

Tony Marsh: Forms of Function

by Thomas Butler



"Creation Vessel," 23 inches (58 centimeters) in diameter, earthenware, with terra sigillata



"Creation Vessel," 24 inches (61 centimeters) in diameter, earthenware, with terra sigillata.

Why does a teapot have a spout? Why put a handle on a teacup? Why put a teacup on a saucer? Well, without delving into needless metaphors, the simplest answers would be: to pour the tea, to hold the cup without burning one's fingers and to keep spilled tea from reaching one's lap. The concept that the form of an object is mandated by that object's intended function is neither new, nor is it particularly challenged. It is fairly well accepted that a bowl with walls curving upward from the base will function better than one with walls curving down. If one varies greatly from the accepted form, a bowl will cease to be a bowl. It is in these areas, both the nature of the shape and the intended function of the form, that California artist/educator Tony Marsh has focused much of his work for the past ten years.

A professor at California State University, Long Beach, Marsh explains that "a lot of what I do is kind of an homage to all kinds

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of ceramics. What I did was kind of turn to the subject of pottery, and what pots do.”

In the spring of 1978, Marsh was offered the opportunity to travel to Japan for three years to work as an assistant to Tatsuzo Shimaoka, a potter who in 1996 was declared a Living National Treasure of Japan. The experience had “a profound effect on me, but maybe not in the way that one would think,” notes Marsh. “That whole business of putting things in vessels has a lot to do with a frustration of coming back to America. In Japan, utilitarian ceramics is king. It’s potters’ heaven. Most people in Japan own pottery, they understand pottery, they value it, and it’s still a very dynamic part of daily life.

“When I was working [in Japan] as a potter, it was very purposeful, because I knew that what I was doing had a direct connection to the culture. When I came back, I didn’t feel that, and I found that very frustrating.”

As a result of that frustration, Marsh turned toward the subject of pottery as a whole for the subject of his work. “If you look at pots from all over the world, you’ll see that they all have the same charge—they are meant to hold things. They are meant to store

and to protect and to present. Sometimes, it’s real and tangible; and sometimes, it’s symbolic.

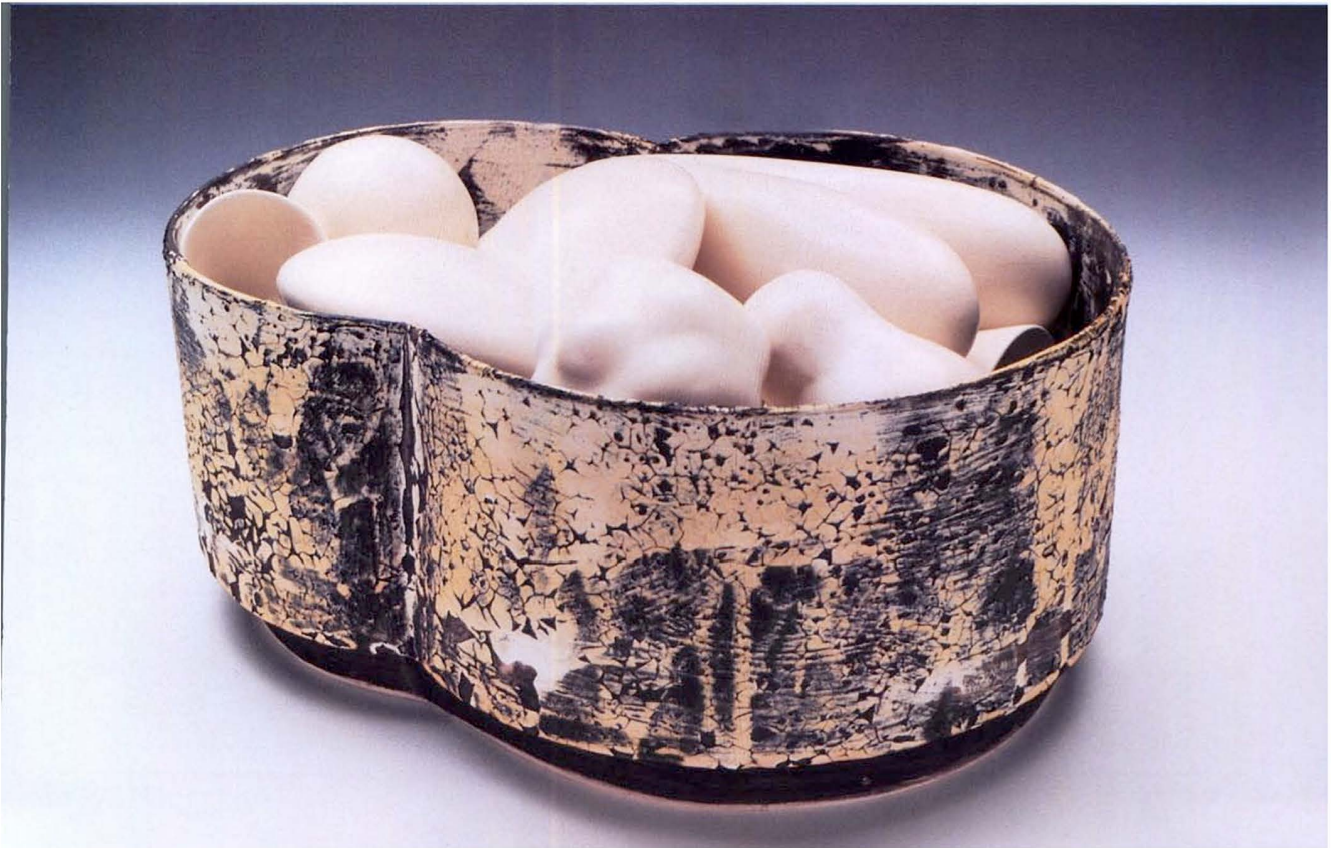
“That’s really been the thrust of what I do. My making certain types of pots then placing things in them is in honor of what pots do. What I am doing is in homage to pots at large.”

