Koplos, Janet, “From Function to Form,” *Art in America*, November 1990, pp. 166-171

From Function to Form

Combining lessons gleaned from Mediterranean and Oriental ceramics with formal insights taken from abstract painting and sculpture, Betty Woodman creates complex hybrid works.

BY JANET KOPLOS

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Betty Woodman's recent works are recognizably vases, but their embellishment is like little in the ceramic canon. Her primary art, as her exhibition at Max Protetch last May demonstrated, is painting, but it's a different sort of painting, a hybrid that is fully three-dimensional and touchable, that can be surveyed from all sides and even held. Over recent years as conventional painting and sculpture have grown closer to each other, Woodman has wrested the surface treatment of her ceramics into a new, looser relationship with its form. The idea seems simple, but its realization is complex. The formal attractions of her work are the colors, the contours and the fascinating spatial ambiguities in the relationship between the object and its surface; the intellectual attractions are her references to painting, to forms and glazes from ceramic history and to the vessel's ancient associations with the human body.

At more than 30 inches high, Woodman's recent freestanding vases are taller and narrower than typical tabletop vases. Some of these freestanding works are single vases (the "Still Life Vase" series), some are pairs (the "Kimono Vases") and one work at Protetch was a trio. Each of the freestanding vases sports elaborately formed appendages that take the place of handles but do not invite gripping. These are large and irregular shapes that she has cut from flat slabs of clay and attached to opposite sides of each vase. All Woodman's works are notable for intimations of movement, created partly by the dynamic shapes of these appendages, which jut out in sharp, quick "gestures," and partly by her unpredictable blotches and sweeps of applied color. The appendages divide each vessel into front and back faces of equal importance but different painted character: one

Opposite and this page, Betty Woodman: Still Life Vase #3, *1989, glazed earthenware, 36 by 34 by 10 inches. Collection Martin and Deborah Hale, Mass.*

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Installation view of the "Wall Flower Pots" series, 1989.

side is spare while the other is packed with incident, or color patches on one side are blurry while on the other they're clear and discrete.

Another series, the "Wall Flower Pots," consists of small vases that sit upon wall-mounted sconces but are hidden behind two-dimensional vase-shaped cutouts. The pots themselves are visible only from an angle. Additional cutouts, reminiscent of the appendages of the freestanding works, are mounted around them on the wall. These cutouts, simpler and more fluid than the appendages, bring to mind the sweeping arm movements of an orchestral conductor.

Color has been an almost constant feature of Woodman's work from her earliest days as a maker of functional pottery. After completing studies at the School for American Craftsmen, she went to Italy in the early '50s and was exposed to vivid majolica earthenware traditions there. (The low-temperature firing which allowed bright color was, at the time, derided in America as a hobbyist's technique.) For many years, her husband, the painter George Woodman, decorated her forms. Later, she left the work plain, and gradually she worked out her own painting approach. Her forms have also changed, growing increasingly exaggerated over the years. Beginning in the '70s she gradually shifted away from pottery for daily use to forms so specific they approached parody, and later to forms intended to be looked at rather than used. The grayed, soft earthenware clay of the recent works is flushed with hues ranging from acid to pastel, achieved by means of slips which have the dry stability of a brushstroke—thus keying the work to the traditions of canvas as much as to those of clay.

Woodman's painting intimates an associative, imaginable space, and at the same time the color moves in *real* space because it is applied to three-dimensional objects. The single-vessel "Still Lifes" demonstrate bravura painting—strong contrasts in generous doses. In *Still Life Vase #3* (1989), a painted, fabriclike expanse of dark, almond-shaped dots on a creamy ground "drapes" from the vase to an appendage on the right, while a reversed pattern of cream dots on black runs off the other way; both tenderly yet ardently trace the change from roundness to flatness. At the top of the right-hand appendage is an abrupt arc of red; counterbalancing it, the bottom left-hand appendage is a vestigial handle, on which brown dentation bites a black patch. Here, as always, Woodman's color is as discontinuous as her form. The strength of the tropically rich painting in *#3* almost overwhelms the vase's decisive form. Real and painted edges are nearly indistinguishable. This is Woodman's forte: the painting adheres to the vessel, yet its operation remains almost shockingly independent of it.

