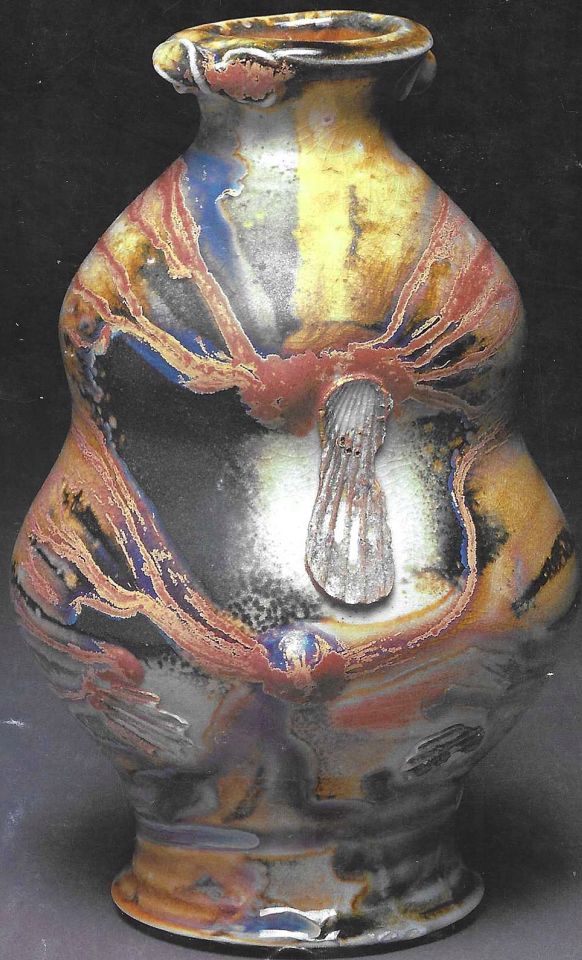


# Ceramics

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# Too Much Is Not Enough

by Billie Sessions



"Screw Teapot," 8½ inches (22 centimeters) in height, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with luster, 1998.

When Susan Beiner speaks about her library, she is not talking about books. She is talking about molds of found objects and forms created from her imagination that she squeezes onto a variety of forms to create a dazzling wealth of visual energy. Beiner usually has about 200 molds at any given time. These forms are her library, and thus her vocabulary.

Just as vocabulary can change in different settings, so too does Beiner's choice of forms used on her surfaces. She is constantly searching for new "words" to alter her message. And her message changes quite frequently these days, from colossal wall pieces dripping with shells, fruitlike forms, giant hooks and bolts to tropical leaves and petite amalgamated succulents resembling precious bubble-ringed, cheery artichokes. It's obvious that she has no shortage of energy. When she completes an oversized porce-



"Fruitful," 9 inches (23 centimeters) in height, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with glazes and lusters, multiple firings, 2001.





"New Hybrid #3," 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with glazes, fired to Cone 6, 2004.



lain-encrusted wall piece filled with thousands of molded shapes, or a sizeable assemblage of fruity, elfinlike works, she throws out those molds, forcing herself to find and create a new vocabulary.

Though Beiner is possibly most known for her "Screw Teapots," overflowing with hardware like a tool man's wet dream, she has abandoned these since her move to Southern California four years ago. It's apparent that the screw pots were a direct response to the industry of the Detroit neighborhood where she lived and worked from 1994 to 2000. Beiner's work is proof that the motor city is a playground for an artist interested in industrial items. "Hardware elements started there because it was so industrial. For instance, my studio was in an old building where they used to make airplane parts."

Two of her artist friends utilized scrap metal in their work and Beiner would rummage through their heaps of "junk" and find things that she would then use as molded objects. She was appropriating the heart and history of Detroit into art. "For me, it was taking what was old and discarded and presenting it in a new way. I was translating the traditional to the fantastic." Even though most of her new vocabulary these days is based on imaginary, organic forms that she molds from what she sees in her new sun-filled environment, she admits she will always use hardware. She claims it's the vocabulary word she will never abandon.

