ALEX MATISSE

New Ceramics

Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

April 6 – June 24, 2014

Online Catalogue

http://mag.rochester.edu/exhibitions/alexander-matisse-new-ceramics/

Alexander Matisse's Soft Touch

by Mark Hewitt

Alex Matisse does not make urinals. He makes mugs, plates, pitchers, jars and vases, and other functional pottery items. Like one particular urinal, Duchamp's famous "Fountain," Alex's pots occasionally get placed on their sides or even upside down, not in a gallery, but in a dish rack or in a sink, or even the floor of a car - places well-suited for art. In addition to the pure visual enjoyment of form, line, and color, you can, however, also hold one of Alex's mugs, for instance, and drink from it.

Duchamp's iconic "Fountain," (Figure 1), regarded by some art historians and theorists of the avant-garde, as a major landmark in 20th-century art, is a ceramic object, as is Alex's mug, (Figure 2); one made out of clay in a factory by a skilled industrial craftsman and appropriated by an artist as an intellectual construct, the other made by hand out of clay by a skilled individual craftsman as an artistic expression and an intellectual construct. Both are utilitarian, one is a vehicle for a message, the other as a vehicle for coffee. I'll take mine black.

Authenticity is sometimes used as a descriptor of craft work, suggesting a kind of genuineness (or at worst, quaintness), which is lacking in other kinds of art work. In my opinion, however, authenticity is a characteristic of all human expression, whether intellectual, comic, or satirical, and it is every person's privilege. No one can claim to be more authentic than anyone else, regardless of class, status, or power. But while Duchamp's urinal has become an iconic intellectual contortion which continues to fascinate the art establishment, pots are routinely relegated to a lower, but more authentic, place on the aesthetic spectrum. Which makes it all the more intriguing, therefore, that Alex Matisse has chosen to make pots, given that he is Marcel Duchamp's step-grandson and, of course, Henri Matisse's great-grandson.

His lineage in this context, however, is beside the point, for what matters are his pots, and his motivations for making them.

I have a small, warm pitcher, a creamer, which fits neatly into the palm of my hand. Stippled brown, tall and sleek, I use it as a model for other apprentices to work from. It has no decoration, but stands on its own, simultaneously specific and generic, one of many, but made at a particular moment by the particular Alex Matisse. It commands attention, particularly on a table, filled with maple syrup.

A pot is a pot is a pot. We potters are connoisseurs of pottery, we study pots in all their details (formal, physical, historical, economic, social), and make them to the full extent of our ability. Fate lends a hand to determine when, where, and with whom we learn how to make them. Then, after training, and once we have established our own studio's and worked out some the intricacies of our craft, we begin to make our own, and, if people like them, they buy them and take them home and use and enjoy them. Would that it were so simple.

We are highly-skilled craftsmen, glad of our relative independence, happy to grapple with the rigors of our dreams amidst the frenzy of contemporary life. We are athletes, scholars, entrepreneurs, aesthetes, builders, engineers, workers, fighters. We are romantic pragmatists and occasionally have our days in the sun.

This is one of Alex's.

Asked about his earliest memory of pottery, Alex replied,

"The first pots I remember were not clay at all but wooden plates. My father made them for my mother on a lathe out of what I remember as walnut or some other dark, hard wood. In them were set small gold rods, which were sanded flush with the surface. They were different sizes and arranged in different constellations of the stars. We would eat from them only with chopsticks (metal would have marred the surface) when my mother cooked stir-fry and on special occasions. After my parents separated they were put away in a box or cupboard and forgotten, their associations and memories too strong and bittersweet. They seemed to soak up the love between my parents and even now, years after they have moved on and remarried, those plates hold that love, if only in the eyes of their son."

Evelyn Waugh wrote, "Charm is the great blight of the English." Alex Matisse can claim no such affliction, though he can be quite charming. It is a charm born of existential imperative, hard won out of necessity, needed as defense, and rightly earned. But his charm causes no stifling impairment, no blanket on his faculties, given his affectionate and teeming impetuousness. It does not prevent him from action.

