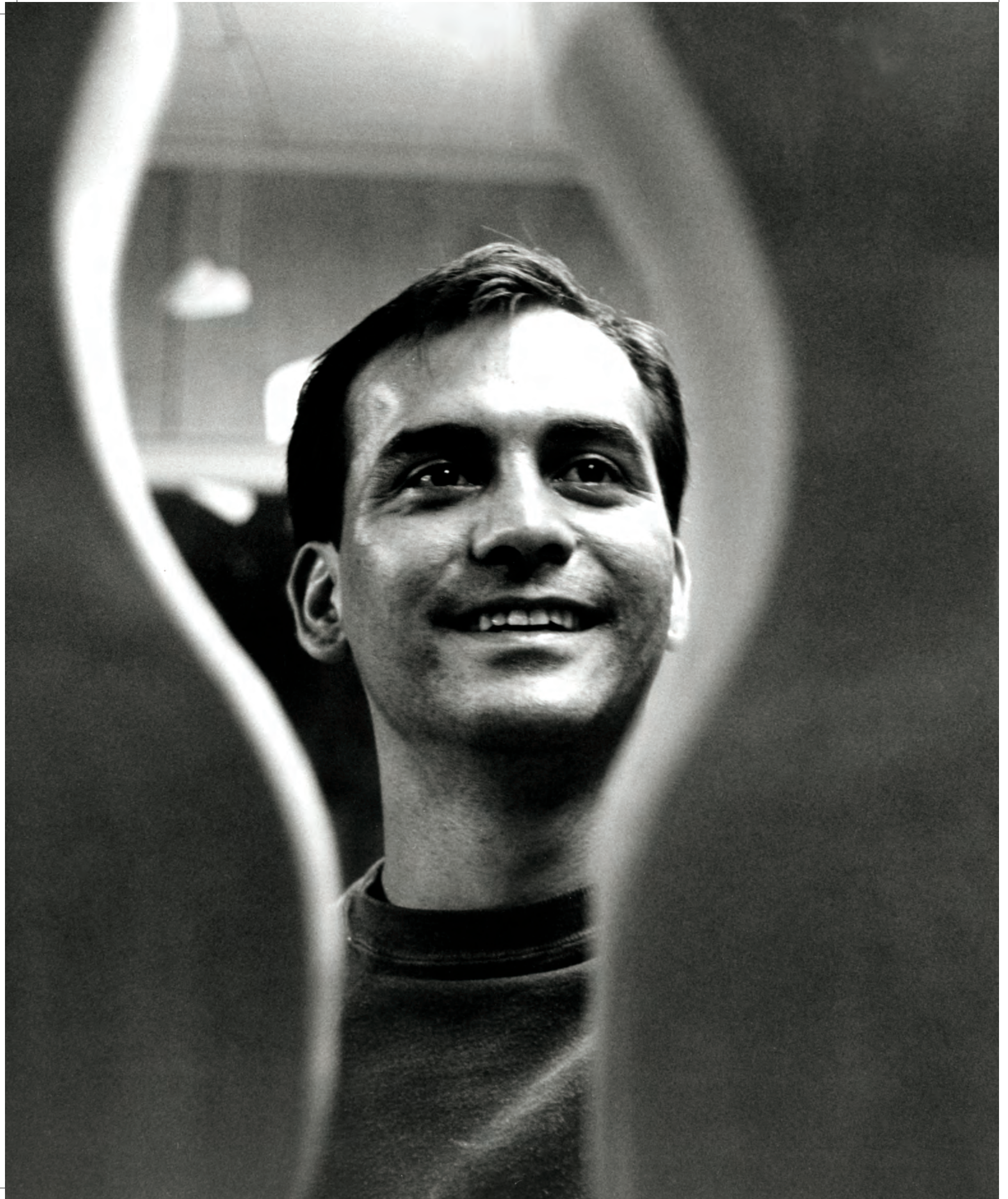
JO LAURIA

RALPH BACERRA



I AM COMMITTED MORE TO THE IDEA OF PURE BEAUTY.
WHEN IT IS FINISHED, THE PIECE SHOULD BE LIKE AN ORNAMENT, EXQUISITELY BEAUTIFUL.





RALPH BACERRA

Exquisite Beauty

JO LAURIA

ESSAYS BY

Jeannine Falino

Hollis Goodall

Christy Johnson

OTIS | BEN MALTZ GALLERY

Otis College of Art and Design

LOS ANGELES

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9045 Lincoln Boulevard
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www.otis.edu/benmaltzgall
galleryinfo@otis.edu
310.665.6905

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PROJECT MANAGER

Jo Lauria

EDITOR

Karen Jacobson

DESIGNER

Amy McFarland, clean{slate}design

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FRONT COVER

Untitled Platter, 2007 (detail). Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

FRONT FLAP

Untitled Wall Mural, 1983 (detail). Ceramic. 27 ½ × 29 ½ × 3 in. (69.9 × 74.9 × 7.6 cm). Collection of Karen Smits.

BACK COVER

Cloud Vessel, 2000 (detail). Porcelain. 22 × 14 ½ × 6 in. (55.9 × 36.8 × 15.2 cm). Collection of Paul and Sharon Dauer.

BACK FLAP

Untitled Platter, 2005 (detail). Ceramic. 3 ½ × 24 ½ × 20 ½ in. (8.9 × 62.2 × 52.1 cm). Collection of Alan Mandell.

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Cup and saucer, from *Untitled Dinnerware*, 1999–2000. Ceramic. Cup: 3 ¾ × 4 ¾ × 5 ¾ in. (9.5 × 12.1 × 13.3 cm); saucer: height: ¾ in. (1.9 cm); diameter: 6 ¼ in. (15.9 cm).

