

Above: *Spring Landscape*. 1983. High-fire ceramics. 45 x 28 in.

Below: *Solarsaurus*. 2009. High-fire ceramics. 42 x 48 in.

Article by Maureen Davidson

HE DID NOT LEARN IN SCHOOL, NEVER DID homework, was relegated to the back of the classroom among the hopeless cases and then advanced to the next grade. "I spent my childhood in the sandbox, making tunnels with my truck," says Mattie Leeds, standing over his wheel with a blowtorch, stiffening the wide, grooved cylinder of red clay destined to become a channel for light within the looming sculpture taking shape nearby.

So resistant to the classroom that he left school as soon as he legally could, Leeds has spent his adult life seeking out and studying long with masters of his own choosing in the rigorous disciplines that consistently attract him. The incorrigible boy now stokes the fires of his muse through monk-like practice of yoga, oboe and meditation in the extensive studio, home and gallery that he built on a dramatic granite outcropping in the mountains above Santa Cruz in Northern California, US.

Here the artist has shaped tons of stiff clay into commanding vessels in classical Chinese forms whose three massive dimensions provide the canvas for narratives painted in the Chinese brush tradition. These pots are feats of intention, strength and consistency of hand: skills Leeds

spent a lifetime developing since, at age 17, he was accepted as the single disciple of Michael Frimkess, one of the seminal masters of the California clay movement. After Frimkess, Leeds found other teachers and evolved the distinctive body of work that, for 25 years, was exhibited and sold internationally by the gallery of Gumps, San Francisco. Recently, prompted by the sudden death of a close friend, Leeds has created a new body of work that integrates while it departs from all that he has learned before. In this uncharted region, for the first time, he has not sought a master.

Born in New York to a father whose artistic ambitions were thwarted by World War II and the inconvenience of a family, Leeds grew up within constant conflict. "I was just checked out. I watched and waited until I could get away."

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1960 and Leeds ran away for the first time (at age 15) to Haight Ashbury where he found work in the shipyards and a home with a self-realisation community, "I was kind of a hippie but with a work ethic." At age 17 he left for good.

"I decided I would be a jeweller, so I went to get tools at a craft shop in downtown Los Angeles." Clay in Particular was actually a studio that offered ceramic classes and sold pots. Artists worked there



in an industrious camaraderie which the young man found appealing. The owner hired him on the spot. In a week he started teaching.

In the mid-1960s Los Angeles was a centre of the revolution that snapped the traces of craft tradition to bring American ceramics into the mainstream of contemporary fine arts. In the basement of the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, Peter Voulkos, Ron Nagle, Ken Price, James Melchert, Michael Frimkess and others experimented with clay in forms that used the tradition of ceramics as the starting point for sculpture that gathered up its history behind it in clear genealogical reference, then boldly entered uncharted regions.

Frimkess used Clay in Particular studios while he was building his own in Venice. "He worked at night. I watched. He talked about Greek athletes and jazz (exotic subjects to me) he was throwing dry clay in thin-walled, classical shapes," Leeds remembers.

Frimkess is credited with re-introducing historical Greek and Chinese forms to American ceramics, questioning the intrinsic value of originality. He took the serious young man under his wing, demanding that Leeds throw pot after pot until he could wield 12 pounds of dry clay into a thin-walled, 30 inch high cylinder. "I spent almost a year



Below: Godzilla. 2009. High-fire ceramics. 15 x 13 in.

Above: Rock Around the Clock. 1984. Low-fire ceramics. 43 x 25 in.



doing only that," said Leeds. "But he was the first person I trusted. I discovered discipline and the freedom that comes from it."

"Through Frimkess I met Fred Marier. Marier treated me as a kind of godson. He was a tremendous person, an avid collector of the California ceramics movement since the 1950s. He and Frimkess both encouraged me to study with the Voulkos group. But I didn't want to go to school. I took myself seriously and was not at all socialised."

"I moved to Berkeley and rented a room near People's Park, a Berkeley hot spot in the 1960s. But actually I didn't go outside much. I had a ton of clay, my bed and a wheel and I just worked."

