

"Melon Pitcher," 13 inches in height, thrown and altered stoneware, with slip trailing and manganese-saturated glaze, single fired.

Where You've Been Is Good and Gone; All You Keep Is the Gettin' There

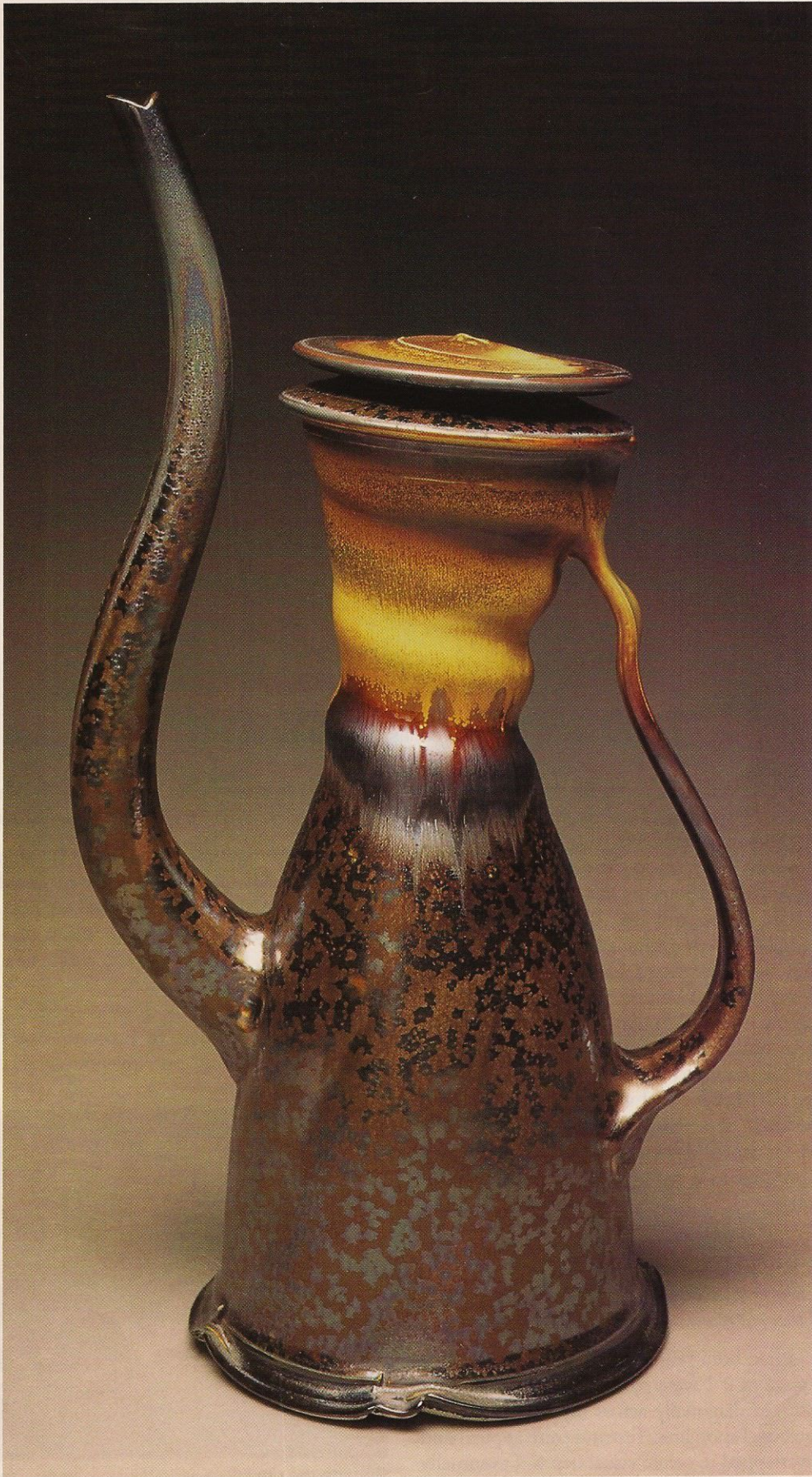
by Steven Hill

As the wheel slows, I am putting the final details on a freshly thrown pitcher. My personal language is in these details—the way I spread a rim into a wide flange with a raised inner edge, alter the rim into an oval or quadrilateral, and articulate the changes from a narrow foot swirling into a swollen belly, through high shoulders and a twisting neck. The music filling my studio is gently urging me on until the throwing is complete. I love this moment. This is why I make pots.