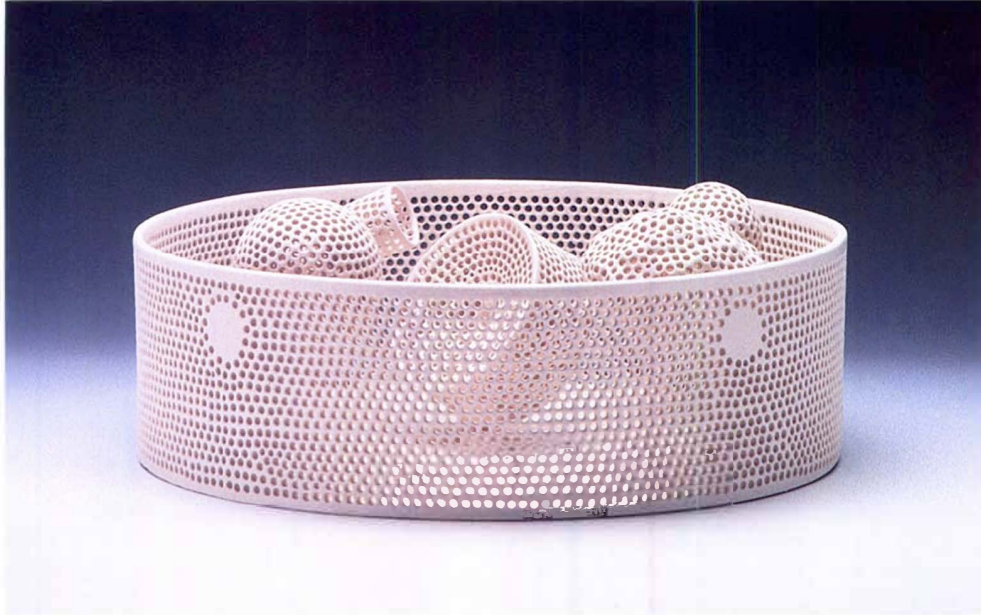
Though the vessels themselves may be symbolic of traditional pottery, it is the act of filling the vessels with objects that creates the meaning of each piece. Marsh has worked with several different symbolic subjects over the past ten years. “What’s been interesting to me is that I honestly can say that I didn’t pre-calculate all the things.

“When I look back, after ten years of making [vessels], it is clear to me that I was just making the kinds of things that I was thinking about. I got married, and I made marriage vessels. We had a child, and I made fertility vessels. I’ve made creation vessels, a lot of creation vessels,” Marsh chuckled. That is “just what I call them; I keep the titles simple.”

