Essay for **New Directions** Catalog Ceramics by Randy Johnston:2014 Pucker Gallery

Randy Johnston studied with Warren MacKenzie and apprenticed with Tatsuzo Shimaoka. He lives out in the country in the Midwest, and he is a potter. These facts have shaped discussion of his work, and understandably so. Johnston is an important figure in the Anglo-Asian-American tradition in ceramics associated with MacKenzie and Shimaoka and, through them, Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. To view Johnston only from that perspective, however, offers at best a limited understanding of his achievement.

Johnston is a traditional potter and a contemporary artist. That is not a contradiction in terms. Any consideration of Johnston's work should include recognition of his engagement with modern art, and with the ancient and non-Western art that helped shape the modernist avant-garde. Of course Leach and Hamada were also moderns in their own way (as is MacKenzie, who began as a painter of hard-edged abstractions in the Mondrian manner). They were not anonymous folk craftsman. Their turn to historical ceramics, like the medieval revival and the Arts and Crafts movement as represented by a figure such as William Morris, was one possible response to modernity. But that is another story.

What should be part of Johnston's story is the impact of modernism on his way of seeing, thinking, and making. Johnston is a conscientious, wide-ranging student—and teacher—of art history. His work has been shaped by his close personal and professional relationship to MacKenzie and Shimaoka and, more generally, by historical and contemporary ceramics. Yet among the artists Johnston says he admires most are major figures in modern art such as Constantin Brancusi, David Smith, and Robert Motherwell, as well as the anonymous creators who fashioned Dogon ceremonial masks and Cycladic sculptures.

Admiration does not necessarily lead to imitation. And no artist of stature is merely the sum of his or her favorites and formative influences. Nevertheless, the artists Johnston admires should indicate his most intense, focused vision and his key concerns—and therefore help reveal his own artistic sensibility.

It is relatively easy to recognize Johnston's use of the rope imprint and inlaid slip techniques he learned from Shimaoka. If one knows about Johnston's admiration for Dogon tribal art, the resemblance between the twin chimney forms in some of his works and symmetrical elements in Dogon masks may stand out. It is harder to consider the affinity at work not in a specific technique or form but in a more general shared aesthetic. Johnston, like Brancusi, favors strong geometrical forms [47388], but he has not made anything that appears directly inspired by Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (a slender vase form [47816] perhaps comes closest). Still, his boat vessels, derived from personal experiences with sailboats and the graceful shapes of hulls and keels, do reveal a similar concern with extension and curvature. They also help explain his admiration for the drawings of Modigliani, that seductive master of the "tautness of line" Johnston values. The Cycladic figures and other sculptures that influenced Brancusi with their stylization and simplification are not directly replicated in Johnston's work. Yet his vases often display a comparable sense of proportion in their tapered forms, especially if we apply the familiar

human-vessel parallel with its shared morphology of foot or base, waist, torso, shoulder, neck, and lip or head.

Johnston says he thinks about drawing "all the time." Like David Smith, he loves the physicality of his chosen medium yet is also devoted to pictorial expression, and especially to drawing as an exercise of the imagination. Johnston's drawings are not utilitarian sketches, but "largely non-objective." If the surface designs on his ceramics often reveal an Asian influence, they also recall the New York School and what has been called action painting, an approach to abstraction at once formal and philosophical, framed by ideas drawn from existentialism, surrealism and, yes, Zen.

Johnston describes the challenge of decorating a slab or platter as "frightening," and adds, "You're confronted by a blank canvas." Here Johnston's admiration for Robert Motherwell comes into play. That artist's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* paintings, with their strong compositions in a limited set of colors (black, white, yellow ochre), could well appeal to someone who also tends to work with a trio of colors (black, white, and a reddish earth tone). Like Motherwell, Johnston is a skilled practitioner of the bold Expressionist mark, whether a stroke, a drip, or a splatter, that combines deliberation and spontaneity. Intersecting arcs overlap in the middle of many of his round platters, reinforced by the radiating underlying surface pattern, and set against the marks of the shells or other elements used to stack works in the kiln [48074]. They establish a dynamic tension that cannot be resolved. Johnston also uses ribbons of glaze to create patterns that are musical in their rhythms, intervals, and repetitions, especially when set at a diagonal on slabs so that they play off the rectangular borders. These fluid, frozen designs demonstrate what Johnston means when he says he wants to create "visual movement that can remain embedded forever."

Viewed in relation to modernist art, the single line that provides a lucid, articulated spatial division in so many recent Johnston platters and vases suggests both Barnett Newman's trademark vertical stripes or "zips," turned horizontally or diagonally, and the radical late Motherwell *Open* paintings, with their rectilinear lines ambiguously defining inside and outside within a large color field. Hamada also on occasion used a black horizontal line on his light colored wares to establish a formal division. As with Motherwell and Jackson Pollock's relationship to Asian calligraphy, that might serve as another reminder that East is constantly meeting West in modern and contemporary art. Johnston is not alone in bringing both traditions together, although he does so with rare finesse.

Johnston's work, like MacKenzie's, is about as far as one can get from the ornamental and decorative qualities identified with court taste. It usually relies upon a muscular physicality, although it can also be lyrical [48036, 47534, 47407]. Perhaps Johnston's use of woodfiring camouflages the modern qualities in his work by suggesting an authenticity identified with the archaic. But a taste for the raw and the seemingly primitive can be a product of refinement. "Truth to materials" was a cardinal tenet of high modernism—stone must look like stone, wood like wood, and clay like clay, with no faux effects—which means that Johnston's straightforward use of traditional materials and methods is in line with a basic modernist principle. Woodfiring is also modernist in its reliance on chance. The poet and critic Paul Valery, in his famous meditation "On the Pre-eminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire," remarks upon "the immense scope for the noble element of uncertainty" involved in firing, and adds of those who work with fire, " *They*

can never abolish Chance" (his emphasis). Ancient methods can appear only a half-step removed from John Cage and his use of the *I Ching* as a tool for musical composition, with the deliberate introduction of chance a modernist complement to artistic control. The struggle between choice and chance is as old as ceramics, but in a world of computer-controlled gas and electric kilns it takes on a new significance. When Johnston uses woodfiring, he plays the ancient game by giving the last word, in effect, to the fire—but not before using his experience and expertise to assert some control through location in the kiln and other factors.

For Johnston, the "most interesting thing about art is the ability to carry information." Here "information" does not refer to some sort of Wikipedia compilation or a cybernetic idea of mass quantities of data. In ceramics, information begins with the associations and traditions that inform the choice of clay, glaze and slip, and firing method, and ultimately includes all the formal elements large and small that are embodied in the finished work. That is where Johnston's assurance, maturity, and skill become evident.

"I want the pots when they emerge from the kiln to be imbued with a mysterious power," says Johnston. The mystery and power of his ceramics are a tribute to his mastery, and cannot be completely explained. Modern art, ancient and tribal art, and ceramic traditions all contribute to the foundations of Johnston's own art, but in the end he is the one responsible for its "mysterious power"—and its promise of staying power as well.