In fact, it was the magic of throwing that first seduced me 28 years ago. Some of my most satisfying moments have been stepping back from a freshly thrown pot, the clay still glistening with a hint of slurry on the surface, and letting the

joy of the work sink in. The manifestation of that joy, not yet a functional pot, is pure form. Sure, the basic parameters of that form have been defined by the pot's intended function and by the inherent limitations of the clay, but it is the energy expressed in the line of the profile that excites me. The sensation of skin stretched almost to the point of bursting gives form that essence of life I am searching for. In this moment...my vision is nakedly revealed.

But this moment has not always been so joyous. I clearly remember sitting at the wheel three years ago as a vague dissatisfaction was gnawing at my subconscious. It seemed like my finished pots never quite lived up to the promise of those wet forms. Having been increasingly troubled by the



"Cypress Ewer," 19 inches in height, stoneware, thrown and altered, with pulled spout and handle, sprayed with manganese-saturated glaze, single fired.



Platter, 20 inches in diameter, thrown and altered stoneware, with sprayed contrasting glazes emphasizing brushed slip spiral.

visual relationship between glaze and form, I was ready for a change of direction. The process of change was nothing new, as I've been facing and sometimes even embracing it throughout my career. Twenty-five years ago, my dilemma was how to continue single firing without the salt kiln I had come to depend on in school. In the mid '80s, it was how to lighten and brighten my glaze palette without switching to low fire. And many times along the way I have quit making pots whose inspirational fires had burned out, even though they were received well. Change, although sometimes a frightening and uncertain beast, has been the one constant factor that has kept my life in pottery fresh and exciting.

As I sat at the wheel that day, I was pondering this need for change. Just then, the plaintive voice of Townes Van Zandt wrapped his words around my consciousness. His song's use of the road as a metaphor eased me into my upcoming journey.

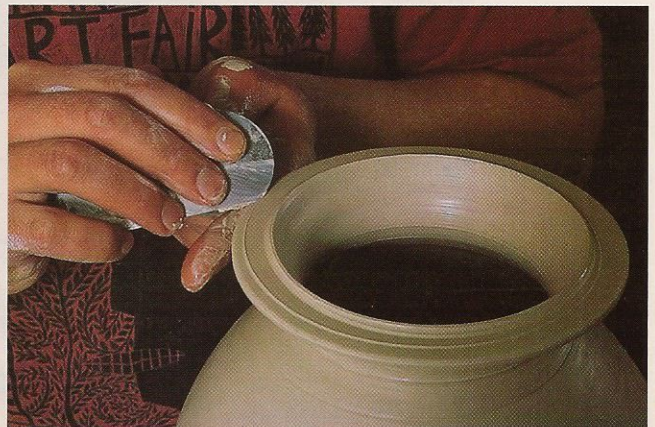
*Ah, Mother thinks the road is long and lonely,
Little brother thinks the road is straight and fine,
Little darlin' thinks the road is soft and lovely,
I'm thankful that old road's a friend of mine.*

For 20 years, I had been refining a personal approach of using slip and glaze as if I were painting. Transparent and matt glazes often cut diagonally across my forms, roughly symbolizing water and shoreline. Textures were applied and layers of glaze overlapped to create visual depth. I eventually became aware, though, that in my zealous use of color and texture, clarity of form had often been the victim.

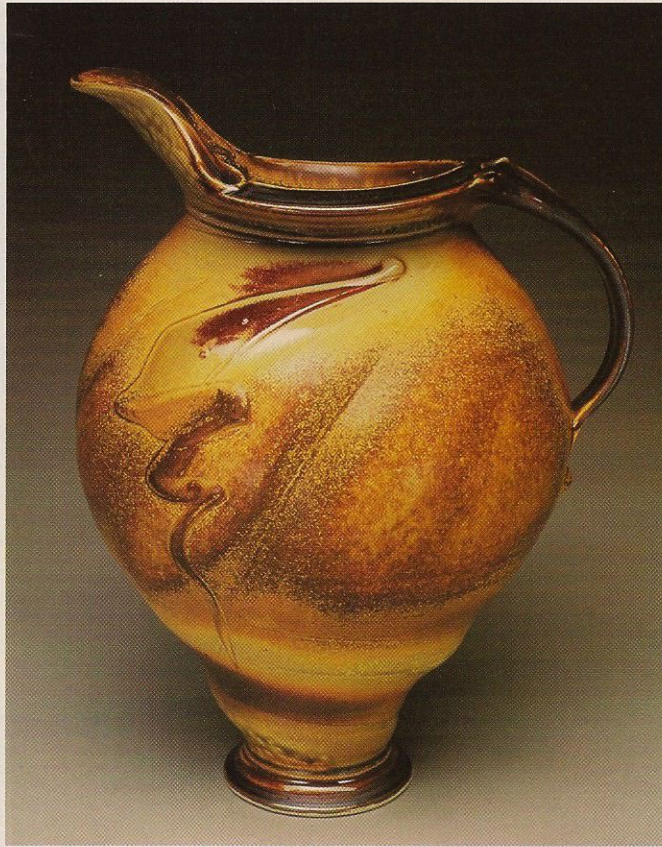
*Lookin' low and lookin' high, lookin' far and lookin' wide,
Try to tell myself that I'm fine, but it just ain't true.*

