

Phillip Ahnen

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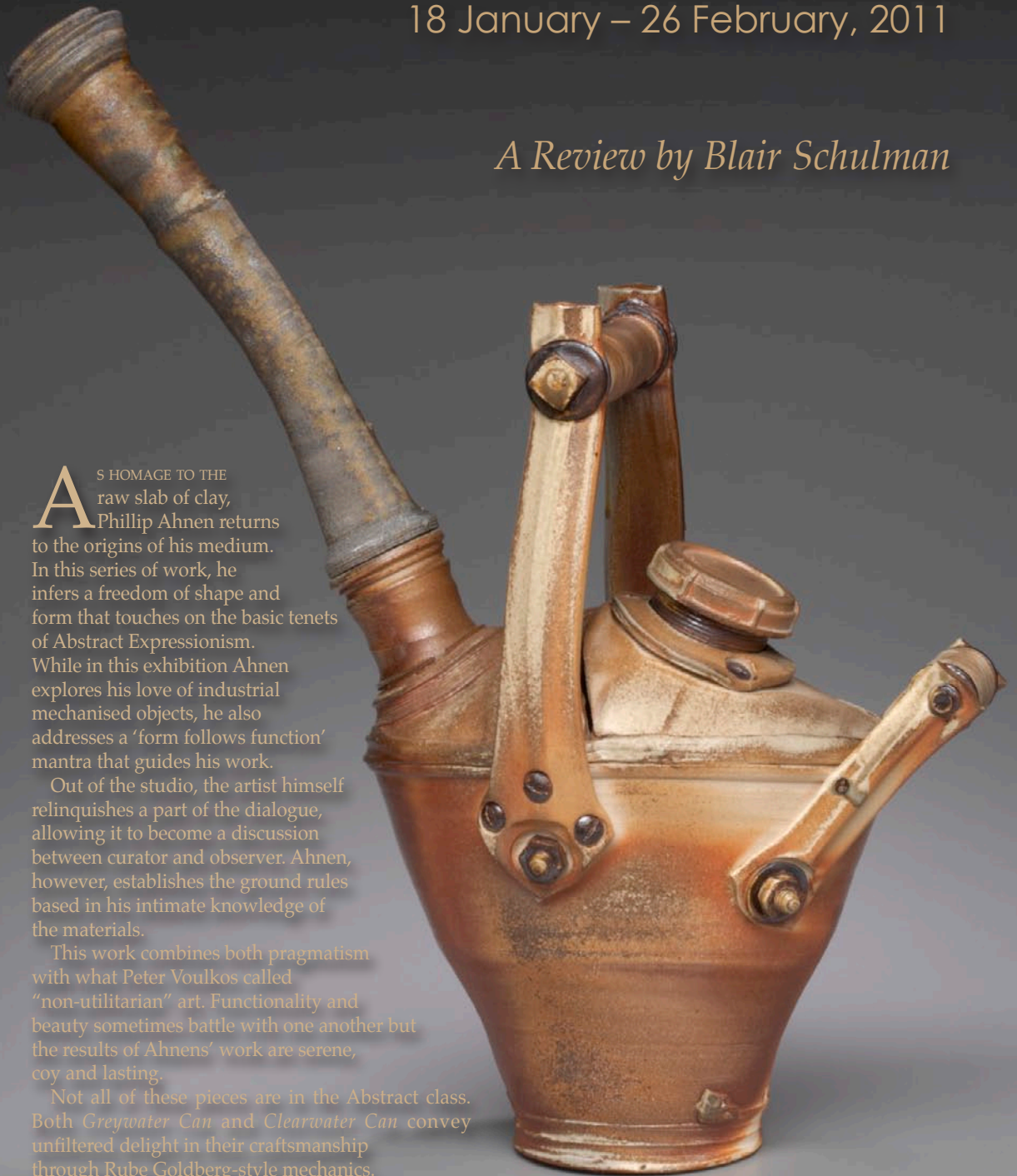
A Review by Blair Schulman

AS HOMAGE TO THE raw slab of clay, Phillip Ahnen returns to the origins of his medium. In this series of work, he infers a freedom of shape and form that touches on the basic tenets of Abstract Expressionism. While in this exhibition Ahnen explores his love of industrial mechanised objects, he also addresses a 'form follows function' mantra that guides his work.

Out of the studio, the artist himself relinquishes a part of the dialogue, allowing it to become a discussion between curator and observer. Ahnen, however, establishes the ground rules based in his intimate knowledge of the materials.

