



KAREN SHAPIRO



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New Work

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The Richness of Objects: A Personal Perspective

Karen Shapiro's personal biography is clearly evident in her work. Shapiro was raised in sunny Arizona and trained as an artist; in time she painted cartoon cells at Hanna Barbera and also did package design. Both experiences honed talents manifest in her current work. In a signature quirky move, she took a U-turn and became a pastry chef, a profession that requires attention to detail, consummate craft and eye-hand skill. Ironically when she returned to art making (this time in clay) the pastry making experience provided a number of one-to-one techniques directly applicable to the handling of clay (working with precision, building forms using slab construction, measuring glaze recipes, weighing various components, firing work in a kiln/oven). Shapiro was also drawn to graphics, making her appreciate and understand the value and appeal of crisp and readable advertising art. She realized that graphic power became pleasantly emphatic when enhanced by increasing its scale. Indeed, her work relies on the success in being "read as over-sized," but not just bigger, expanded only up to a point. Shapiro traces her delight in the manipulation of scale to her love of comedian Lily Tomlin's five year old Edith Ann character sitting in an over-sized rocking chair on the *Laugh In* television show of the 1970s.¹

Shapiro's early work featured vegetables, and she quickly learned that collectors like to create

groupings of her pieces and to arrange them in their own still-life tableaux. For that reason she makes items that are linked thematically to aid owners in constructing their own groupings. Her forms are all iconic, and taken from those familiar to her baby-boomer audience; often they are ones she particularly relates to, or are requested by clients. In her own estimation, her work is not calculated to impart deep intellectual truths, but rather to provoke looks of recognition and charmed smiles or chuckles.²

On the technical side, Shapiro uses the (relatively) quick and evocative raku process developed by American ceramist Paul Soldner in the 1970s. The result of a fruitful misunderstanding of the sixteenth-century Japanese ceramic process, many American ceramists have since adopted this beguiling technique.³ While most of her forms are based on commercial products or domestic items dating from the 1930s on, they are not meant to be one-for-one replications. By using the American raku firing technique, imperfections are intentionally introduced to enliven the surface. It is interesting to note that if Shapiro's works were made from, for example, metal, they would be chilly and not engage the viewer as readily. Metallic perfection would render them flat and toy-like, and not contain the "softness" that clay implies. "If I'm doing some kind of modern piece of everyday life, and I kind of funk it up with raku, I can get wonderful flecks and cracks that age it, bring it to life" Shapiro noted in 2006.⁴ Using slab construction to build



her pieces, Shapiro “under cooks” her cone 10 (high fire) clay to cone 4, resulting in works that are a bit more fragile. However, the surface created is engaging, the happy result of the thermal shocks inherent in the raku process.

Her first exhibition breakthrough came after San Francisco gallery owner Virginia Breier spied her work at a student show at the College of Marin, in Marin County. More recently, in late 2009 Shapiro was included in an exhibition *POP Craft* shown at the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, which explored the tensions between the handmade, the everyday, and the art object. Their side-by-side display illustrated the actual integration and enhancement that each mode provides the other. In Shapiro’s intentionally displaced objects, all of these layers are happily melded into discrete works of art.

Artist Karen Shapiro takes advantage of a cultural continuum that is shared by all Americans raised after the advent of television, the rise of advertising culture, and the expansion of consumerism. By selecting everyday items

as her subject matter, she taps into the nostalgia that prompts fond memories of a reassuring past. Through “super-sizing,” Shapiro injects a charming and comforting reminder to her audience that they, too, were once carefree children and objects filled their eyes. Yet, not pulling her punches, Shapiro’s sculptures reminds us that our lives are sometime defined too much by the stuff we have. This sly commentary makes a rich vein out of the ordinary.

Martha Drexler Lynn Ph.D.

March 2010

1 Author conversation with the artist, February 27, 2010.

2 Shapiro skirts the copyright issues by making one-of-a-kind works; interestingly, the companies that manufacture the original often purchase her rendition.

3 For a discussion of this misunderstanding see Martha Drexler Lynn, “Useful Misunderstandings: Japanese and American Mingei,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No. 70 (December 2007 – February 2008):38–42.

4 From a gallery statement, Chris Winfield Gallery, Monterey, California, December 21, 2006, quoting Lisa Crawford Watson, *Ceramics Monthly* (December 2002):71–74.



The Richness of Objects: A Historical Perspective

Karen Shapiro's ceramic sculptures are delightfully fun and pleasantly provocative. Conjured from a combination of ceramic precedents, personal history, and judiciously applied ceramic techniques, her work captures the both the eye and the heart. To understand it fully warrants examining its blue-chip lineages. These include the centuries-old *trompe-l'oeil* tradition of "fooling-the-eye," the confrontational works of early twentieth-century artist Marcel Duchamp, the wry wit of New York artist Andy Warhol, and the bad-boy funkiness of Californian Robert Arneson.