Still Life Vase #3 evokes Matisse—glazed. Here Woodman, through color and pattern, aspires to express an entire slice of life, from exterior vegetation to interior decoration. In the shapes and hues of her color patches she captures the richness of a Matissean environment—still lifes on tables, textiles, art works, views through windows. She achieves this despite only rarely painting a shape that corresponds to something specific (one such is the multilobed green flare at the top of *#3* that looks like the compound leaf of schefflera or horse chestnut).

The freestanding twin "Kimono Vases" are the descendants—and a distillation—of a set of three flower vases that Woodman created for a lobby display at MOMA in 1988. While the spatial relationships among the MOMA vessels pleased her, she concluded that the center vase was unnecessary—or even an impediment—to the effect. The voids between the elements were as compelling as the solids. So she produced the "Kimono Vases" series in which the center of each two-part work is the carefully defined and measured space between the vessels. While painting is essential to the effect of the "Kimono Vases," distinctive outline plays a stronger part in these works than in the "Still Lifes."

The central void of the "Kimono Vases" is outlined by the edges of the flat, unmatched, odd-shaped appendages (Woodman says she's "not a straight-line person," which is putting it mildly). The appendages destroy the bilateral symmetry of the vessels' profiles, and their "gestures" invigorate what would otherwise be passive space around a centripetal vase. Their curves and diagonals set one's eyes in motion, and only the horizontals of the rims and bases of the

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Above and below, Kimono Vases February, *1990, glazed earthenware, 38 by 50 inches overall. Collection Janet and Robert Kardon, Penn.*

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Delphinium, *1989, glazed earthenware, 42 by 19 by 7 inches.*

Here color is as discontinuous as form; the painting adheres to the vessel, but its operation is almost shockingly independent of it.

vessels provide a place to rest. Appendage shapes on *Kimono Vases February* (1990) hint at a handle and a spout. Others might be compared with wings, knife blades, flippers, tails, unfolding palm fronds. But these associations are incidental: the appendages function primarily as invented abstract forms.

More consequent than such associations is the physical change from vase to appendage, from volume to flatness. Here Woodman is conceptually playing off the fact that conventional ceramic vessels-in-the-round can be summarized by their outlines—by a flat silhouette—because their three-dimensionality is regular and predictable. But in Woodman's works, outline and volume are not the same, the vessel is not schematically summarizable, and the artist heightens this three-dimensional complexity with mixed spatial messages from her two-dimensional painting.

Woodman's inspiration for the loose relationship of painting to form comes from ceramic history. Once she adapted the forms of ancient Mediterranean ceramics for her "pillow pitchers" and appropriated Tang dynasty three-color glazes for their coloring. Now she borrows the chaotically free split decorations of early 17th-century Japanese Oribe ware. But perhaps a more potent precedent for the complexity of her color patterns is the layering of kimono and obi, each with its own intricate brocade. The kimono is a flat garment wrapped around a volumetric form, like Woodman's painting wrapped around her objects. Perhaps, then, the appendages can be equated with kimono sleeves in motion. Other Japanese ghosts can also be seen in these works: part of *Kimono Vases March* (1990) is painted with a wallpaperlike repetition of vertical green lines and dots of salmon-red that brings to mind the Irises screens of the 17th-century painter Ogata Korin.