Frimkess asked Leeds to return to help him set up his new studio in Venice. Only a few weeks after they began, Frimkess learned that he had Multiple Sclerosis. Frimkess was 34. Leeds was now 18.

Soon Leeds established his own studios in South Central Los Angeles. With the proceeds of a successful first exhibition, he travelled to Japan to meet Hamada Shoji. In Japan he discovered Chinese painting and determined to find a master.

Eventually he found Master YC Chiang, who attained the highest level master of martial arts and was a doctor of Chinese medicine. He had studied painting from childhood, with masters including Puru, the brother of the last Chinese emperor. "He painted. I copied what he did. I studied with him for 10 years. I moved 30 times during that 10 years but I always had my little box of ink and brushes.



Above: *Red Dog*, 1985. Low-fire ceramics. 48 x 30 in.
Below: *Godzilla (Detail)*.

And I made big pots, bigger pots, they needed a lot of space."

So in 1980, Leeds moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains to develop the site where he now lives and works. In 1982, Gumps offered him a show. By this time his massive wheel-thrown vessels were covered with expressionistic narratives painted with a Chinese brush in strokes of sure, searing commitment in intertwining images and symbols that read sideways, diagonally, in 360°, the vivid skin of classical shapes that sometimes rose to five feet and beyond.

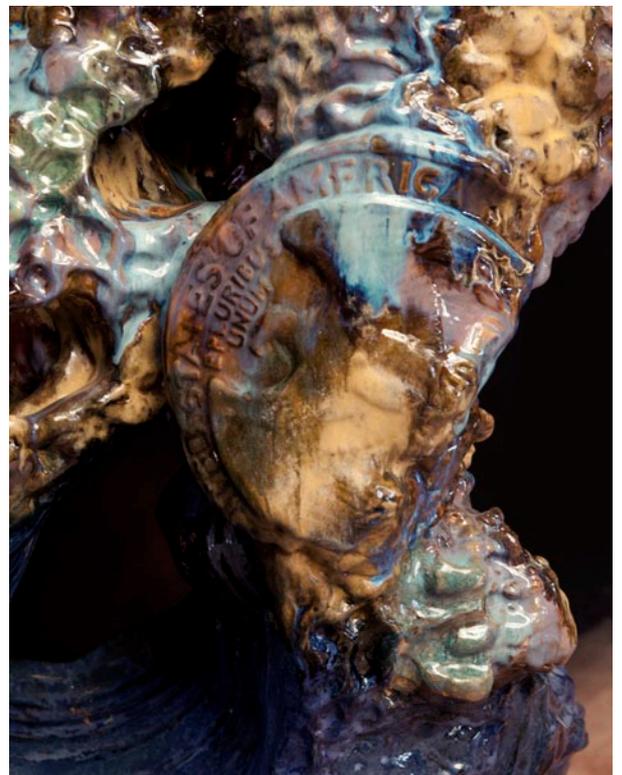
These story pots often incorporated pop iconography in a direct reference to graffiti inspired by artists like Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Works like *Rock Around the Clock* (1983) used rhythmic line and juicy vivid color to emulate the frenetic rhythm of rock music contained within a traditional ginger jar shape. His five-foot tall *Red Dogs* (1984) is a work of searing expressionism whose anthropomorphised dogs dance in a scarlet so radiant that it appears to pulsate against the cool teal background. In 1984, when Gumps hosted an event at the Democratic Convention, Leeds created a presentation piece that was the story of the Mondale/Ferraro Presidential campaign.

"For 25 years I disappeared into my own little world. I perfected techniques for making giant pots that only Gumps could sell and ship. I became immersed in my work and learning about painting the figure, doing portraits, telling a story."

He told hundreds of stories of women (mostly strangers who responded to his advertisements seeking models). Asked to wear clothing or, if they modelled nude, to bring objects that were clues to their identity. The models talked about themselves as Leeds painted directly on four or five pots surrounding them. Mirrors allowed him to paint the model from every angle. In this way he developed the style he calls "365-degree cubism".

