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Sam Chung
by Glen R. Brown



Ewer, 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height,
soda-fired porcelain.

Suggestive of the longitudinal crease in a human tongue or a leaf in which the blades curve gracefully outward from the petiole, the linear concavity in the surfaces of Sam Chung's vessels is a trait deriving not from any particular preference for geometry—the precision of an abstract logic of space—but rather from a sensitivity to the balanced division of parts occurring naturally in most organic objects, particularly the human body. As a consequence, his forms are first experienced through a kind of empathy rather than the more consciously analytical perspective that eventually dominates their contemplation. The result is a sense of moving gradually from nature toward something that is more specifically the product of rationality, a characteristic that makes Chung's works ripe with allusion despite their ultimate autonomy. If his forms are not literally abstractions—simplified representations of the essential characteristics of certain things—neither are they purely self-referential. It is characteristic of his vessels that they are ambivalent in this respect, situated somewhere between abstraction and nonobjectivity.

Chung, currently a professor of ceramics at Northern Michigan University, has explored an aesthetic of lightly swelling planes and crisp contours since first committing himself to the slab-

construction technique as a graduate student at Arizona State University in the mid 1990s. To a significant degree, the visual aspects of his work have evolved as a consequence of procedural innovations that have simultaneously simplified the process of construction, and rendered the results more refined and complex. Although he has sought to develop a formality and sophistication that he associates with certain Chinese and Korean vessels of the Song and Koryo dynasties, his work is ultimately driven by process, not by the conscious imitation of other forms. He consistently evades concrete references to recognizable styles, just as he avoids any obvious representation. The goal of his work is to provoke a particular kind of response from the viewer, but one that must relate to the form at the level of its very being, rather than to something that has been grafted superficially onto it.

Initially, Chung relied exclusively on rolled slabs for the construction of his vessels, but eventually the desire to introduce a more complicated volume led him to experiment with the wheel-thrown slabs. Raising a thin, bottomless cylinder about a foot in diameter, he presses a rib tool into the midsection while the piece is turning, creating a gentle horizontal indentation in the cylinder's wall. Then, placing a paper template so that its vertical axis is aligned with this crease, he cuts out slabs to be used as the sides of a vessel. Although he occasionally exploits the option of inverting the orientation of the slabs to create convex sides, he normally situates them so that the creases form a concave vertical division of the vessel's surface. The result is a form that not only splits the bulk of the vessel's body visually into two smaller sections, but creates the effect of movement in depth as well. Concavity plays against convexity to produce the impression of a gentle rolling motion from the vessel's center outward to its contours, both vertically and horizontally.

While the precise, albeit organic, regularity of Chung's forms suggests a fixed pattern of development like that governing the complex dispersal of cells in a living body, his surfaces display a greater unpredictability. This quality cannot be described as true randomness any more than the rivulets of glaze on a Tang-dynasty vessel can be said to arise purely from chance. The glaze is strategically placed in order to exploit unforeseen possibilities. Consequently, it suggests, among other things, the freedom of consciousness to break with the patterned restrictions associated with the physical body, an assertion of will as opposed to the inevitability of genetics. Although Chung's intention is not explicitly to produce metaphors of two inextricable aspects of human being—mind and matter—he appreciates this potential in his work. "I like the fact that there is a loose quality to the glaze," he explains. "It's something spontaneous on top of a rigid, handmade form. There is a tension between the two, and I like to think that there is a little bit of the human in that."

Not all the coloration of Chung's surfaces is irregular, however. He frequently uses a wax resist to create geometric divisions of dark and light hues on a vessel, often separating the whole into halves or quarters. The irregu-



Ewer, 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, assembled from thrown porcelain slabs, glazed and soda fired.

