

Putting **CLAY** to Work

In Denver's thriving River North Art District, Plinth Gallery shapes a promising future

BY ROSEMARY CARSTENS

Persistence, perseverance and patience. These are the qualities that Plinth Gallery owners Jonathan Kaplan and his wife Dorothy Bensusan credit for their growing reputation as a resource for fine contemporary ceramics.

Some of their success can be attributed to what Kaplan describes as “a very discernible sense of discovery” in the River North Art District (RiNo), just north of downtown Denver. With more than 200 active artists, RiNo is the largest of eight art districts in a city known for its enduring clay traditions. >>

Formerly a glass blowing and manufacturing facility known as the Acapulco Smoke Shop, the 10,000-square-foot industrial building has been transformed by owner Jonathan Kaplan into Plinth Gallery, a combination exhibition space, studio, office, warehouse and inside and outside kilns on the first level, with an open floor plan living area on the second.



©DOUGLAS KAHN /ALPERT+KAHN 2010

“We look for products that are different, visually exciting and impeccably made.”

—Jonathan Kaplan, Plinth Gallery owner



Interior gallery spaces were designed to take advantage of the natural light. The “gallery grid” (left) is a powder-coated steel unit with 54 spaces that serves as a versatile display system for smaller ceramic objects. Above, Jonathan and Dorothy with gallery dogs Ajax, a spaniel, and Mica, a Weimaraner.

In 2006, after living in Steamboat Springs where he owned a ceramics design and manufacturing business and taught at Colorado Mountain College, Kaplan wanted to return to his career as an artist. Driving around in search of Denver real estate, he spotted a 10,000-square-foot industrial building situated on a three-lot parcel. He immediately envisioned what it could become, signed a contract, and began extensive renovations.

The first floor, where pipes and bongs had once been manufactured for the “head shop” industry, now houses the Plinth Gallery showroom and office, Kaplan’s personal studio, a vast raw materials storage space, and indoor and outdoor kilns. The couple lives on the second floor in a strikingly designed space with a view of the Colorado Rockies. In a district where innovative architecture is the norm, Plinth holds its own.



Getting the Word Out

“Denver has a vibrant cultural scene,” says Kaplan, “and both our present and prior mayors have understood that supporting the arts benefits the community in ways far beyond financial.” RiNo itself has a very wide following. Its monthly e-mail newsletter, the RiNo Crow, goes out to more than 3,000 recipients and its website (www.rivernorthart.com) gets 10,000 hits each month.

Word of mouth remains an important source of the gallery’s customers.

Kaplan and Bensusan are very involved in the RiNo Art District, which they feel not only supports their business but provides a sense of belonging. They participate actively in RiNo’s First Fridays and Second Saturdays showcases, and for several years during RiNo’s Spring Open Studio Tour, they’ve sponsored the UCD Iron Pour and invited community participation.

But the couple also understands that advancing public awareness of their business outside their own neighborhood is essential. They make the most of every marketing avenue, issue regular press releases, and send out a monthly e-blast before each opening event. They keep their website current and find that linking it with Facebook and Twitter “really



works” for them.

Kaplan, a slightly built, articulate bundle of energy, publishes frequently in ceramics journals and elsewhere, which plays a role in the gallery’s success, and the couple strives to attract corporate, public and special interest groups to Plinth. Their strong ties to the interior design community help them to get major artists’ work installed, and Kaplan’s ongoing connection with arts educators continues to prove fruitful.

Running Workshops

“Our workshops are stand-alone events that have tremendous appeal to other ceramic artists and arts educators,” Kaplan



explains. “We work with Adams State College in Alamosa to provide graduate credit for participation and successful completion.” The national artists Plinth brings in “have very significant followings and reputations, and they present great learning opportunities.”

In addition to Plinth’s workshop program, the gallery hosts one major two-month-long ceramics exhibition each year. Last year, it teamed up with the Anderson Ranch Arts Center to produce an all-Colorado exhibition. This year, in October and November, in collaboration with The Boulder Pottery Lab, it is producing “Flash Point: An International Wood Fire Exhibition.”



