

Randy Johnston
MAKER of MEMORY



“THE CLAY HAS REMEMBERED THE MARK”

— *Randy Johnston*

We talk and write about art by looking at cultural markers and socio-political factors, by grouping, identifying genres, sussing out classifications and trends. We tend to understand things through a comparative lens. As we try to make sense of the unexplainable, which is part of art’s domain, these tools have their use. In writing about the work of Randy Johnston, I want to turn our thinking from characterization and control to a focus on the ineffable, and how Johnston’s art collaborates differently with the world. In this work, materials and objects of use and ritual, collectively framed through a powerful and confident conductor, are encouraged to move in and out of focus. Johnston’s objects in clay, somehow familiar yet elusive, are not so much controlled as they are collaborated with.

In her book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett explores a powerful new way of thinking about the world in which the objects and the very matter that surrounds us have agency. They have a voice. Bennett offers a radical kind of material politics, reconsidering what is agent, what is active, and what (not just who) has power, with complex repercussions for our understanding of human authority. This “vital materiality”¹ is also a new lens through which to understand the power of our visual culture and the objects we make. In Bennett’s thesis, the earth and stones transformed through the potter’s hands are not inert, but active, with their own internal lives. This framework provides a new way of understanding the dynamic relationships inherent in Johnston’s work, where materials are not merely something to be bent to the artist’s will but instead full participants in the conversation. Despite Johnston’s extraordinary skill and expertise in the science of ceramics, he often chooses materials for how they misbehave, for how they express their inherent and unique characteristics. In Johnston’s work, the material is more than personified, it is given collaborative agency.

Johnston brings balanced sensitivity to the formal dynamics of making, where opportunities arise sometimes first by accident, and often from noticing and responding. What was once a mark that occurred where glaze met clay becomes a new revelation, a horizon line, an active bisection of form, and of our field of view (RJ786). Just as Johnston’s forms move between references—anthropomorphic, architectural, abstract—so the surfaces shift as well. In these ceramic surfaces,



SQUARED VASE
Copper glaze with texture
13 x 6.25 x 6.25"
RJ786



YUNOMI
Nuka glaze, natural
ash over iron slip
4 x 3.25 x 3.25"
RJ796

fluidity and spontaneity are carried within an elusive and carefully choreographed matrix. Confident pours and brush marks of a glaze moving across the interior of a bowl reveal themselves to be marks of erasure and resistance (RJ798). Like figures silhouetted against the horizon on a Wisconsin winter day, marks of the hand become a new form in profile (RJ777). Johnston's surfaces are deep, revealing successive moments layered one on top of the other, the heat of their transformation in the kiln like memories and light shifting in shadow. A cup captures the experience of a storm (RJ796), its surface rich with the intimate, searching relationship between Johnston and his medium, processes, and an object's finished fired surface.

Surface and form are clear but also inexplicable, imbued with a mysterious beauty. A vestigial handle on a small, green, glazed box (RJ773; page 4) lives in both the past and present. Suggestions of a previous use, now erased, become a pause for the hand and eye. This abstraction is the remnant of an erasure, of wear through use, a framing of Johnston's desire to condense meaning. The plinth is active within the work (RJ803; page 4), a sculptural mode of framing, familiar but formal. A vase's "foot" becomes the base on which an assemblage of forms play (RJ804; page 9). Architectural and abstract details echo Johnston's modernist touchstones—Brâncuși, Noguchi, Modigliani, and those from more archaic cultures and times. Much has been written about how Johnston's work evokes a range of cultures and eras, but I would instead focus on how these objects situate themselves BETWEEN things—objects, eras, and functions. Enigma is a complication of perception, as the human mind attempts to make sense of the world. The renowned painter, David Hockney, aptly stated, "The camera sees geometrically, and we must see psychologically."²

OVAL VASE FORM
Nuka glaze over iron slip finger marking
 14 x 10 x 3"
 RJ777



LARGE SCULPTURAL TRIANGULAR BOWL
Nuka glaze over iron slip
 4.25 x 20 x 20"
 RJ798



ROUND RELIQUARY JAR WITH LUGS
Copper glaze
4.5 x 3 x 3.5"
RJ773

Johnston's recent work dances on exactly how much is needed. Reduced to archetypes, the objects move between states of being, between past and present tied together through the object's utility. A move towards abstraction is an expression of loss, of mourning, of the unseen, of a desire to connect with the space between things. Doorways, openings, figures, archaic marks (RJ784) are calls toward connection. Anthropomorphic, tender but also structural, Johnston's work navigates all these spaces. A double or deckled edge (RJ791) is as much the form reaching to find itself as it is the sensual meeting place of two bodies, two volumes in an inexorable embrace. Works that are more sculptural are not less utilitarian, but rather differently so. Johnston's objects remind us that a once in a lifetime ritual is as important as one's daily sustenance.



SQUARED VASE FORM ON BASE
Copper glaze
11 x 4 x 4"
RJ803

Making, material, memory, the agency of the world around us are forces to consider, or perhaps they are just another attempt to frame the elusive and powerful experience of Randy Johnston's art. Johnston continues to ponder long-standing questions about objects and their mysterious power to frame experience and meaning. His work is a manifestation of his desire to collaborate with the most heady and geologic stuff—clay—and through his hand, we are reminded of how "the clay has remembered the mark."

—DAVID S. EAST, 2023

Artist and Educator, Chair: Ceramics, Maryland Institute College of Art

¹ Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

² David Hockney, "David Hockney: 'Abstraction in Art Has Run Its Course,'" *The Art Newspaper*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/09/30/why-abstraction-in-art-has-run-its-course>.