This work combines both pragmatism with what Peter Voulkos called "non-utilitarian" art. Functionality and beauty sometimes battle with one another but the results of Ahnens' work are serene, coy and lasting.

Not all of these pieces are in the Abstract class. Both *Greywater Can* and *Clearwater Can* convey unfiltered delight in their craftsmanship through Rube Goldberg-style mechanics.





Facing page: *Clearwater Can*. 2010.

Above: *Greywater Can*. 2010.

Below: *Petit Server*. 2010.

All above works are woodfired stoneware and slip.



These watering cans are large and heavy monolithic structures that appear to be functional on first impression but they actually parody the perceived intent. In the roots of these pieces, you observe a delicate geometry and you ask, "Will it topple?" or "How cautious should I be in observing it?" Henry Takemoto's, *Flag*, shows us the same sense of inverted balance that Ahnen's work exhibits here, while still speaking to the enduring characteristics of a functional vessel.

What ideas does he address in his forms? There are humorous antecedents that speak to a trend in practicality. The sheer joy of its existence seems to have been removed from the equation of modern manufacturing. Pleasure and pride of ownership are sacrificed for performance. Colours and shapes, in cheapened or overpriced design, are present in modern day household items. Look back at Norman Bel Geddes, the American industrial designer whose futuristic designs during the 1930s had a significant effect on household culture. Ahnen's humorous renditions contemplate a sheer enjoyment for the beholder, practicality notwithstanding. Some pieces, however, do bear an implied usefulness, such as *Petit Server*. Having worked in clay for nearly 20 years, Ahnen refers to the advent of Bel Geddes purity of design



Top: *Self-Portrait*. 2010. Woodfired stoneware.
 Above right: *Sushi Platte*. 2009. Woodfired stoneware.
 Below right: *Dessert Plate #2*. 2010. Woodfired stoneware.

intelligence along with its decline and the ideology of 'planned obsolescence' that currently permeates our culture.

One can see the trade-off from levity to deep thinking in *Self-Portrait*, one of the few pieces found on a wall. From this introspective position you feel its reflective influences gesturing back at you.

Sushi Platter and *Dessert Plate #1*, both present the results of gestures that seem anonymous or noncommittal. You could believe what these pieces represent or opt out of it entirely. Either way, one allows his work to take on the freedom from lineage that so strongly represents Abstract Expressionism's formative ideas. These forms are reflective of Zen Buddhism and what Isamu Noguchi calls "A close embrace of the earth". Contrast editing is not applied, keeping its organic nature undisturbed. Smoothness of glass or texture of stone, Ahnen allows chance elements to remain that happen in the kiln. They do, however, continue to be free of line and long on action, which are some of the fundamental rules of Abstract Expressionism.

Textured slips trigger a duality of chaos and control that embraces rejuvenation in a rural setting. Ahnen returns to the root causations of his family's history in Wisconsin, where working with and for the land is essential to survival. While Ahnen's own familial security allows for a creative autonomy in his work, one can see the roots from Noguchi's own struggles with Japanese nationalism and identity. And if "Noguchi ceramics would seem to fall in

between two poles – neither traditional enough for purists nor wild enough for rebels" as found in a biography of his work, Ahnen's trajectory is the child borne of this idealistic struggle with style and form.

Taking this process a step ahead of his creative forbears, Ahnen makes an allusion to raku and





Above: *Dessert Plate #1*. 2010. Woodfired stoneware and Shino glaze.

Below left: *Gauge #44*. 2010. Woodfired stoneware, slip and inkjet decal.

bisque but he adds man-made elements that keep it all the more relatable to present day. In *Scraps Plate* Ahnen alludes to both the strong Asian influences and his own "constant amazement with raw beauty and colour".

The primitive qualities in his work are also prevalent, even as he maintains a deep respect for their historical influences. Two other pieces on a wall, *Gauges #44* and *Marsh*, exhibit both a technical and realistic dichotomy of form and style. *Marsh*

was the brand of gauge used in his woodfired stoneware and the result is stunning.

These are works that should be cloaked in partial darkness such as certain of (Michaelangelo) Caravaggio's eponymous 16th and 17th century masterpieces. The painter's dramatic use of lighting is meant to enhance a realistic human observation of the physical and emotional states as a way to highlight for the viewer the uniqueness of an unhindered comprehension of these individual forms. The same idea would well serve an Ahnen piece, wherever it is shown.

Ultimately balanced within humour, concept and idealism, Phillip Ahnen is an artist whose work serves as a testimony of a dedication to exploring form in its totality.

Below left: *Ahnen's mark*.

Below right: *Phillip Ahnen*. Photo by James R Dean.



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