Actually, I have never questioned the importance of form in my work. My blindness to these surface distractions arose out of the intimacy I felt with those wet pots. No matter how many competing waves of color and contrast were splashed around a form, I still saw the soft patina of a leather-hard pot glowing through.

Although increasingly dissatisfied with glitzy surfaces, I didn't quite know how to proceed. The richness of terra sigillata was enticing, but my pots seemed to require the



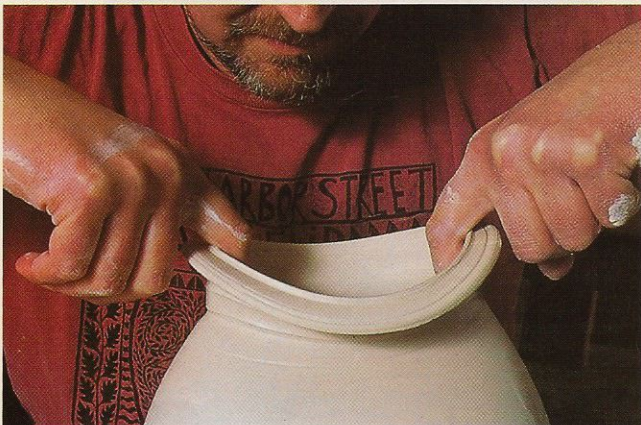
Ribbing the rim into a wide flange with a raised inner edge.



"Melon Pitcher," 12 inches in height, thrown and altered stoneware, with trailed slip and sprayed Sohngen Stony Yellow.

relative permanence of stoneware. The hardness, the durability, the oneness of clay and glaze, all figured into it. Wood- and soda-fired pots are a genuine inspiration, but being an urban potter prevented me from pursuing those firing methods. And I certainly couldn't see myself applying just one glaze to each piece. One thing I experienced during years of increasingly complex glaze application was a seduction, not so much by color, but by rich and varied surfaces. How could I give that up?

*Time flows through brave beginnings,
And she leaves her endings beneath our feet...*



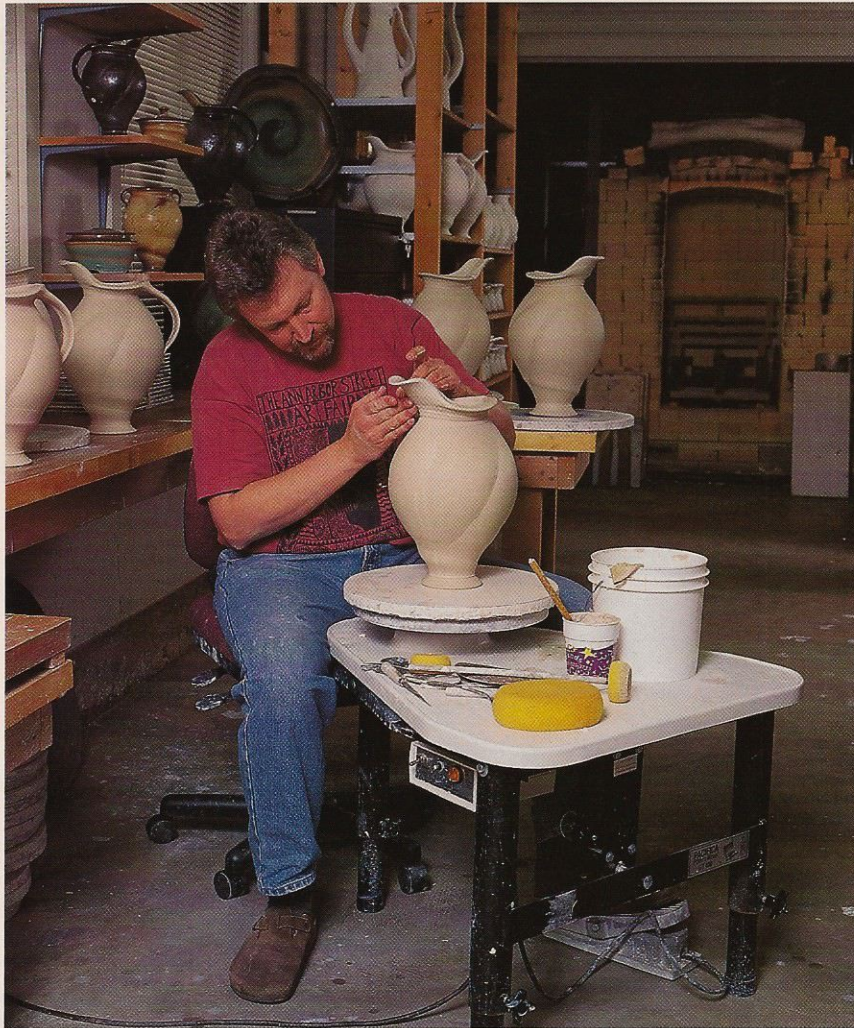
Pulling on opposite sides to reshape the rim as an oval.