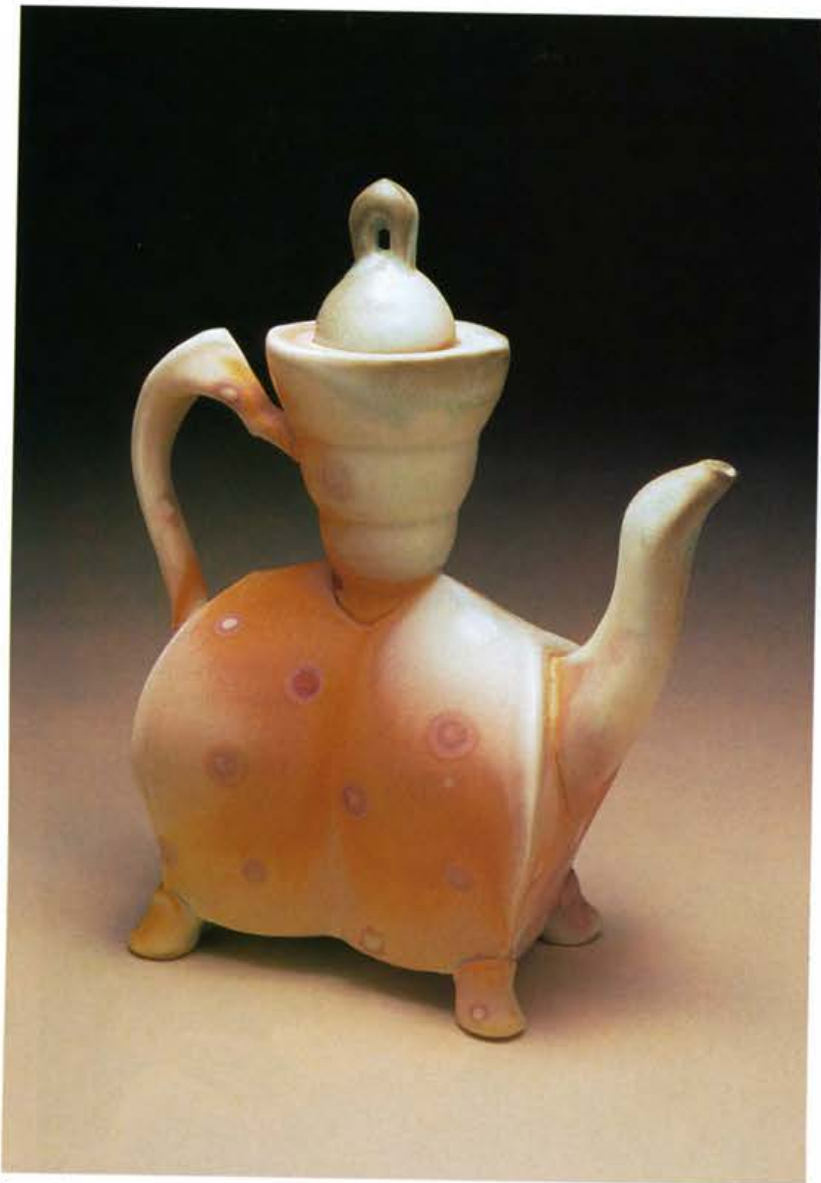


**Ewer, 7 inches
(18 centimeters) in height,
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larities in such cases are confined to spots of glaze, evenly dispersed but running slightly to create unique forms, or the mottled effects of cream, mint green and buff that result from soda firing an unevenly applied white satin glaze containing a small percentage of copper carbonate.

Although Chung occasionally does reduction firing, especially for pieces with a blue celadon or clear glaze, soda firing is his preferred method. "I'm fascinated by the subtle color variations that it creates in the glaze," he explains. "I started soda firing in graduate school, using it primarily with flashing slips. There was some loss of control with that, so I started to use glazes that would work well with the soda—that would flux more and look a little more atmospheric."

Apart from his mainstay white-satin glaze, sprayed on in order to achieve the desired surface, Chung also relies on a chrome-based apple-green celadon, a yellow glaze and a copper-based turquoise-green. Despite the vegetal colors of Chung's vessels, the allusions to plants are only vague and, for the most part, unsupported by the particulars of physical form—which tend, in fact, to be more zoomorphic than botanical. "Although I don't want to be too literal about the connection," Chung asserts, "I am interested in the relationship that pots can have to animal forms. I remember seeing a particular Staffordshire teapot in the shape of a camel. There was something in that piece, a certain quality or essential shape, that I wanted to capture in my own work. Animation is especially important to me." Obviously, this quality is



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something that can be separated not only from the blunt representational detail of Staffordshire pottery, but even from the considerably more general idea of a camel. In Chung's ewers, for example, animation is often nothing more than an impression imparted by the relationship between a graceful spout, small pads and a looping handle—vaguely like the serpentine neck, spatulate feet and wiry tail of a camel, to be sure, but far from definitive in their connection to anything outside the vessel itself.

The incongruities between zoomorphism and the colors of vegetation are only partially responsible for the overall visual ambiguity of Chung's works. Added to the eclectic mix is an architectonic sense relating to principles of design that he first encountered in the Mogul buildings of India when he traveled there for several weeks in the summer of 1996. His teapots and ewers generally carry lids in the shape of domes, recurrent forms in Muslim tombs and mosques, while their necks are often tall and narrow, flaring at the top in vague analogy to minarets. The sides of his vessels sometimes possess contours that are reminiscent of Islamic multilobed arches. Interestingly, Chung has spent little time studying ceramics from the Islamic world, yet the influence of the design sense inherent in Mogul architecture has given his own vessels a look similar to these. The analogies cannot be pursued very far, of course. His intention is to refrain from making any references of a nature that might border on imitation or even on an obvious abstraction of specific formal elements from a recognizable source.

The true impetus to Chung's work is to be found in his vessels themselves, forms that are utilitarian—at least technically—and that can be divided into



Cup caddy, 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain.

four principal types. The teapots and the ewers, their more diminutive relatives, were the earliest developments in his repertoire. The next to appear, beginning a few years ago, were the pitchers. The bodies of these larger vessels are similar to those of the teapots, but Chung adds thrown cylinders for the necks, indenting them horizontally to create perpendicular counterparts to the vertical creases below. The spouts, curved slabs cut with a template and attached to the necks at the front, presented a functional problem until Chung increased their length.

