

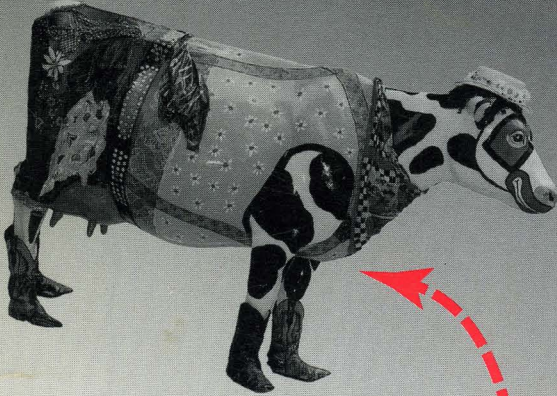
Artichoke

SUMMER 2000
Volume 12 Number 2

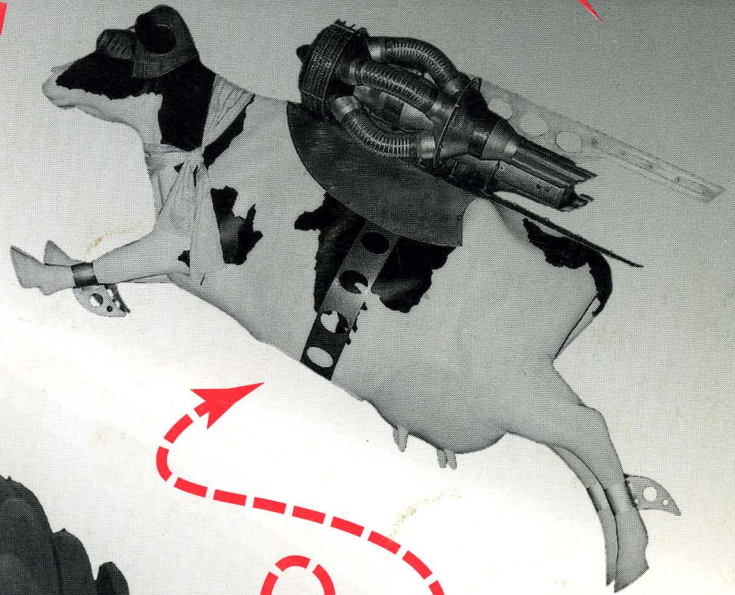
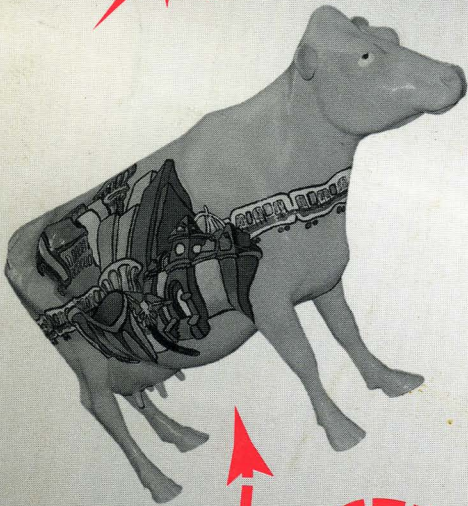
WRITINGS ABOUT THE VISUAL ARTS

Alberta Magazine of the Year

\$4⁹⁵



LEOPOLD FOULEM



AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARTMAN
KELOWNA ART GALLERY

LEOPOLD L. FOULEM'S "MONOCHROME ABSTRACTIONS"

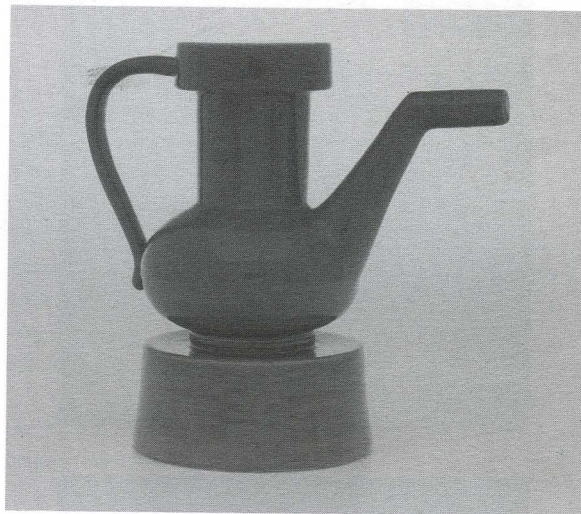
by Paul Mathieu

"The vase gives form to the void, music to silence."