"It was a Pandora's Box of the psyche: a woman talking deeply about herself to a single audience who was concentrating on her intensely." Some of the models were emotional, some exhibitionistic. Leeds was demonised briefly by a group who saw his many undeniably erotic works as demeaning of women. "They are portraits. I try to find out what the person is about, listening, talking, drawing from the model right on to the pot, finding a shape inside these classical forms where the portrait can emerge. What I learn comes through my hands, as if the person is a piece of music and I am just playing the music that's in front of me."

In the 1990s, Leeds began to study music, choosing the oboe, admiring its clear and penetrating voice and embracing its legendary difficulty. "I have been studying with Carol Ponofsky, a world-class musician, for 16 years. Just learning to make the reeds took all of my free time for years. Like throwing those cylinders with Frimkess or copying the paintings of Master



Chiang, frustration is the only real obstacle.”

In 2005, just as Gumps curatorial staff changed and they began to become directive about his work, the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History offered him a show for which he created a new body of giant work illuminating untold incidents of local history in which race or culture was at play. He also showed a series of erotic portraits under the title *Weapons of Mass Destruction* that was, for a time, the culmination of his decades painting models.

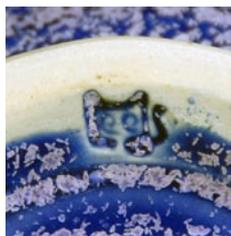
After a close friend died in 2007, the preternaturally disciplined Leeds was unable to return to the studio. Walking on the beach, he collected materials which he made into a mobile as a meditation on his friend’s life. Susan Hillhouse, curator of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, saw the mobile in Leeds studio while organising *Ying*, a 2008 exhibition about the cross-cultural influences of Chinese and American art.

She had been looking for works similar to several Leeds pots the museum had already acquired, notably *Spring Landscape* (1993), a five-foot porcelain-slipped *coup de grace* exemplifying precepts set forth in the Canons of Chinese Painting. Leeds had used the pot’s expanding diameter to accentuate the looming nature of the hazy mountain peaks towering over narrower, denser, more vigorously brushed foothills below.

But along with a rich cache of such Chinese-influenced pots, Hillhouse recognised the calligraphic qualities of Leeds’ mobile and requested that he expand it to fill the museum’s central three-story staircase.

During this process, Leeds meditated on the idea of loss and became obsessed with negative space and finding a way to illuminate work from within. “A woman commissioned me to do a piece for her daughter who had recently died. We collaborated on a work that became a portrait of feeling, space and light, with a place for her daughter within it.”

What followed was a series of abstracted sculptures that, rather than tell stories on their surfaces, embody the narrative within their form. Recently Leeds began creating vast volumetric sculpture based



Above: *Red Dress*. 2003. Low-fire ceramics. 20 x 12 in.

Below left: *Mattie Leeds Stamp*.

Below right: *Mattie Leeds Portrait*. Photo by Jane Edberg. © 2010.

on boyhood icons: *Godzilla*, *Disco Dog*, *Stegosaurus* and other monsters. Each is pierced through with channels that become an intricate armature while they also act as an inner transit system by which light penetrates the work. Instead of brush-painted surfaces, the sculptures are impressed with objects (a negative calligraphy) and painted non-figuratively.

Giant dinosaurs now stalk Leeds’ studio wielding atomic disintegrators or aiming teapots, their knobby hides camouflaging surprising embedded figures (impressed coins, architectural details, pop memorabilia). “Ceramics has always been about the culture it comes from. As a society we have created monsters. *Godzilla* is a potent symbol of the mess we have gotten ourselves into.” Embodying the discipline that his masters taught him, Mattie Leeds has found a new freedom and now, for many, has become a teacher.

Maureen Davidson is an art critic, arts writer and educator in print, on the radio and on the web. A former director of arts organisations and founder/curator of the Momentum galleries in California and Washington, she now serves as independent curator and consultant living in Santa Cruz, California, from where she roams the Bay Area looking at art. (mo.davidson@sbcglobal.net)