I also still have a few tiny, fat bud vases of Alex's that we fired after he left here, each with delightful decorations sitting on their elegant shoulders, perfectly placed, and

perfectly executed. $5 items (for a Matisse no less!), made with love - little sweethearts; tender, poised and gentle. What do you do with your moments, the throw away seconds when you either strike at the heart of the matter, or drift aimlessly, indulgently? What Alex did was to reach into the emptiness and pull out beauty – simple and uncomplicated. We potters fill our hours with the quest to make something good.

Alex saw good things early,

“My mother had an old teapot. It was brown and simple with a cane handle. She bought it in Japan when I was young and used it every day until its spout was finally too chipped to pour well. That was the first pot we used every day that would hold in it the qualities I would learn to admire many years later. I’m sure my memory has altered it, but I remember it having the quickness and sureness of a skilled and confident maker. It was the first quiet pot that I knew.”

Alex was my apprentice, before that Matt Jones’, we are in the same school, part of a tight knit group working in North Carolina, with our own distinctive lineage and pedigree (we are not mutts), all doing excellent work. Mark Hewitt, Matt Jones, Daniel Johnston, Alex Matisse, and Joseph Sand - with John Vigland, (Daniel’s recent ex-apprentice, now working alongside Alex), fast coming on board. Ours is a fertile collaboration. We have plumbed the bedrock, we have tapped the root, and, while part of the same genus, we continue to mutate. We steal each other’s ideas, but with grace and honor, tending them diligently. We show each other the best we can do, but you can do only so much on your own. This is the way great ceramic traditions are born, for rivalries and succession generate quality. We admire, compete, and improvise, catching ideas on the fly, giving them our own exquisite twists, and move on. We have style.

He writes of the ensemble,

”This group of potters is very much a family for me and I have never felt a stronger collective identity to any other community. There is an unbreakable bond that comes from making pots in this particular and peculiar way. There is a common language learned—of form and surface and quality –that cannot be transferred by words or imitation from afar. This language becomes an accent that the members of our group can’t shake, regardless of the vocabulary and narrative we choose to adopt. As a Classical musician first learns scales before composing a song, so did we, as apprentices, learn the most fundamental anatomy of pots that came before us before venturing into new, uncharted waters. These men and I now play in a far-flung orchestra, each with our own roles and the occasional solo, but always in harmony with each other; together, in union, we create something more beautiful and stronger than ourselves.

“Although our workshops and kilns are far apart, I know at any point in time what each of us is doing. We are at our wheels, tending our kilns, with our lovers, making the only thing we know how to make, doing the only thing that quiets the gnawing crisis of our own existence. To make pots is to be present and focused for a moment, amidst the clamor and distraction of the world.”

How did he get here?

“I started to throw in earnest at Guilford College (North Carolina) with Charlie Tefft, but I break my trajectory into two distinct time periods: before and after apprenticeship. Had I continued down the academic road, I don’t know where I would be or what I would be making.”

Then, an epiphany,

“I vividly remember the smell of Matt Jones’ damp, dirt workshop floor and wood smoke, the kiln chugging along through the night. That was where I wanted to be. Matt’s pottery exerted a gravity I couldn’t resist and it changed the course of my life. After working with Matt Jones and Mark Hewitt, my world seemed to shrink and expand at the same time. My pursuits narrowed dramatically, putting into clear focus a rather small corner of a larger ceramic tapestry. But within that focus emerged the infinite possibility of form and surface. Here began the maddening and impossible pursuit for the perfect pot, where line and volume are in steady harmony, and the decoration is strong and natural.”