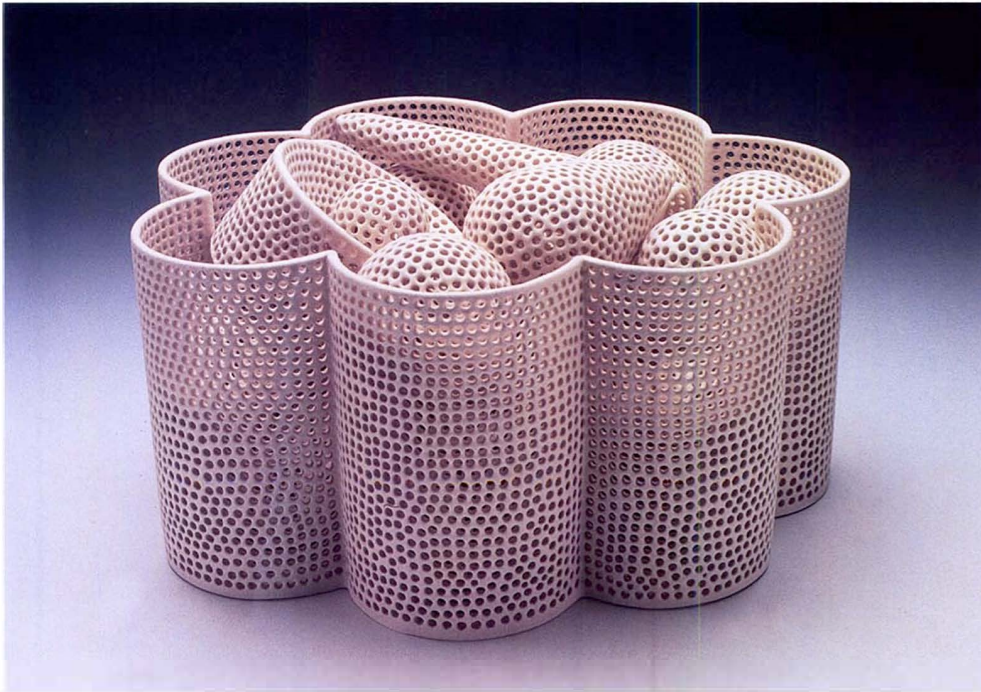
By sticking to such broad topics for his subject matter, Marsh hopes that his pieces will connect with people on a basic level. “I use real elemental forms. When you start talking about marriage,

“Floating and Dreaming Vessel,” 13 inches (33 centimeters) in length, earthenware.





"Perforated Vessel," 12 inches (30 centimeters) in length, earthenware.



"Perforated Vessel," 13 inches (33 centimeters) in length, earthenware.

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birth, death and procreation—everything but taxes—you’re talking about real fundamental things.”

When dealing with symbolic imagery, an artist will always run the risk of misinterpretation or, worse yet, risk losing the meaning of the piece altogether. Although he acknowledges that it is never a certainty, Marsh is also confident that “if I title it ‘Fertility,’ and I have a masculine and a feminine form together in a vessel, it’s not rocket science really.

“It doesn’t solve all the world’s problems, but it’s an acknowledgment of something mysterious. I don’t know how deep [the symbols] are, but I would hope that someone would find them moving on some level. By keeping it very simple, I would hope that I could point to something larger, something that you also may experience.”

Though the subject matter may be simple in meaning, the technical process can be both complex and tedious. Some of Marsh’s pieces, particularly those of the “Creation Vessel” series, go through as many as ten firings. Few, if any, come from a predetermined plan. “I’ll make them, and take them out of the kiln after they are fired, and I’ll do something else to them, based