Beiner's true passion is sumptuous surfaces. Too much is not enough. Throughout the years, she has been encouraged to change her opulent and profuse casings. However, her studio mate in

Detroit, Kathy Dambach, was influential in convincing Beiner to stick with it and work through her ideas. "When I began working," Beiner recalls, "my style wasn't accepted much and it took some time for people to get used to the energy. I am a compulsive workaholic and have the energy to keep working and to be fearless. I enjoy the time and the challenge of what the work presents. The intensity of the surface and color gets me going."

Naturally, Beiner's encrusted work is thought to have its aesthetic roots in Bernard Palissy's work. Yet, she was unaware of his work until her surfaces were well on their way to their present state of congestion. All the same, some of her influences are clearly explainable. It turns out that her childhood home in New Jersey played an important role. Since her mother loved fine China, her father would bring indigenous ceramic tokens home from various parts of the world where he traveled for work. Over the years, the breakfront cabinet became filled with cups and saucers of completely diverse designs, colors and surfaces. Beiner cherished these rowdy bits and pieces.

Years later, as a ceramics student, Beiner was drawn to studying festooned silverware and bejeweled Meissen and Sèvres pieces, noting their parallel surface adornments. She is well aware that these styles peaked her intuitive cravings, having always been drawn to active surfaces. Until recently, she was constantly reviewing her reference books about 18th-century vessel forms and their purposes, since she was translating those forms and their flamboyant decoration into her contemporary encrustations.

As a painting major at Rutgers University in the early 1980s, Beiner enrolled in ceramics her junior year. She became acquainted with the possibilities of molds from Lynn Peters who was a graduate student. Beiner stayed an extra year, completing her B.F.A. in ceramics. She knew this was the tip of the iceberg, as far as what she needed to apply for a terminal degree in ceramics. She relocated to Arizona State University to prepare.

Uprooting herself again, she moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan for an M.F.A. Next, she moved to Detroit to begin concentrated studio work as adjunct faculty for the College for Creative Studies (CCS) at the College of Art and Design. Her mentor there was Tom Phardel. He was adventurous about experimenting with new glazes, surface orientations and techniques. Teaching slip casting for five years at CCS taught Beiner an enthusiastic and disciplined zeal for the potential of using molds to satisfy her vocabulary.

She is now assistant professor of art at California State University, San Bernardino. "For the first two years in California, I was out of my mind. I made the last screw teapot here . . . , but I wasn't sure where it would lead. The series was over, as my environment had changed. Southern California was so different than any place I had ever been. I started thinking about not making pots



"Klubbo," 20 inches (51 centimeters) in diameter, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with glazes, fired to Cone 6, with aluminum, 2004.





**"New Hybrids," to 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height each, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with glazes, fired to Cone 6, 2004.**

anymore and making sculpture instead. I questioned what it was to make sculpture. It's a whole different set of principles. I haven't made any teapots for over a year now and I like the idea that I don't have to limit myself. I really think that all the years that I made teapots were somewhat limiting, just because I didn't really know that I could not make them. Although I am still interested in the vessel form, now it's completely nonfunctional."

Forms unfold from her sketchbook. They may not have a direct historical connection like the objects that she was making in the 1980s and 1990s. Before, she was sketching traditional forms and attaching castings of found objects. Presently, she uses her sketchbook to record, translate and develop her own forms. This new approach is more engaging for her. The only time that she uses found objects is for the hardware elements in her work. However, the size of the hardware has increased. Beiner has found hardware suppliers that allow her to borrow and return their pricy (\$200+) industrial hooks, bolts and screws.