BOWL, DOUBLE LIPPED WITH INDENTS
Copper glaze
3.5 x 12 x 12"
RJ791



SCULPTURAL BOWL FORM WITH BARS
Copper glaze
8.25 x 6.5 x 6.5"
RJ784



SQUARED VASE FORM ON BASE

Copper glaze
13.5 x 4.75 x 4.75"
RJ802



SQUARED VASE FORM

Crackle shino glaze over iron slip, natural ash
14.5 x 6 x 6"
RJ800



YUNOMI

Shino glaze layers over iron slip
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ806



YUNOMI

Shino glaze layers, natural ash iron brushwork
4.25 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ809

KATAKUCHI "CUT MOUTH" BOWL
WITH SPOUT
Copper glaze, double walled
3.5 x 8.25 x 9"
RJ792



SCULPTURAL SPOON FORM
Copper glaze
4.5 x 19.5 x 11"
RJ789

SQUARED TEAPOT WITH
OVERHANDLE
Natural ash, kaolin slip
10.5 x 5.5 x 5.5"
RJ816



SUSHI PLATTER
Copper glaze, trailed black lines
2.25 x 14.25 x 5.5"
RJ790



BOAT FORM
Natural ash, iron slip, kaolin slip
 5.5 x 21.5 x 7"
 RJ815



FIGURATIVE VASE
Copper glaze, added texture
 14 x 9 x 4"
 RJ801



VASE FORM ON BASE
Copper glaze
 10 x 7 x 3.5"
 RJ804

SQUARED VASE FORM
Nuka glaze over iron slip finger marking
 12.5 x 6 x 6"
 RJ776



YUNOMI
Shino glaze layers, iron brushwork
 4 x 3.25 x 3.25"
 RJ813



IKEBANA VASE FORM
Yellow glaze, natural ash
 8 x 10.5 x 4"
 RJ778



LARGE SCULPTURAL TRIANGULAR BOWL
Copper glaze
5.75 x 22.5 x 22.5"
RJ799



BIRD SCULPTURE
Natural ash, kaolin slip
7 x 5 x 4"
RJ818



BIRD SCULPTURE WITH CANDLE CUP
Copper glaze
6 x 3.5 x 2"
RJ787

TEAPOT
Natural ash, kaolin slip
8.75 x 10.5 x 4.5"
RJ783



TRIANGULAR SCULPTURAL PLATTER
Nuka glaze over iron slip, natural ash
3.5 x 13.5 x 7"
RJ781



KATAKUCHI "CUT MOUTH" BOWL

Copper glaze
4.25 x 12 x 12"
RJ772



KATAKUCHI "CUT MOUTH," DOUBLE WALL FORM

Natural ash, kaolin slip
3.75 x 8.5 x 10"
RJ780

LARGE SCULPTURAL
BOWL FORM WITH BARS
Copper glaze
10 x 8.75 x 8.75"
RJ785



IKEBANA NARROW
VASE FORM
Copper glaze
9 x 4 x 2.5"
RJ788





ROUND RELIQUARY FORM
 Yellow glaze, natural ash
 2.5 x 4.75 x 4.75"
 RJ814



SQUARED VASE FORM
 Crackle shino glaze, natural ash, iron slip with wax resist decoration
 9 x 6.5 x 6.5"
 RJ771

FIGURATIVE VASE FORM
 Natural ash, kaolin slip
 13.75 x 7.5 x 4.75"
 RJ775



YUNOMI
Natural ash, inlaid rope pattern, kaolin slip
4.25 x 3.75 x 3.75"
RJ807



TRIANGULAR RELIQUARY FORM
Natural ash, kaolin slip
3.5 x 9 x 7"
RJ782



OVAL SCULPTURAL BOWL WITH RAISED BARS
Copper glaze
4.5 x 11 x 9.25"
RJ793

Randy Johnston is a recognized artist who has exhibited internationally for 51 years. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Bush Foundation Artist Fellowship, two Visual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Distinguished Teaching Award in American Arts from the James Renwick Society of the Smithsonian, and the Walter Gropius Award for Artists. A member of the International Academy of Ceramics, Johnston received his MFA from Southern Illinois University and a BFA in Studio Arts from the University of Minnesota, where he studied with Warren MacKenzie. He also studied in Japan at the pottery studio of Tatsuzo Shimaoka (who was himself a student of Shoji Hamada). Johnston has presented hundreds of lectures and guest artist presentations worldwide, and his work is represented in numerous international museums and private collections.



TEA BOWL
Shino glaze, natural ash over iron slip
3.25 x 4.5 x 4.5"
RJ797



YUNOMI
Natural ash, kaolin slip, impressed rope pattern
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ794



SQUARED VASE FORM
Natural ash, kaolin slip
14.5 x 5.5 x 5.5"
RJ774

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Randy Johnston

MAKER of MEMORY

DATES: 9 December 2023 through 28 January 2024

PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION: Saturday 9 December 2023
3 to 6 PM • The artist will be present.

ONLINE EVENTS: Please visit www.puckergallery.com for a list
of virtual gatherings and events accompanying *Maker of Memory*.



YUNOMI
Natural ash, inlaid rope pattern, kaolin slip
4.25 x 4 x 4"
RJ805



YUNOMI
Shino glaze layers over iron slip brushwork
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ812



YUNOMI
Nuka glaze, natural ash over iron
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ811



YUNOMI
Iron brushwork
4.25 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ810



YUNOMI
Crackle shino glaze over iron natural ash
4.25 x 3.75 x 3.75"
RJ808



YUNOMI
Natural ash over iron slip
4.25 x 3.5 x 3.5"
RJ795

Cover: LARGE ROUND PLATTER
WITH LUG AND RIM MARKS
Copper green glaze
5 x 22.5 x 22.5"
RJ817

Please visit www.puckergallery.com to view current and past exhibition catalogues,
read artist biographies, and subscribe to the *Pot of the Week* email list.