— Lao-Tzu

In a 30-year career filled with radical gestures of all sorts, Montreal artist Leopold Foulem's recent "*Monochrome Abstractions*" constitute probably his most radical act yet. These ceramic objects present us with what seems to be a pot, resting on a slightly larger base, to which it also seems to be attached. By presenting us with a pot (teapots, bottles and vases are some of the forms used) attached to a base made with the same material (glazed earthenware clay), Foulem establishes a clear context for these objects. He explains that "the base decontextualizes the ceramic form by establishing a distance between form and function and a closeness between the object and museum type sculpture." It defines and reinforces the fact that these objects are ceramic objects; that they are part of a specific history; that they relate to certain ways of making, to particular materials, forms and functions; but most importantly, the base directs our understanding; it clarifies our relationship with the object while challenging our expectations.

In itself, the joining of a familiar object to another form is not a radical act. If we were in the realm of sculpture (are we?) this state of affairs would be familiar, expected. Traditionally, sculptures are presented on a base, and often physically attached to that base which may or may not be made of the same material, but such presentation is rarely the case for vessels.



Abstraction 2351 (Turquoise), ceramic, 8 1/4" x 9" x 5", Leopold L. Foulem, 1997

In many ways, the making of Foulem's *Monochrome Abstractions* is fairly traditional; they are assembled from wheel-thrown and hand-built forms. The general shape of the pottery is made of simple geometric forms— sphere, cylinder and cone— which bring to mind Cézanne's prescriptive to perceive the world through mathematical forms. The base is a flared cylinder attached to the 'bottom' of the pottery form. In another context, the form of the base could be read as an upside down bowl (a doggy dish comes to mind), but here they are clearly intended as sculptural plinthes. While both object and base are made by hand, all traces of the throwing marks have been removed. The surface is slick, smooth and mechanical. This stresses that the making is not the most important part; they embody what Foulem describes as "tactile ideas but not tactility," contrary to so much historical and contemporary ceramics work.

If production was the goal, slip-casting would be an appropriate method to use, but each of these objects is unique, singular, with all the importance attached to these qualifiers. The pottery forms themselves are familiar, stereotypical, and refer to historical precedents in a generic way, but not to specific objects within the history of styles. The forms are actually prototypical and original, as if they were the first ever example of their type. They visually read as ascetic and primal archetypes. Their balance and composition

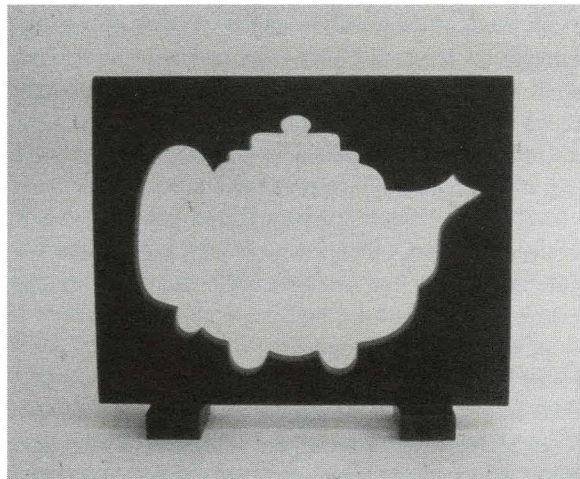
are quite typical of Leopold's particular aesthetic—a slight variation through exaggeration of parts—yet they remain subtle and underplayed. A statement on personal style and individual expressivity is not what these objects are about.

If we were in the realm of design, their quirky shapes would not be particularly beautiful or functional. Their total surface is covered with a single glaze, pottery form and base, which refers to historical *blanc de Chine*, *sang-de-boeuf*, or other Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Chinese monochrome glazes. Yet, beyond association, the color simply plays its expected optical role of mild seduction and no more. In fact, Foulem uses a cheapened version; the pots are glazed with commercially available hobbyist glazes, instead of the celebrated and highly valued historical originals. The use of a single color, in itself unusual but not unique in Leopold's oeuvre, simply refers to the 'monochrome' of their title. What distinguishes these pieces is that all the openings (spouts, lids, mouths, etc.) are smoothly sealed and glazed over.