He muses on the his training,

“If one wants a fast road to self-expression, the apprenticeship is not for them. It is a slow arc and it often feels at odds with our culture of Instant Everything. Less and less time is allotted for the things that often take the most time and consideration. The breakthroughs that come to me in the workshop are found mostly in my decorative work and if I have one or two in a three-month making cycle I am happy. That side of the work seems to be where my strengths lie and although I am a relatively proficient thrower, I get most excited when I have a bench full of platters waiting to be slip-trailed

Alex stealthily lays lines to adorn an arc, fluid applied with slippery immediacy, free and controlled, at fever pitch, always dangerous. His touch is supple, his fancy free.

One of his recent bigger vases perches on our mantel, it has a hyper-extended belly and a tulip-shaped neck , a decoration on its shoulder so deft and lyrical it stops me in my tracks each time I pass. I’m not surprised that Alex made it, and I’m always delighted to see it.

“My pots follow the natural cycle of their creation. They are made, then decorated, and then glazed. The strongest and surest forms are left unglazed and undecorated, to stand on their own in the fire. The rest become a curved canvas. Each pot’s shape informs its decoration, and I find motifs repeating themselves on certain shapes that call for something specific: a loose line with a few sparse leaves or a complex geometric web stretched taught over the form. My main decorative tool is the slip-trailer, an old Clairol hair applicator which contains a watery clay in shades of ivory and russet. Limiting myself to one technique has pushed my decoration into new realms and it continues to evolve. The, glazing, while not an afterthought, magnifies the quality beneath it. Most of the glazes are ash glazes, which tend to move and run, sometimes pulling oxides out of the slips. There is a fine line between a glaze running too much and obliterating everything I’ve labored so hard to achieve, and a dull glaze that stays exactly in its place, rendering the surface stagnant and sterile. We have to hit it right.”

We exhort the material to behave, and crumple when our folly is occasionally revealed. Humility is our shadow. We have substance.

The work is an arduous meditation; moving wood is a prayer, clay preparation a devotion - a focus before action - and then the world is ours. Each pot is a recitation, a solitary pilgrimage inward, a time-sensitive spiraling pathway, a substantive reconfiguration by touch. A mound held firm yields to pressure, pliant clay slides open, the walls rise, shape swells palpably, and the silky kaolinitic membrane becomes incrementally thinner with each diminishment of touch until it is moved by pulse alone. Pots are made with blood. Our eyes are in our fingers.

We are pagan materialists, whole earth alchemists, clay worshippers, glaze sanctifiers, kiln dervishes, wild flamers. We put our fingers in the clay, we tease from the inside, we fondle curves, we caress bottoms, we stroke handles, we put our mouths to the rim. We make the lid fit.

But that is not all, for Alex is going out on a limb, flowering,

“With the familial nature of an apprenticeship there is a time when the student, like a child, must reject some of what he has been taught, or the comfort of what he knows, whether that be his home or his ceramic dogma. For me that came in the form of exploring something outside of stoneware and wood-firing. I wanted something that spoke more to the modern world while still giving a nod to the past. Making these slip-cast porcelain lights did just that and with the incorporation of decorative elements it brought the hand back into a medium that can be cold and sterile.”

Perhaps he’ll make urinals one day, but in the meantime,

“I make pots half for myself and half for the people who will buy them. I want my work to connect with someone on a level that is beyond reason. I am in search of beauty and that one simple goal should keep me busy for some time to come.”

About the author: Mark Hewitt is the son and grandson of former directors of Spode, the fine china manufactures. He apprenticed with English potter Michael Cardew in Cornwall, UK, and then Todd Piker in CT, USA. He and his wife, Carol Peppe, moved to North Carolina in 1983, where Mark uses local clays and glaze materials to make work that dovetails Anglo-Asian studio pottery with Southern folk pottery traditions. He continues to take apprentices. www.hewittpottery.com