Trompe-l'oeil is the most historical visual strategy employed by Shapiro. The technique was first used to render three-dimensional objects on flat surfaces (walls or canvas), and has roots in the western world, dating from before the first century in Italy. Fine trompe-l'oeil examples were preserved by the rain of pumice that showered down in August 79 C.E. on the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The custom was to present a range of objects with attributes that underscored the pictorial content, most commonly comprised of figural elements relating to Greek and Roman mythology. Later in the Renaissance, similar pictorial motifs appeared in the paintings-on-wood and -canvas, and most vividly, in wooden inlay (marquetry) applied to the furniture and the walls of elite interiors across Europe. In Holland, a popular genre of seventeenth-century painting (still-life)

featured luxury objects (fruit, bottles, porcelain, glass, silver and skulls, among others) in tableaux set on luxurious and exotic Persian carpets. These works were meticulously detailed to communicate metaphorical content and/or to display the material wealth of the owner. Layered with allegorical meanings, these assemblages were far more than just literal renderings of objects with evocative surfaces and textures. Shapiro, too, offers a clutch of culturally-linked meanings in her object-based sculptures.

Early in the twentieth century the content attached to objects started to shift, and came to embrace ironic and often provocative notions. Leading the way were French artist Marcel Duchamp and his circle, who were associated with Dada and later Surrealism. Striking boldly at the pretensions of the traditional high art practice of featuring mythological and historical heroes as the only worthy artistic subject matter, Duchamp elevated the mundane (and off-putting) urinal to the status of art in his famous *Fountain*, 1917. In his sculpture Duchamp presented a standard, commercially made, white porcelain urinal on a pedestal, with a signature reading "R. Mutt" in a bold, calligraphic hand. By implying that it was an original artist's work, and then by displaying it on a pedestal in an art show, Duchamp raised a common, commercially manufactured item of low distinction to the level of "high" art. In time Duchamp would expand his group of "readymades" to include snow shovels, bicycle wheels, and bottle racks, among other items. These acts of disruption reframed "art" from a moralizing



medium to a confrontational one, and transformed the expectations attached to mundane, even crude objects. By rejecting the “noble” subjects and expectations of art, Duchamp made any object fit for artistic exploration. Building on Duchamp’s conceptual lead, Karen Shapiro presents in her work a range of ordinary, mid-century household items as beguiling sculptures, worthy of artistic consideration.

The next significant addition to the vocabulary of objects came by way of the pre-and post-World War II influx of European émigré artists who arrived in New York between 1933 and 1950. They brought their European Dada sensibility and its 1930s sequel, Surrealism, which added a darker strain to the meaning of objects. Both Dada and Surrealism were responses to the horrors of war, and the artists sought to provide a tonic for all who had been lacerated by war’s brutality. To accomplish this the artists used many visual “shock tactics” that featured disjointed imagery and juxtapositions, representing the disquieting intersection of the “real” world with the subconscious. To communicate this, isolated and mundane forms (melting watches in the case of Spaniard Salvador Dali) and giant eyes (Belgian René Magritte) were used to depict a world of sinister realities. Other artists from Europe brought their theories and applications, among them German Hans Hofmann, Dutchman Piet Mondrian, Frenchman Fernand Léger, and Russian Marc Chagall. While their works were not the only approach to art-making at the time – Abstract Expressionism emerged in the 1940s – their theories, perspectives, use of color and linear motifs found fertile ground. American artists added their post-War optimism to this blend, and lightened its content. In time the urban art world moved from the earlier and darker war-related sensibilities and evolved into more cheerful and less high-brow Pop Art movement of the 1960s. It was in this context that the rendering of discrete everyday objects as sculptures came into its own right. Pop Art as seen in American (and also

British) work added humor and a “literal-ness” grounded in everyday forms. It was not long before the objects they employed were dubbed “super objects.” Driven in response to the perceived elitism of the then-dominant New York school of Abstract Expressionism, the “super object” became a distinct branch of the Pop Art movement. Shapiro’s work partakes of these reformulated American notions seen in her Surrealist-tinged, over-scale domestic artifacts.

Others of the period explored Pop Art, and chief among them was American innovator Jasper Johns. In the mid-1950s he began a series of American flag paintings. With World War II over but the Korean conflict about to begin, Johns chose to comment on the super-patriotism of the period with his groundbreaking painting *Three Flags* (about 1954). By rendering a series of flags, roughly painted, and with one seemingly laid on upon another in descending sizes, Johns cleverly toyed with the boundary and the tensions that existed between what was reality and



what was art - much as Duchamp had done. Seen by some as blasphemy, it was the logical, albeit political, extension of what Duchamp had initiated over thirty-five years earlier. When selections from his “Flags” series were shown in 1958 at the Castelli Gallery in New York, they grabbed the attention of the American and European art worlds, and, importantly, struck a cord with a young then-commercial designer named Andy Warhol. Karen Shapiro is one of the later artists



who responded to Johns' revelatory approach.