Their titles—*Monochrome Abstractions*, followed by a number and a reference in parenthesis to the color of the object, as well as the date of manufacture—are basically descriptive with no narrative intent. While they make clear references to abstraction



Abstraction 5211 (Red), ceramic, 7" x 8 1/4" x 6 3/4", Leopold L. Foulem, 1999



Teapot, ceramic, 9 1/4" x 10 3/4", Leopold L. Foulem, 1983

within modernism, as well as to minimalist art (within the tradition of pottery and ceramics, abstraction and minimalism date back to the very origins of the practice, 15,000 years ago), the numbers bring to mind the taxonomic obsessions of museology.

The term 'abstraction' begs the question "Can a pot ever be abstract?" According to Webster's dictionary, abstraction refers to "non-representational, non-concrete" and implies "the formation of an idea, as of the qualities and properties of a thing, by mental separation from... material objects." This definition could probably stand as a succinct description of the operations taking place here. The forms are reductive, simplified, offering us the bare yet excessive minimum for clarity of reading.

These kinds of minimalist and conceptual statements are not new in the artist's work. Their genesis can be traced as far back as (if not earlier than) Foulem's *Conceptual Teapots* of 1979, which consisted of a rectangular clay slab, glazed matte black, with a pierced outline delineating the contour of a teapot as an opening in the upright clay rectangle. In these works, according to Foulem, the object is "constituted of two voids, two negatives: a physical, spatial void that depicts the outline of the image, itself a pictorial void by absence. The physical void (the clay part) is not a frame, it simply defines the contour of the teapot, and the hole in the slab is not an image, yet it

reads as an obvious teapot, and its scale is true to the familiar prototype.” This work of Foulem’s is very similar both stylistically and conceptually to the meditative objects used by the Jaina cult in the Tantric rituals of India, where the deity is represented as an opening, a void within a bronze plaque.¹

This investigation was furthered in a 1983 series of deconstructed, tri-dimensional cups glazed with gold lustre. Another series, in 1988, dealt with similar problems in yet another way; the “chicken wire” *Generic Containers* teapots consisted of historical forms reconstituted in metal wire dipped in white slip, then multi-fired. All the expected components are there, the ceramic material, the volumetric body, the spout, lid and handle; the negative aspect is the obvi-



Cup and Saucers, ceramic, each 20 cm x 10 cm x 18 cm, Leopold L. Foulem, 1982

ous denial of function, since these forms, while clearly defining a volume, a space for containment, could not possibly hold a liquid and transfer it, the usual function of teapots. They challenged and contested familiar cultural conventions.

Foulem has made use of the teapot form extensively, probably because it is so emblematic of ceramics itself. It is formally challenging in its complexity and it carries so many cultural connotations, both in the East and the West. Another series of ovoid teapots from 1985 present us with a balloon-like volume from which a conventional spout protrudes. Following the outline of that spout, the profile of a teapot is carved on the form, completing for us visually, the body, the lid, the handle. The ‘image’ of the teapot is glazed in a speckled blue to refer to enameled tin ware, with black negative areas. The basic concept of the previous bi-dimensionally flat



Teapot, ceramic, 10 1/8" x 9 5/8" x 6", Leopold L. Foulem, 1988

series are here given tri-dimensional solutions.

In a 1989 series, *Teapots*, Foulem developed similar concepts by assembling found objects, usually mnemonic of teapot parts (handle, lid, spout) and coming from the opposite worlds of nature (driftwood) or the ‘low’ material-value rejects of popular culture and consumerism, such as plastic, industrial glass and metal. These found objects were attached to thrown shapes which formed the teapots’ bodies. The main characteristics of this series were that the teapots had neither top nor bottom, being open at both ends. They were covered in gold lustre, again to reinforce preciousness and challenge the hierarchy of materials and practices still operative in art. The hole at the base of the pots not only denied function, it reinforced the idea of the volume, the central operative concept at work. When there is both an opening on top (where it is expected) and at the bottom, the volume is transformed from a container to a passage.

