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ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Adam Silverman's 'Clay and Space' is vessel for inquiry

Adam Silverman collapses clay pots and buildings in 'Clay and Space,' a provocative installation at Laguna Art Museum.



A firepit where Adam Silverman fired some of the ceramics on the beach in Laguna. (Laguna Art Museum / July 31, 2013)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
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Before he became a potter, setting aside a longtime hobby for full-time engagement, Adam Silverman trained and practiced as an architect. Clay vessels and buildings are significantly different, in myriad obvious ways. But Silverman sometimes collapses the two in surprising and provocative installations. An exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum titled "Clay and Space" lays out some of those correspondences. It's a significant step forward from "Boolean Valley," an intellectually sound if rather dry and unengaging 2009 collaboration with architect Nader Tehrani for the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center space in West Hollywood. That room-sized installation employed 400 small clay domes dispersed in a complex, undulating pattern across the floor. Site-specific and alluding to landscape, "Boolean Valley" paved the way for what's more engagingly on view in Laguna Beach. Architecture remains significant. Silverman's work begins with the simple premise that buildings and pots are functional objects that form spatial volumes, then elaborates from there.

The show's title installation is a pair of free-standing circular walls, each built from stacks of ordinary, buff-colored fire-bricks — similar to the ones used by Carl Andre for 1960s Minimalist sculptures, except scarred by use. The uniform stacked rows are interrupted at various levels by blocks of charred wood.

The two constructions were erected inside a relatively small gallery whose walls are painted dark bronze, and the interior of each is flooded with light from overhead spotlights. These twin silos, each slightly taller than a standing person, suggest kilns being fired, and the staggered bricks allow glimpses inside. Silverman placed them so that a pathway runs between the two. Walk around them, and an opening allows entrance into each interior space.

There, 16 or 17 ceramic vessels are displayed around the small circular room on shelves protruding from the wall at staggered heights. Vases, bottles, bowls and other basic shapes feature smoky, mottled surfaces, looking somewhat like traditional Korean and Japanese raku but produced from baking in fire pits the artist built on a nearby beach. (Visually, Paul Soldner's ceramics are one precedent.) The space even carries the faint smell of smoke, probably from the charred wood blocks.

From the painted gallery room to the hand-built walk-in "kiln" to the rough-hewn vessels, Silverman has shaped one space that contains two spaces that contain yet more spaces. One uncanny result is a heightened sense of a viewer's own body — although, given the effect, perhaps "participant" is a more accurate description than "viewer." The savvy installation vivifies pottery's component parts, which have always been identified in bodily terms — lip, neck, body, foot, skin.

Those conventional parts are dramatically elaborated in the first of the show's four rooms, where 18 wheel-thrown vessels are displayed in clear plexiglass boxes mounted at various heights on a deep indigo wall. Vases, chalices, bottles and other familiar, functional forms are interspersed with natural shapes, such as eggs and ornamental gourds. (Gourds are sometimes called "nature's pots," given their ancient uses as vessels.) Glazes tend to be thick and even crusty, somewhat like bark on a tree, metamorphic rock or cooled lava.

A rich, brown 2007 chalice-shape is even so thickly glazed that at first it appears to be made of mysteriously molten mud. The natural history of pottery's firing process bubbles up in these luxurious surfaces, much as it does in Beatrice Wood's densely glazed ceramic work.

Silverman achieves these crusted surfaces in different ways. Often, various chemicals and salts are mixed into the glaze, which is sanded down once it comes out of the kiln, then reglazed and refired. (The artist, who studied in the scientifically rigorous ceramics program at Alfred University in Upstate New York, is director of design at Heath Ceramics in Los Angeles.) Lip, neck, foot, body and skin are joined by an emphasis on the hand. Inside their sleek vitrines, the knobby pots appeal to the sense of touch.

Across from the display, six large, unframed photographs by Stefano Massei are tacked to the wall. (There is no catalog to the show, but Massei's photographs are featured in a lavish recent monograph on Silverman from Skira Rizzoli.) Each shows a single, spherical vessel against a white or black field, as if it were a fashion model posed in an advertisement art-directed by Irving Penn or Richard Avedon.

The glamorous images are focused on the dark opening at the top of each vessel, emphasizing the inaccessible interior volume. A black hole hums at the center of each photograph, the vessels transformed into chunky alien planets.

A third installation in a small, dark room is composed from eight large, spotlighted egg forms, glazed off-white or blue and positioned on end atop knee-high concrete pedestals. The composition (if not the style) recalls the poised, probing egg sculptures of the late ceramic artist Ken Price. Inexplicably, these symbols for prospective birth coexist with the reverent gravity of funeral markers.

Finally, two works in the last room merge pottery, art's most ancient medium, with video, its newest. (A sound piece in the same gallery meshes ambient noise recorded from both.) Silverman, as he did with Massei, collaborated on these works with Lucas Michael and David B. Kelley.

One video installation is a simple set-up in which the rotating image of a spherical vase with a pitted white surface is projected onto the surface of the actual, stationary vase. A sliver of light curves around the black

shadow the vase casts against the wall. A static physical form is held in visual tension with its rotating image, memory of its origins on a potter's wheel. Bathed in projected light, it's like watching the moon go through time-lapse phases.

Across the room, a video diptych charts Le Corbusier's famous chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France. The building's exterior is recorded on one side, its interior on the other.

With its swooping roofline, asymmetrical shape, pierced walls and pair of altars, one indoors and the other outdoors on a sun-drenched patio, the architect built a surging, organic, site-specific form that broke from the rigorous machine aesthetic of his earlier work. Silverman's video of the sacred space, titled "Inside, Outside, In," is something of a key to everything that has come before in his show.

Adam Silverman: Clay and Space

Where: Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach

When: Through Jan. 19. Closed Wednesday.

Info: (949) 494-8971 or <http://www.lagunaartmuseum.org>