One of the innovative strategies utilized by Johns and others in the Pop Art movement was to enlarge the scale of the object. By changing the size, a work attains greater importance and assertiveness, and often a touch of humor as the viewer is transformed into a temporary Lilliputian. Fellow artist Robert Rauschenberg played with this notion in his 1953 *Automobile Tire Piece* which featured an inked tire tread track that he scaled up to 22 feet long. Johns applied the same tactic to his *Painted Bronze* (1960) in which he took two carefully reproduced Ballantine ale cans, over-scaled them, and presented them as sculpture. Shapiro adopts this strategy to add visual punch to her sculptures.

The next transformation of the object was realized by American artist Roy Lichtenstein who employed a pictorial vocabulary derived from the commercial world of comic books. Taking on the perceived incompatibility of high-versus-low in society (and the gestural, individualistic works

of the Abstract Expressionists), Lichtenstein chose the mass-produced motifs of popular culture based graphics as his mode of expression. In such works as *Whaam!* (1963) Lichtenstein used cartoon language to illustrate a bomber plane shooting at another plane, resulting in a comic book rendering of it going up in flames, accompanied by the comic expletive "Whaam!" Again using big scale and common subject matter, he made acceptable the use of borrowed imagery to address topics that were rooted in mass culture. Shapiro does the same as she selects her subject matter from widely known commercial and domestic products that are common artifacts of late twentieth-century life.

By the 1960s, Andy Warhol built on the conceptual breakthroughs of Duchamp, Johns, Lichtenstein and others, blending incisive social commentary with product design tropes. In 1962, Warhol produced his 32 *Campbell's Soup Cans*, and two years later his iconic *Brillo Boxes*. By taking products from the broad landscape of American

consumer culture, he placed these banal items in the artistic “super object” category. In doing so, Warhol also made sly references to the worshipful, yet uneasy, relationship Americans have with their material riches. His deployment of “cool,” enhanced with dollops of humor found resonance across the country, especially after his one-man show at Irving Blum’s Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. The exhibition again featured his super object-linked and Pop-inspired series of paintings of 32 *Campbell’s Soup Cans* and they again achieved wide acclaim and provided revelatory ideas to West Coast artists. Warhol moved on to his famous Coke bottles, Brillo boxes, and grocery cartons (rendered in two-dimensions and some later in three-dimensions). As Warhol continued his evolution he focused on issues of fame and celebrity, and created works featuring movie stars and others of note. In time he took topics from the mass-produced newspaper photos, again taking the mundane and elevating it to art. By riffing on what New York art critic Clement Greenberg had disparaged in 1939 as “kitsch,” many artists, among them California artists Wayne Thiebaud and Karen Shapiro were inspired to make everyday objects speak volumes.¹

The final link in the evolution of the object came through the California-born founder of the distinctively West Coast Funk movement, Robert Arneson. Working from his perch as an artist-provocateur and professor at the University of California, Davis, in the central valley, Arneson lead a group of young artists (David Gilhooly, Peter VanderBerge, Clayton Bailey, Richard Shaw, Robert Brady and Tony Natsoulas, among others) in exploring object-based subject matter that veered from crude to rude to funny. Known for his casually crafted work, Arneson made such things as ceramic typewriters with fingers as keys, adorned with red nail polish, vulvas depicted on



rotary telephones, crude toasters, portrait busts based on Roman models, and clay renderings of unflushed toilets (an obvious nod to Duchamp). Arneson added humor and a bad-boy sensibility to the representation of objects as sculpture by presenting forbidden imagery, much of it grounded in his cartoonist beginnings at the College of Marin and the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland (now the California College of Arts). All of this was in the air as Shapiro came of age and, indeed, Arneson’s contemporaries Richard Shaw and Tony Natsoulas were direct influences on her work and helped her to find her artistic voice.²

Martha Drexler Lynn Ph.D.

March 2010

1 See Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965):3–21.

2 Author conversation with the artist, February 27, 2010. All other artist quotations are from that conversation.









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Pepsi Bottle, 19 ¼" height x 6" diameter

Olio Berio, 19" height x 10 width x 5 ½" depth

3-In-One Oil, 18" height x 8 ½" width x 4" depth

Adderall, 15" length x 4 ½" width

Prozac, 15" length x 4 ½" width

Kodak Verichrome 120 Film Box, 6 ¼" square x 12 ½" length

Film Roll, 14 ¾" height x 6" diameter

Singer Sewing Machine Oil, 19" height x 9" width x 5" depth

Planters Peanut Butter, 11" height x 9 ½" diameter

Heinz Beans, 12 ¾" height x 9" diameter

Quaker State Motor Oil, 13" height x 9 ¾" diameter

Indian Premium Motorcycle Oil, 13" height x 9 ½" diameter

Starkist Tuna, 4 ¾" height x 10" diameter

French's Mustard, 11" height x 7" diameter

Heinz Tomato Ketchup, 19 ½" height x 6" diameter

Best Foods Real Mayonnaise, 12" height x 7" diameter

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