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Untitled, 1998 (detail and full view). Porcelain. 15 ½ × 19 ½ × 17 ½ in. (39.4 × 49.5 × 44.8 cm). Collection of Forrest L. Merrill.

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Ralph Bacerra in the Chouinard ceramics studio shortly after his appointment as head of ceramics, c. 1968.

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Ralph Bacerra's signature from the underside of the *Dragon Platter* (c. 1975; p. 33).

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Ralph Bacerra applying china paint to a large platter at his Eagle Rock studio, 1974.

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Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

PAGE 9

Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

PAGE 10

Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm).

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Introduction

JO LAURIA

Ralph Bacerra: Exquisite Beauty is the first retrospective and publication to document the eye-dazzling ceramics created by Ralph Bacerra (1938–2008), a Los Angeles–based artist known for his innovative approach to surface embellishment. The exhibition features more than ninety of the artist’s finest pieces—dramatic, highly decorated vessels and sculptures that have never before been the focus of a major exhibition or publication.

Bacerra’s career in ceramics spanned five decades, over the course of which his work moved stylistically from traditionalism to pattern and decoration to “post-baroque.” He was part of the group of second-generation post–World War II California artists who followed the boundary-expanding lead of Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, John Mason, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos. These visionary artists sought to use clay in a way that responded to their time and place. Collectively they broadened the possibilities of the medium and brought recognition to the field.

Like those before him, Bacerra regularly challenged ceramic conventions, resolutely experimenting with unfamiliar materials and

techniques in his studio. His unique contribution was the creation of a new “grammar of ornament” through the complex layering of aggregated design motifs, achieved primarily through multiple applications of underglazes and overglazes combined with metallic lusters. The resultant interweave generated a language rich in cross-cultural inflection and design schemes fluent in optically inventive patterns that played with perception and teased the eye.

Ralph Bacerra was born on January 23, 1938, in Garden Grove, California; his father was from the Philippines, his mother from Montana. He attended what is now Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, and in 1957 enrolled at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he initially studied graphic design. An elective class in ceramics, however, altered Bacerra’s life: after one semester of study with Vivika Heino, a pioneering studio potter and celebrated educator, he veered away from commercial art.

Ralph Bacerra on the front porch of his home in Eagle Rock, c. 1963.



Bacerra had taken a studio class in pottery at Orange Coast College but hadn't realized or considered that ceramics could be a vocation. Heino and her husband, Otto, worked together at the Chouinard ceramics studio, although only Vivika was formally engaged as an instructor. They collaborated on the making, glazing, and firing of their pieces, extending this practice to their home studio, where they also displayed and sold their pottery (left). This opened Bacerra's eyes to the possibilities of a profession in ceramics, and the Heinos became his lifelong mentors. In an interview the artist recalled his early experience with Vivika Heino in the Chouinard ceramics studio: "And once she started to talk, demonstrate, and the environment in the classroom, and I started to get more serious of working with the wheel and the clay and the glazes. I said this is for me. This is where I want to be, and I dropped everything and switched my major to ceramics."¹

When Vivika Heino accepted a teaching position at Rhode Island School of Design in 1963, she recommended Bacerra as her replacement. He served as the head of ceramics at Chouinard from 1964 through 1971, when the school was formally absorbed into California Institute of the Arts and the ceramics major was eliminated from the curriculum.



Vivika Heino, head of the ceramics department, working in the studio, Chouinard Art Institute, 1959.



Otto Heino throwing a large platter on the potter's wheel in the Chouinard ceramics studio, 1959.

Ralph Bacerra, drawing from sketchbook, 1957-58. Graphite, ink, and pen on paper. 11 x 8 in. (27.9 x 20.3 cm).



Ralph Bacerra, *Orange Form*, 1968. Earthenware, metallic (chrome, lead) overglaze; wheel-thrown. $9\frac{1}{2} \times 9 \times 8\frac{3}{4}$ in. (24.1 × 22.9 × 22.2 cm). Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Gift of the Johnson Wax Company, through the American Craft Council, 1977 (1977.2.6).

This sensuous sculpture was selected by curator Lee Nordness for *Objects: USA*. The exhibition opened at the Smithsonian Institution in 1969 before beginning an extensive US tour, eventually crossing the Atlantic and traveling to European venues.

Chouinard was a proving ground for Bacerra both as a student and as a teacher. As he matured in the classroom—he was only twenty-six years old when he became department head—his ceramics also became more sophisticated and refined. His elegant Asian-inspired porcelain vases and bottles caught the attention of Ken Deavers, founder of the American Hand gallery in Washington, DC. In 1967 Deavers invited Bacerra to join the gallery's roster of artists. This relationship, which continued until 1997, provided Bacerra with representation on the East Coast and increased visibility as a ceramist.

Bacerra's recognition was furthered in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when his work became identified with the art movement “variously known as ‘Finish Fetish’ or ‘Fetish Finish’ depending on whether the emphasis was on the obsessive preciousness of the art object or on its pristine surface.”² In ceramics, this style demanded that the work be flawlessly executed and deliberately seductive in both shape and surface. *Orange Form* (1968; left), with its sensuous contours and enticing glaze treatment, is emblematic of this aesthetic direction. Although Bacerra felt that too much was made of his association with this style, it is clear that he believed in its underlying principles: “Technique is a high priority. The skill has to be evident in each piece. That is to say that the form should be pleasing, the glaze and the colors are right and the design is completely worked-out.”³

After his teaching job at Chouinard was eliminated, Bacerra spent the next decade as a full-time studio artist. This was a time of intense experimentation. Dating from this period are the handsome covered stoneware jars (p. 18) and the intriguing mythical animal sculptures