This passage is reminiscent of the digestive system; the pipes, tubes and drains of the scatological impulse. At the anthropological level, the opening for the lid becomes the mouth and the hole at the base, usually a closure, is here a relaxed, dilated anus, excreting a world of meaning, a meaning reinforced by the cheap, dejected, throw-away objects which



Teapot with Beveled Handle, ceramic and found objects, 8" x 7 3/4" x 4 7/8", Leopold L. Foulem, 1992

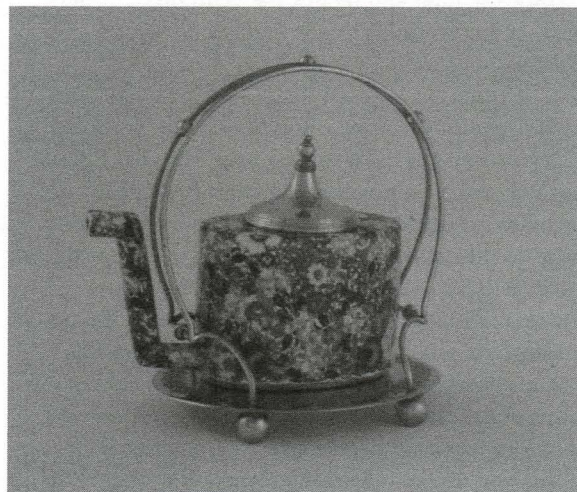
make up the other parts of the teapot. The gold surface reiterates this analogy, since "according to Freudian analysis, excrement and gold are part of the same cycle, caught between retention and expenditure."² This anthropological analogy could be pursued further in an analysis of opening-as-access but also opening-as-penetration, both stressed by the phallic nature of the projecting parts; something probed with greater depths in Foulem's graphically phallic *Rythons* shown in 1984.

Another series of objects in Foulem's career, *Structures and Armatures*, made between 1991 and 1999, offers further context for *Monochrome Abstractions*. These teapots, cups, casseroles and lidded jars are composed of handmade ceramic objects mounted in the vacated space inside metal turn-of-the-century found objects which Foulem collected in flea markets and junk shops.

This important body of work is made of three radically different series: the earlier black pieces and the later, more colorful and conceptually decorative *famille* pieces, refer to historical precedents from the Far East and European ceramics lexicon. The most recent, humouristic, visually graphic and text-based pieces deal with genders issues, sexual politics and identities. If we lift the lid (often composed of found parts) on these ceramic and multi-media objects, the space that we expect to find open underneath is sealed

with a clay slab, yet the spout, when there is one, has the expected pouring opening. If the spout was likewise closed, the object would become a sculpture. It remains controversial because it is not a sculpture.

In these pieces, the volumes are solid yet empty. They replace the empty space of the missing object, they become full 'voids' by their opacity. They materialise the volume by using the familiar prototype of the teapot. The 'void' is the abstract made concrete. Here it is made concrete by becoming a surface painted black. When we see this surface, we realize that the void (the negative space inside the pot) has become mass, has materialized; as such, it represents the concreteness of the volume. It has become pictorial, while keeping its spatial reality. It is our experience that tells us that there is a void. "The void is glazed black as yet another convention for absence and emptiness,"



"Hundred Flower" Ground Teapot in Mounts, ceramic and found objects, 8 3/4" x 8 7/8" x 5 3/4", Leopold L. Foulem, 1997 - 1999

Foulem explains. In the *Monochrome Abstractions*, it is the whole object that investigates and embodies this idea.

Within ceramics, other artists have dealt with similar issues. Some early cups of Robert Arneson are pierced with holes and filled with balls. The more recent work of Tony Marsh continues this idea in a decorative, formal manner. In many ways, minimalism

could be said to be a ceramic concept. The first bowl ever made, simple and basic, was certainly the result of a conceptual act as much as a transformative one. A reductive impulse is evident in the work of Dutch ceramist Geert Lap. Vessels without a bottom have been made by British potter Martin Smith.

The difference between the work of these diverse artists and Foulem's is that besides the conceptual and contextual content, in the other artist's work there is always a strong stylistic and aesthetic impulse at work; the necessity of a personal style, continuous over the whole development of their careers, as well as an evident decorative and expressive urgency which supersedes and overwhelms the conceptual intent. This rejection of individual expression based on a characteristic personal style is blatantly manifest in the *Monochrome Abstractions*. Foulem's work is stylistically fluid and retains the neutrality, timelessness, and universality of the anonymous art of ahistorical cultures.

