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## Don Reitz: Out of the Ashes

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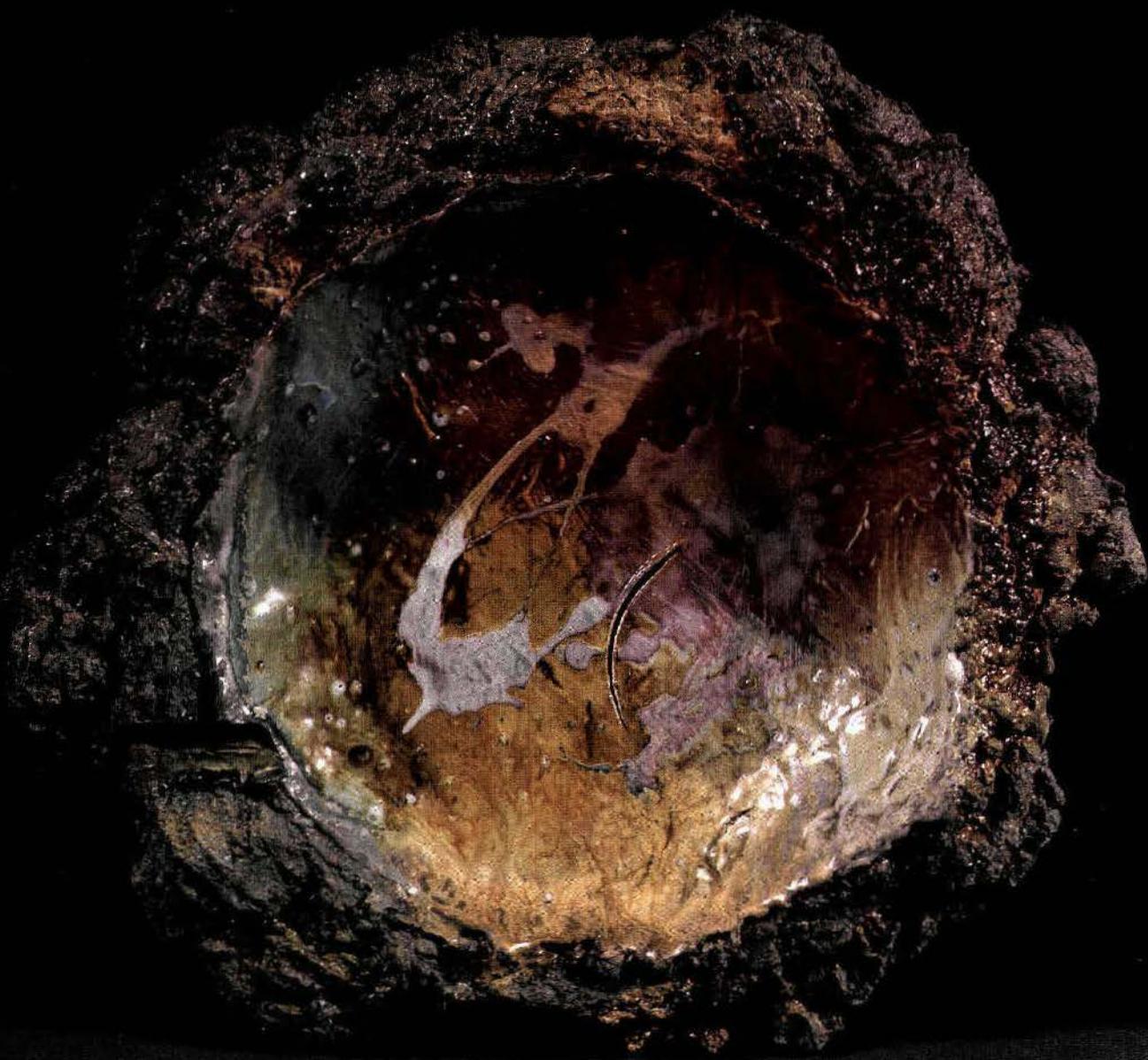
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Don Reitz  
**Out of the Ashes**

*Article by  
Jo Farb Hernández*



SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY'S NATALIE AND JAMES Thompson Art Gallery was proud to present a major exhibition of new work by ceramic sculptor Don Reitz, one of the most iconic and influential ceramists working today. Over 40 works were on display from 28 October through 19 December 2008.

Following high school in Belvidere, New Jersey Reitz joined the Navy. After his service and unsatisfied with his early vocational choice as meat-cutter, he decided to make use of the GI Bill to return to school at Kutztown State University (Pennsylvania, US) to study painting. Working in the style of the contemporary Abstract Expressionism movement, during his last semester Reitz was introduced to ceramics by an instructor who had noticed his "good hands". Serendipitously, that same day he had first seen the work of Pete Voulkos in a craft magazine and he was immediately inspired by the medium and its potential. The dimensionality and physicality of clay suited Reitz far better than his work on canvas. Although he has continued to experiment with other media over the years, clay has always remained his true calling.

Energized by the possibilities inherent in this new medium, Reitz moved on to Alfred University, graduating with his MFA in 1962. Soon after, he accepted a position at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Madison that had been opened up in order to free Harvey Littleton to move from clay to glass. Teaching gave the young artist both the time and the wherewithal to move beyond the traditional modernist studio ceramic teachings and forms he had explored at Alfred. Combining intensity of purpose with an innate ability to elicit, absorb and assimilate information from everyone he met and every place he travelled, he became one of the foremost practitioners of sculptural and expressionist ceramics. It is

no exaggeration to note that Reitz helped to actually define the genre itself. He has worked tirelessly over the past 50 years, exploring different clays, manners of firing and ceramics traditions. Particularly drawn to wood and salt firing, in which the element of unpredictability complements his personal predilections for daring experimental innovations and improvisations, he is a master technician and incomparable potter who chooses to dramatically alter his thrown forms, manipulating classic contours by pushing and pulling, stabbing, marking and painting.