Because of Beiner's energy and her confession that she gets bored easily, it makes sense that her work evolves relatively rapidly from one articulation of her vocabulary to another. Beiner is translating the landscape of indigenous succulents of southern

California. This latest evolution of her structural design vocabulary she calls "New Hybrids." These have evolved from last year's "Hybrids." More diminutive than the others, they are about 7 inches in height, composed of two pieces. They are action-packed pinnacles set on a saucerlike form with a concerted relationship of color and texture. They are sumptuous, like the experience of driving past fragrant orange groves. With Beiner's flair for the ornate, a cactus is translated into a cluster of energetic, pineapple-like agricultural matter, twisting with bold and festive color combinations, overloaded with shells, ping-pong balls, nubbins, screws and such. Characteristically for Beiner's passionate need to stuff a space, she will fill a whole wall full of these embryonic buddies.

"The difference between what I did before and the new work is that I'm working sculpturally with the inside space of the cast parts. In other words, I am casting the pieces that frequently resemble an improbable leaf or bud and working with the interiors of the casts. I am interested in altering the form because it gives me more options. I can be playful as I investigate the interior space by cutting them open. They move in space, rather than being static. I can manipulate, cut, form and reassemble



parts using a multitude of methods—allowing each piece to blossom. I am dealing with interchangeable parts, and I need to move all the combinations around until I find the appropriate feel. Then they come alive for me. I can't figure them out until I can play around with them."

Prior to the "New Hybrids," Beiner never used crusty glazes or put matt, satin or gloss glazes together on one piece. She is now experimenting with layering them. "I have always been a color freak, so for me to play with the relationship of color to surface this much and have it all together in a small space is a new puzzle. It's like a design problem—integrating an idea strictly through color and shape." As she views two long rows of these pieces, looking like a furrowed crop ready to be picked and taken to market, she says, "Though this group looks somewhat like repeti-

tion, I consider all of these as one piece. I'm going to make more, because I am experimenting with a lot of new things that I haven't done before. I am continually developing new fluid colors to add to my palette so I can examine the activity as the colors interact with one another on these pieces. I want a highly smooth surface so the layers of color will ooze on that form—so luscious you might want to lick them."

When asked what Beiner would do to a living room if she had all the time in the world to make it her own, she replied "I would make ceramic wallpaper that would extend out from the walls. The room would be a historical encrustation of objects from my life. I would have thick glass shelves placed within the wallpaper, each holding a specific object from the people in my life. It's all about activity and celebration—a massive encrustation."

## MONTHLY methods

### Color: Cones 6 through 10

Beiner gets these brilliant colors in firings to Cone 6 or 10. She doesn't like the look of low-fired glazes, as they are not dense enough for her color palette. She likes the look of china or porcelain and has created a low-grade porcelain slip with a lot of ball clay. Because she is interested in making color more intense, she makes her stains as bright as possible by putting an opaque white matt glaze underneath the colored gloss glaze. The opaque white glaze is fired to Cone 10, but the colored glaze is fired to Cone 6–7. The colored glaze melts into the higher-fired glaze, permitting her to fire it anywhere between Cone 6 and Cone 10. The glaze is applied quite thick, thicker than she teaches her students to apply glazes. It doesn't run because the glaze underneath is not fluxed at Cone 6, though it starts fluxing at Cone 8. She sprays the colors on, which requires a lot of wax to separate the colors and textures. Since too much is not enough, it's only natural that all of Beiner's projects, large or small, involve incalculable hours of glazing.

Surprisingly, Beiner has found a limit to her time-consuming obsessions. She doesn't clean mold seams, as she is fond of the added texture they give her pieces. She refuses to score when attaching add-ons. Instead, she attaches parts with a "goop" made from her casting slip, combined with Epsom salts. The slip is deflocculated and the Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) flocculates it. It acts like Velcro! She adds 2 tablespoons of Epsom salts to a cup of water, then heats up the water to dissolve the salts. She then adds 1 tablespoon of this mixture to a quart of slip and it stiffens quickly. She loves the fat edge that the "goop" gives her when it hangs out from under her hordes of fabrications.



"Hybrid #3," 25 inches (64 centimeters) in height, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, with glazes, 2004, by Susan Beiner, Redlands, California.