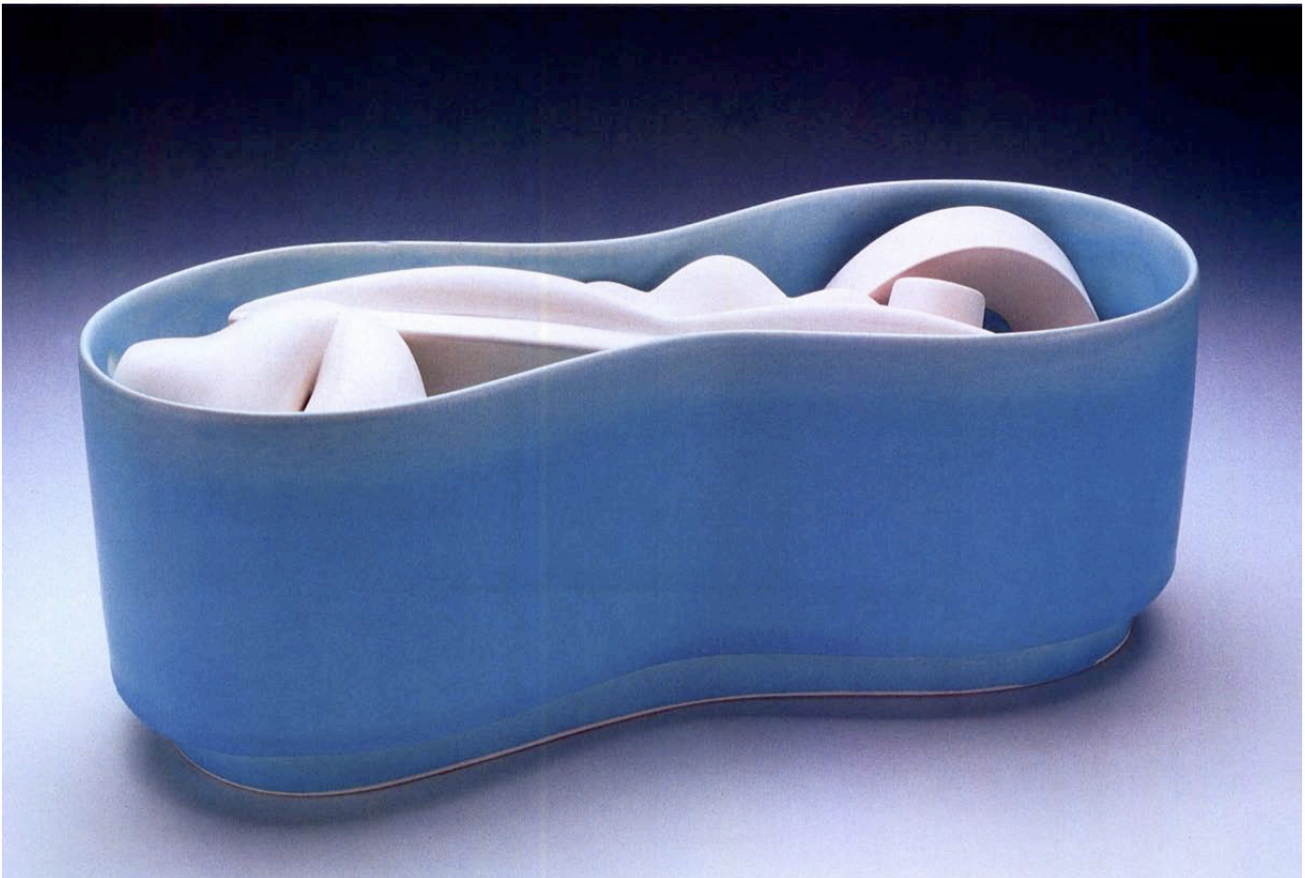
on what I see and how I feel about it. [I am] just reacting to things as they happen and seeing what I can make from that.”

Even the pieces that appear to have gone through the greatest amount of change during the throwing process require several turns through the kiln. A “Perforated Vessel” is coated with up to six layers of a vitreous engobe to achieve the proper surface, one in which “light enters the surface of the work and refracts through the body of the glaze.”

Despite the long production process, it is actually restraint that gives each piece its power. “I feel that by holding back, sometimes, you can make a work more powerful than by just letting loose. I have to hold back to try to keep them from being highly personal and...driven toward the universal. To me, somehow, that process requires restraint.”

In the end, although he may not know exactly what it may take to get each individual piece to that stage, Marsh is able to recognize when it has reached completion. “I’ll just keep firing, and trying different things—adding them, subtracting them, applying, reapplying—and at some point I’ll be pleased enough with what I see to stop working on it. Then I’ll move on.”

“Floating and Dreaming Vessel,” 17 inches (43 centimeters) in length, earthenware, by Tony Marsh, Long Beach, California.



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