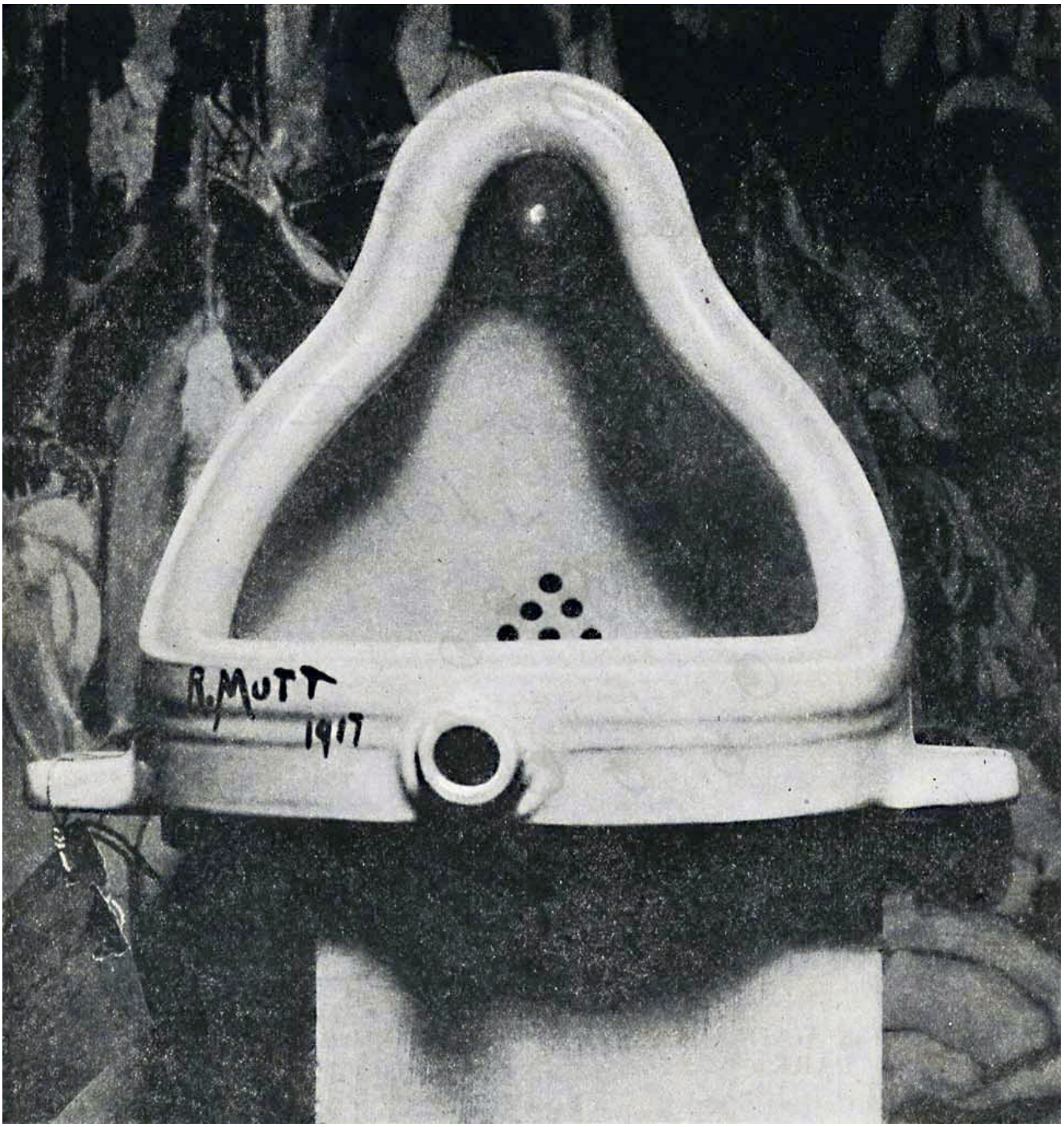

Figure 1. ”Fountain,” Marcel Duchamp, 1917

Figure 2. Mug, bu Alex Matisse, 2013?