It might be essential here to ask a simple ontological question, the very question asked by these objects themselves: "What is a pot?" By that I mean not only how we perceive and experience them phenomenologically, but how we understand them; how do they operate epistemologically? Obviously, the basic definition of a pot establishes the polarity between interior and exterior and combines the two in a symbiotic whole. The strategic space where this operation takes place is situated at the lip, where this transitional event occurs. On one side you have the interior (volumetric yet empty, meaningless; to be filled) and on the other side, the exterior, the whole world, full, filled with meaning. The interior void is thus defined by clear borders. The space inside the pot is not the same as the space outside. The interior space is a negative space, with a finite content enclosed by edges, borders, limits. The exterior space is infinite, limitless. This void is the operative volume of pottery and like the volume of books it is a space for containment and meaning. An interesting analogy could be made with the world of astrophysics, when the pot becomes a singularity and the edge, the lip of the pot, is the event horizon, the place where everything changes, where new laws apply.

"A singularity is a mathematical point at which space and time are infinitely distorted, where matter is infinitely dense and where the rules of relativity and quantum mechanics break down. Singularities are believed to lurk at the heart of black holes which conceal their existence from the outer world. A naked singularity would be one without a concealing black hole shell, and therefore visible, in principle, to outside observers.

The problem for astrophysicists seeking direct information within known black holes is that black holes are bounded by event horizons that forever conceal everything inside them, including their central point-like cores: their singularities. If the event horizon could be eliminated from a black hole, the singularity inside would be laid bare."³

This is exactly what Foulem has been doing for many years; an equation made emblematic in the *Monochrome Abstractions*. He has removed the event horizon and made visible, finally, the true reality of pots. In so doing, he has changed the laws governing



Abstraction 1385 (Turquoise), ceramic, 9 1/4" x 5 3/4", Leopold L. Foulem, 1997

our understanding of these types of objects. Like the scientists, he presents us with a new knowledge; with the intuition that comes from more than thirty years of rigorous, continuing work, he shows us something we didn't know existed, despite its apparent familiarity. And he does it, as always, with amazing directness and simplicity, by operating a simple reversal; by removing the edge separating outside and inside, turning inside out and upside down.

The implied volume (the operative factor of functional pottery) has been transmuted into mass (the operative factor of traditional sculpture). This is not a nihilistic, negative act but an affirmative one. Nonetheless, it remains radical and truly revolutionary, while maintaining what Milan Kundera calls the "radical autonomy" of genres and practices.⁴ Foulem maintains the radical autonomy of ceramics within art. His "exploration of the formal and conceptual potential of the tension between the interior and the exterior, the void and the full, the negative and the positive, the hard and the soft"⁵ locates his work squarely within the major preoccupations of artists in the second half of the 20th Century. "Within modernism as well as post-modernism (and to a lesser degree in abstraction), conceptual art implies some form of dematerialization, putting very little importance on material."⁶ That Foulem achieves this within a material-based practice that remains preoccupied, if not obsessed, with a specific material (clay), is in itself a remarkable feat.

In this culminating body of work, a number of subsequent reversals are also present; the top is closed and it is the base that is open, reversing the operative factor of pots (open top) to the specific characteristic of bronze casting and traditional sculpture; the invisible yet essential open base. These objects behave like sculptures because all their openings are closed. It is the base, the plinth that is open. Again, like bronze casts, the objects have no real perceptual thickness and the interior pressure extends all the way to the exterior skin; as if the clay had dematerialized, and all that remains is the glaze, suspended in the air without any real support. It is not so much a shell any more as a bloated balloon with no real physicality. It has become pure representation, total abstraction.

These objects are empty of content, empty of meaning (the familiar meaning of narratives), yet full of concepts. If ideas are the purest form of negation, these objects on bases, presented in a gallery setting on the conventional plinths, are visually challenging, disturbing and confusing. Their unassuming presence and simplicity are effective elements of their implicit power.♦

Paul Mathieu is a potter in Vancouver. He currently teaches ceramics at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

Endnotes

1. Philip Rawson, *Tantric Art*. (see also Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, Oxford University Press, 1971)
2. *The Informal, A User's Manual*, Centre George Pompidou, Paris.
3. *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, n.d.
4. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*.
5. Maurice Frechuret, *Le Mou et ses Formes*, Paris, 1993.
6. Maurice Frechuret, *ibid*.