Well-known and beloved as a teacher (at Wisconsin, where he served as a professor until 1988 as well as through the innumerable workshops and classes he has provided to audiences worldwide), his lectures should be more aptly described as performances, as he jumped on top of the wheel to throw huge vessels or as he illustrated the fine points of pulling a handle through satirical and entertaining demonstrations.

Right: *Kachina*. 2007. 57 x 16 x 16.5".

Below: *Punch Out*. 2006. 9 x 10 x 7 1/2".



An intense and energetic man who lives life to the fullest, Reitz was always on the go, always ready to work hard and party hard and always willing to ditch the 'Reitz look' for new aesthetic and technical directions when he felt the need to do so.

The *Sara Period* works, for example, are widely-known: a series with bright colours and enigmatic child-like markings created as he slowly recovered from a 1982 car crash that would have killed almost anyone else and after which he was told he would never walk again or have use of his legs. These pieces are named for a young niece who was convalescing from cancer at that same time and with whom Reitz carried on a vigorous correspondence and exchange of drawings. Visually distinct from these works, yet following the same conceptual path of modifying style, technique and even aesthetic to respond to changing circumstances, the pieces on display at San José State's Thompson Gallery – with one or two

exceptions – were all drawn from the last three to five years, a prolific period in which Reitz came to grips with his new physical reality as the survivor of a heart attack. During this time period, he endured 11 surgeries, including open-heart surgery in which two valves were replaced and he flat-lined three different times on the operating table. Yet once again he has risen 'from the ashes' to explore new ways of realizing the ideas for new pieces that keep him on an almost manic treadmill of throwing, constructing and firing.

No longer able to throw as large as he could in earlier years, Reitz has developed a series of sculptures assembled from smaller thrown and hand-built forms that let him continue to produce work on the human scale. At least four works are always in process at once as he throws a series of varying forms and then assembles them by joining, slashing and pulling, ripping and marking. Some clearly reference the human figure, such as the *Kachina* works; others are much more abstract, such as the smaller *Punch Outs* that defy any cultural connection and speak instead purely to form, gesture and expressionist movement. Allowing the pieces to air dry slowly, he dispenses with a first bisque fire, instead moving directly to the Anagama-style wood kiln that he built on his Arizona ranch some years ago.

Many admirers may still remember Reitz as 'Mr. Salt', the intrepid explorer into the almost-lost technique of salt glazing, which resulted in vessels boasting luminous colours and sparkling surfaces; in contrast, these new works are both more earthy and more subtle, yet are no less rich. He still retains both his interest in colour and his affinity for it but the tones of these new pieces, for the most part, require more effort on the part of the viewer to see and appreciate. Although Reitz has pro-actively devoted important periods of his life to opening his mind to

Left: *Sculpture*. 2008. 38 x 12 x 12".

Below: *Table Top*. 2008. 10 x 14 x 11".



other ways of being and working – from living with an Algonquin elder while a young man, to numerous later visits to Japan and even to New Zealand, where he was honoured by the Maori for “distinguished leadership in the dispensing of knowledge to peoples”, with his name carved on their totem pole – in some ways these current works may be the most spiritual of his entire career. They require patience and vision on the part of the viewer, paralleling the patience and vision of the artist throughout the various stages of conceptualisation and production: only close and extended observation will reveal the depth of the layers and the many provocative and engaging moves with which the artist endowed these compelling works: no ‘drive-by’ visit will suffice.

Now Professor Emeritus from UW and living and working in Arizona, Reitz has received such honours as being named one of the 12 “greatest living ceramic artists worldwide” by *Ceramics Monthly* (1988 and 2001), is Trustee Emeritus of the American Crafts Council (which recently honoured him with one of their highest accolades, the Aileen Osborn Webb Award), Trustee Emeritus of the World Crafts Council and recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Among many other honours, his significant periods of time studying and working in Japan have also earned him the Governor’s Award from Himeji City.

As he approaches his 80th birthday (November 2009), Don Reitz continues to intensely and intensively explore new paths: despite near-death experiences through accidents and illnesses, he has always

come back, re-energized and forcefully approaching his art anew. This exhibition, curated especially for the Thompson Gallery, included some of the artist’s newest work, never before seen on the West Coast. The wood and (a few) salt-fired floor, wall and table-top size pieces, taken together, reveal the facility of a master who continues to explore and take risks and the increasing spirituality that he is now bringing to his impressive work in this most elemental of materials.



Jo Farb Hernández is Professor and Director of Exhibitions and Special Projects for the School of Art and Design at San José State University. Hernández has worked in the museum field for over 30 years, most recently as Director of the Monterey Museum of Art and President of the California of Museums. She has authored or coauthored over 30 exhibition catalogues and books in the fields of self-taught and contemporary art. Particularly interested in the genre of art environments, she is the Director of SPACES, the non-profit archives of self-taught art. She is currently working on a book on ‘outsider art’ environments in Spain. All photos by Jeff Bruce unless otherwise credited.

*Above: Don Reitz in his Arizona studio. Photo by Preston Tolbert.*

*Right: Stack Sculpture #6. 2008. 38 x 15 in.*

*Below: Platter. 2006. 5.5 x 19 x 10.5 in.*