"One of the first ones had a spout that didn't go down the neck very far," he remembers, "and the liquid didn't pour well. So I extended the spout all the way down to the body so that the liquid would have a channel to flow through. My concern was for function, but it ended up having a visual role as well." Later, while looking through some images of Chinese ceramics, he came across a water ewer in the shape of a monk's cap in which the spout was precisely the same, undoubtedly the result of a similar process of functional refinement.

While many of the formal traits of his vessels can be compared to examples encountered in historical ceramics, he holds no bias against well-designed contemporary utilitarian forms. "I like the idea of borrowing from anything with a relationship to function," he explains. "At one point, I encouraged a student to look at disposable drink trays from a fast-food restaurant. One was sitting in the studio, and I picked it up and asked, 'What about this?'" The suggestion actually proved most persuasive to Chung himself.

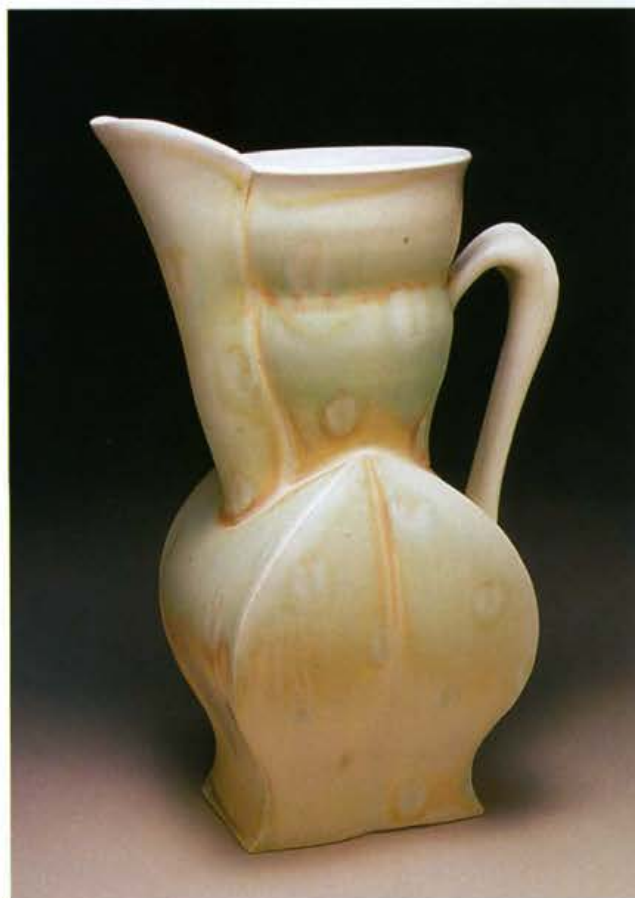
Recognizing efficiency in the design yet desiring a greater concession to aesthetics, he decided to reinterpret the form in porcelain. The result was a series he refers to as the "Tea Trays" and its later variant, the "Cup Caddies." Consisting of basketlike carriers and sets of cups that nestle orderly within them, the trays and caddies constitute the furthest degree to which Chung has departed from single, self-contained forms. At the same time, although they consist of several individual parts, the caddies resist any unpredictable dispersion in space. They are necessarily unified into a more concentrated form by the function of the tray or caddie itself.

Visual cohesiveness is clearly one of Chung's overriding concerns, and he prefers to achieve it by concentrating on the internal relationships of a discrete object rather than by attempting to predict how multiple objects might be arranged together. The fact that his work remains utilitarian, despite his reluctance to make extensive sets of objects, is surely significant to its underlying impulse. Chung's vessels seem to strike a balance somewhere between pure self-indulgence and absolute surrender to the requisites of utility. They retain a usefulness that guards against their becoming austere formal exercises, and they remain somewhat resistant to use in order to permit a freer exploration of aesthetics. Coupled with this tendency to focus on objects that are both utilitarian and discrete is an obvious desire to evoke through small scale the piece's inherent preciousness, a key to the ultimate purpose of Chung's vessels. "The scale reinforces my ideas of delicacy and formality," he explains. "I make vessels to use occasionally, not all the time. They're like a nice suit of clothes that adds the proper mood to an important ritual."

Producing vessels that transcend routine utilitarianism yet avoid assuming a formality that is excessively austere and intimidating, Chung has managed to explore form without losing touch with ceramics tradition. Consequently, his work, like the majority of successful contemporary American pottery, is neither zealously avant-gardist—neither obsessed with originality as a value in itself—nor content merely to perpetuate convention. In the combination of vaguely botanical, zoomorphic and architectural forms, he has developed a style that cannot help but seem reminiscent of pottery from the past simply because of its similar genesis.

By focusing first on the requisites of process, then combining the results they engender with a concern for utility and a sense of design relating to basic experience of the organic and man-made world, Chung has assured for his vessels a necessary degree of familiarity. By consciously avoiding imitation and consistently seeking to enhance the preciousness and formality of his forms, he has achieved an equally necessary element of novelty. From the balance of these polarities comes the strength of his work.

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Pitcher, 13 inches (33 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain, by Sam Chung, Marquette, Michigan.