Counterclockwise from above: a spiral staircase provides access to the residence and the deck; an open floor plan creates seamless space through the living, dining and kitchen areas, with ample room for displaying ceramics and art; the popped roof and many windows were added to the structure to take advantage of the light; Jonathan in his studio.

Collectors are an important part of the gallery’s clientele, but its wide price-point mix and art works ranging from small drinking vessels to larger sculptural works also attract those who just “wish to own one singular, beautiful piece such as a Yixing teapot.” The gallery has a growing walk-in business, and word of mouth remains an important source of customers.



©DOUGLAS KAHN/ALBERT KAHN 2010

Creating Excitement

Plinth Gallery focuses on an eclectic mix of contemporary ceramics worked in a wide variety of techniques. In a career spanning more than 40 years of working with clay, Kaplan has developed a keen eye for top-of-the-line objects: “We look for products that are different, visually exciting and impeccably made,” he explains, “and that complement what we are already showing.”

In a district where innovative architecture is the norm, Plinth Gallery holds its own.

Plinth mounts eight solo exhibitions a year, with work by artists from all over the country as a way of showcasing new artists and new ideas that Colorado collectors and enthusiasts may never have seen firsthand. Kaplan and Bensusan encourage experimentation, and are willing to take risks to display it.

The couple does everything on a transparent, businesslike basis, making sure each artist they represent receives fair exposure. Using a combination of pedestals, shelving and wall space, gallery displays are changed frequently to maintain freshness.



JONATHAN KAPLAN

Display units (top) are a combination of Abstracta with glass shelving, pedestals in assorted sizes, and an adjustable shelving system. The gallery offers a full schedule of changing exhibitions through the year, showcasing work by artists including Kristen Kieffer (above), and Farraday Newsome and Jeff Reich (opposite).

Building Relationships

A large part of Plinth Gallery's success derives from the attention that Kaplan and Bensusan give to their community, their



JONATHAN KAPLAN

clients and their artists. As with any good recipe, each ingredient absorbs strength from the others and, taken as a whole, it becomes something greater than its individual parts.

“Collaboration is the magic component,” Jonathan maintains. “Once you involve others in your success, everyone benefits.” ■

Rosemary Carstens writes about art and travel for national magazines and publishes the award-winning online magazine FEAST at www.feastofbooks.com.



©DOUGLAS KAHN/ALBERT KAHN 2010

PLINTH GALLERY

3520 Brighton Blvd., Denver CO 80216, 303-295-0717

<http://plinthgallery.com>
gallery@plinthgallery.com

OWNERS: Jonathan Kaplan and Dorothy Bensusan

YEAR OPENED: 2007

RETAIL SPACE: 800 square feet

NUMBER OF ARTISTS REPRESENTED:
 Approximately 30

MAILING LIST: 6,000+

MERCHANDISE MIX: An eclectic contemporary mix of low fire, high fire, porcelain, slip cast, raku and saggar fired functional and sculptural ceramics

ADVERTISING/MARKETING METHODS:

Print media; website; e-mail; direct mail; Facebook and Twitter; citywide community involvement as well as within the River North Art District; professional articles in top industry publications. Board of Directors, Studio Potter; membership in the River North Art District, RiNo Neighborhood Association and the RiNo Yacht Club (dedicated to the health and vitality of the Platte River that flows through the neighborhood); member of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA).

SPECIAL EVENTS: First Fridays and Second Saturdays; artist demonstrations and workshops for students, clients and art educators; and an annual open studio tour. One major two-month-long ceramics exhibition each year, which in October and November 2012 will be a collaboration with The Boulder Pottery Lab to produce “Flash Point: An International Wood Fire Exhibition.”

CUSTOMER SERVICES: Gift certificates, gift wrapping and arranging custom commissions; flexible payment plans offered on occasion; professional consultations with interior designers.