

by Rosette Gault

Sages have said that ultimately there are two fundamental powers in life: sex and death—because both events irrevocably transform the individual. Great art also belongs in the same category because it too transforms. In a brief moment, an artistic image is fixed in the mind. The influence of an artwork may be subtle at first, but its power in the memory grows with time—a seed taking root.

During his lifetime, Howard Kottler left a trail of clay seeds, graphic testimony to a process of personal and artistic liberation. Over the years, layers of pretense dissolved. This was a man looking for and at himself, at us and at society through his art—with an eloquence and sense of humor matched by few.

The majority of Kottler's works were an eclectic blend of humor, mystery, satire and protest. Laced with surprises, secrets and contradictions, his central images were borrowed (some would say stolen) from the collective soup. Simple but familiar attention-getting devices fool no one when they appear.

Assemble a few of these "loaded" associate images in a collage, and the result is a visual pun. This pun for the eyes, with both entertainment and graphic value, was to become one of Kottler's more consistent trademarks.

In "The Old Bag Next Door Is Nuts," for example, he literally reproduced the image of a paper bag filled with nuts as a three-dimensional collage of slip castings. In the "Last Supper" and "American Gothic," we saw familiar art masterpieces reproduced in miniature and presented as slightly altered collages of decals on obviously commercial dinner plates. At that time, those of us who were working in clay studios will recall that slip casting and low fire were near anathema.

What is relevant is the way Howard Kottler, fellow ceramist, used power to engage his viewers in a relationship. After he got our attention on visual

and intellectual levels, he would then provoke an emotional conflict to insure the impact of the message. His tool, humor, occasionally would make the pill easier to swallow, or make us gag; but, most of the time, it would do both simultaneously. His knowledge

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about the use and abuse of power in both the practice and theory of making art was extensive.

Consider the underlying power issues associated with art. A few examples from early work are: the power of fear associated with mental illness; the power of belief in the sacred; the influence on art of fame and the published word; the power of seduction, of language, of taboo, of compulsions and obsession.

Expressions and displays of power at these levels are a fundamental issue, the cause of both war and peace. Just what this power looks like is also a fundamental issue for visual artists who are concerned about the contribution they make to the culture, both personally and professionally.

For many, to speak of power is to speak of control or influence, over the self, over others and over the environment. But how is this power obtained in the first place, artistically or otherwise?

A common way of getting power is to fuse with the powerful object or symbol and by process of osmosis, gradually deplete the potency of the host. We are not talking spiritual power here; we are talking the opposite, the power of the ego.

By the late 1970s, Kottler began to turn his attention inward toward the ego. The numerous "trick" self-profiles of that time, although still within the

characteristic visual pun format, hint of a trend toward greater self-absorption which was happening in society at that time.

For these, Kottler stole the ubiquitous "perception test" image of a wine goblet as a point of departure. Found in both art and psychology textbooks, it is an exercise in seeing and shifting point of view. For him it served as an appropriate illusion of a self-portrait. Because the profile was visible in silhouette only, the satisfaction of looking Howard Kottler

directly in the eyes was deliberately withheld. Thus the artist engaged us in a petty, yet seductive power play, which was effective and typical.

At some point, the role of control and self-discipline in power-based artistic self-expression, and in real life, became extreme—rigid control is most vulnerable, like ceramics and glass, to breakage or "shock." If the overcontrolled identity shatters, what remain are many sharp, potentially dangerous pieces. Turned on themselves, the very weapons of self-defense now threaten that which they used to protect.

By 1987, actual sharp, shattered mirror bits surrounded Kottler's "negative space" in yet another self-portrait in profile, this time larger than life, like an altar, center stage—each piece a separate reflection of a man whose identity may well have become a collective image made up of fragments of those around him.

Few art students of the '70s and '80s could get away with such a trite and blatant display of simplistic imagery at the undergraduate level without being lambasted. Yet Kottler took that which was so gauche and flaunted it.

It was the enormous dog forms posing in a 1987 exhibition at the Bellevue Art Museum that were most difficult to ignore. Power is not just in appearance of scale; power also is dependent upon a relationship. Dogs were a metaphor of choice for Kottler. Dogs are the

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model of domesticated power. Is not what we call art also a kind of domesticated imagination?

How are these wild things (a.k.a. art) dominated or controlled? By tricks? By secrets? By costume? By a leash? By a literal and simultaneous jigsaw fit precisely to the root of ceramic art as understood by academics in the university art world?

Kotler lampooned his own field, his own knowledge, his own career; in fact anything public, including artists, was fair game. Shamelessly, he borrowed from Boccioni, the futurists, the cubists, from Noritake tableware, from art historians, dead or alive.

Where is the power in this? Secrets, of course; the power of the secret; the covered jar from the pottery tradition. Secret compartments were built into the dog sculptures. If you know where to look, and you are willing to (heaven forbid) touch/interact with the sculpture, you can find them. That dog is also a covered jar!

I can still hear the collective groan of his colleagues, as they smile. I still

see the older women at the Bellevue Art Museum delighting in a glimpse of the secret compartments, while Kotler, feigning disinterest, watched from a distant corner of the room.

Take on the history of ceramics, especially since the '50s. Be a thorn in the paw of the purists who still worship reflections in glaze surfaces and sensuous touchy-feely clay, just as you once did, who retch at the mere thought of a mold-made knickknack. Magnify the knickknack 1000 times. Protest the protest against a plastic lifestyle. Go literal. Use phony wood grain Contact paper instead of glaze. Maybe it will catch on—glaze of the '80s! People will smile in spite of the "tackiness" of the idea.

Be a sophisticated brat, which is a euphemism for Kotler-style protest. The ceramic purists' disdain of pretentiousness and narcissism has no limit. It's time someone noticed. Bring those denials and taboos to light. Love those enemies.

Ceaselessly duplicate your face in your art. Bother those well-meaning individuals who just beg for a little common sense, good manners and humility, who saw "the best minds of

their generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked..." as the poet Alan Ginsberg declared in the opening line to his 1956 poem "Howl."

Give us a chance to see the judgments, the arrogance, the repression, the ironies, those power relationships up close.

Magnify their power. Beyond life size. Beyond Claes Oldenberg. Diminutive they could be treasured. Now they must be encountered. Big they are dragons. Big they are powerful, fearsome, loathsome eyesores. But we do not fail to see them.

Who then was Howard Kotler? Who was this controversial and dramatic individual, whose art would provoke disgust and a laughter at the same time, but which we would not soon forget? Like the comedian who delivers a side-splitting comment with a perfectly straight face, Kotler, for most of his life, had the control to deliver the collective goods, the spoils of his personal war. He shone his mirror back in our faces, even when it was empty and he knew it.

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