In the "Wall Flower Pots," the hues range from muted to garish (one work combines turquoise, purple, yellow and red, for example), and the strong color occurs only in

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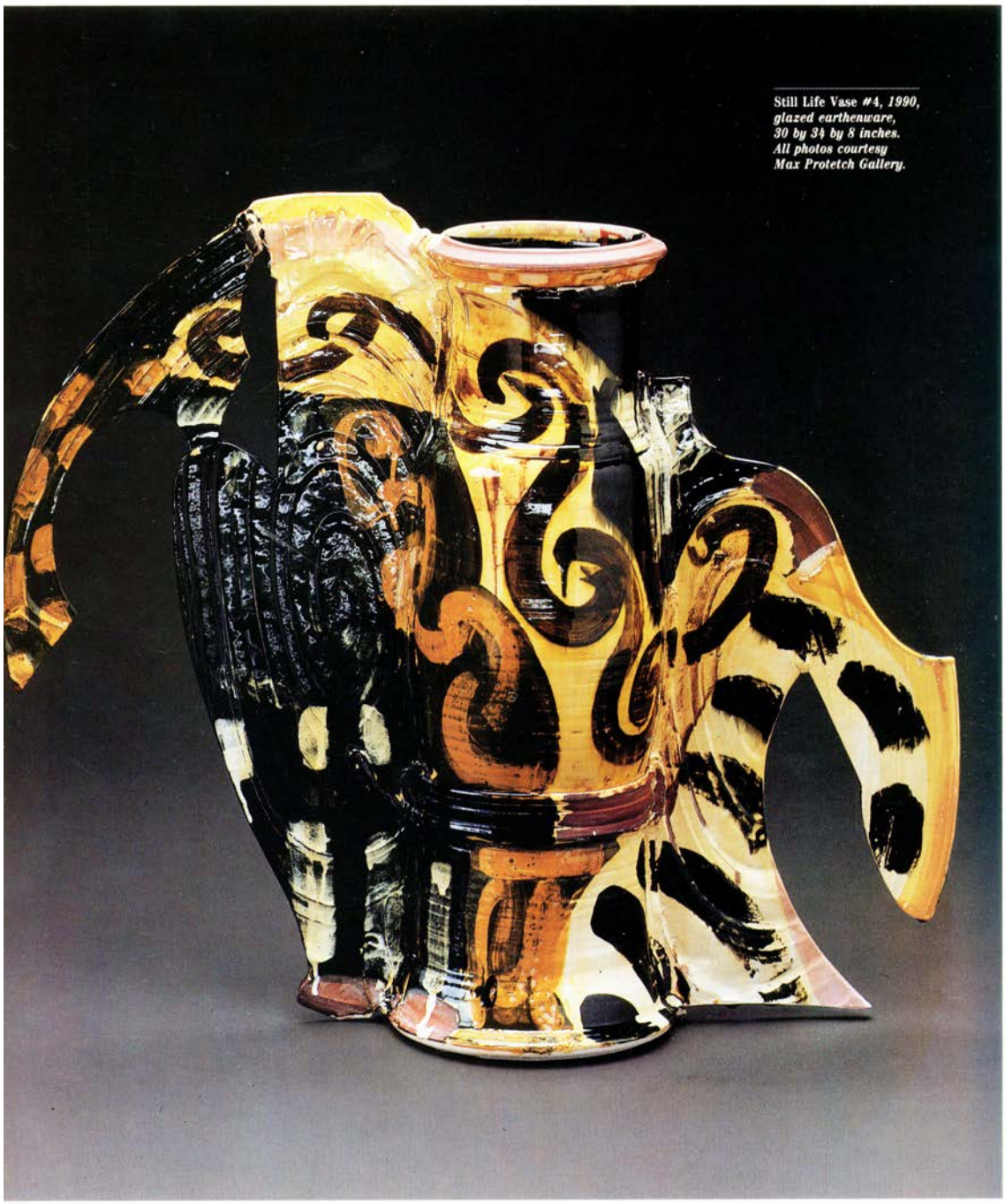

Still Life Vase #4, *1990*, *glazed earthenware, 30 by 34 by 8 inches. All photos courtesy Max Protetch Gallery.*