Then came Italy. Two years ago my family and I had the opportunity to spend two glorious weeks in Tuscany. The art, the food, the countryside and the people were all incredible; Michelangelo's David, the interior of St. Peter's Basilica, the ancient Roman roads lined with towering cypress trees, all left their mark. But the single most inspirational aspect for me was the architecture. It wasn't just the spatial relationships and the details of buildings, but the way in which architectural form has stood the test of time. Seeing buildings that have been in constant use for hundreds, even thousands, of years gave me a new appreciation for surface quality and how it relates to form. The weather-worn stone, painted wood and stucco, with numerous layers of color exposed, seemed to communicate the spirit of the buildings and the generations of people who have inhabited them. In America, peeling paint is disgraceful; in Italy, it reveals the soul.

After returning home, I found myself thinking about the relationship of glaze and form differently and seeing the architectural elements of my pottery more clearly. Although I work with organic form, I use the details of rims, feet and handles to add definition in much the same way that a door frame defines an opening, or the way the soffit and fascia visually articulate form changes where wall and roof meet.

Your dead misconceptions have proven you wrong...

For the first time, I could clearly see how my glazing techniques had been denying much of what I had been saying with form. Shouldn't I be applying glaze to emphasize form instead of treating my pots as if they were a three-

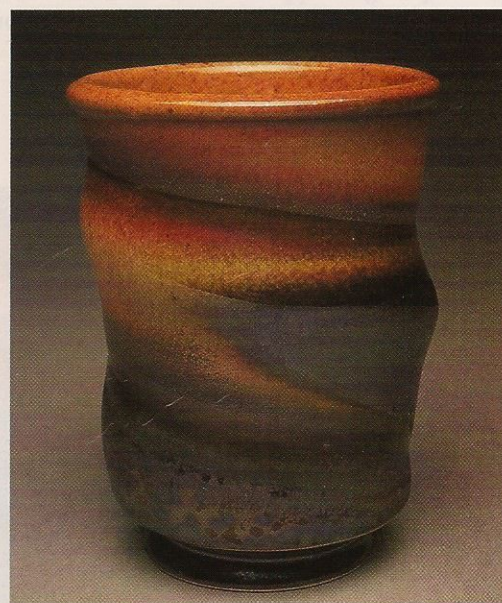


Adding a spout extension to a leather-hard melon pitcher; an important design consideration is the line that begins at the tip of the spout, sweeping across the rim and continuing down the handle in an S-curve.

dimensional canvas? Why not glaze the rim of my pots to contrast with the body, much like a window frame is painted to make it stand out from the wall of a building? And what if I used subtle, textured matt glazes to enhance and unify the body?

My new-found awareness occurred after I realized how much one of the matt glazes I use, Sohngen Stony Yellow, reminded me of the textured walls I had seen in Tuscany. The next step was to imagine the pot's rim as a door or window frame. The problem of how to apply contrasting glazes to adjoining areas, such as rim, handles, neck, shoulder, belly and feet, was a challenge, though. Dipping and pouring were out, as they create hard edges that aren't likely to coincide with form changes. Brushing has its possibilities, but I've never been too comfortable with a brush and I didn't want the marks that result from uneven application. That left spraying as the most logical alternative.

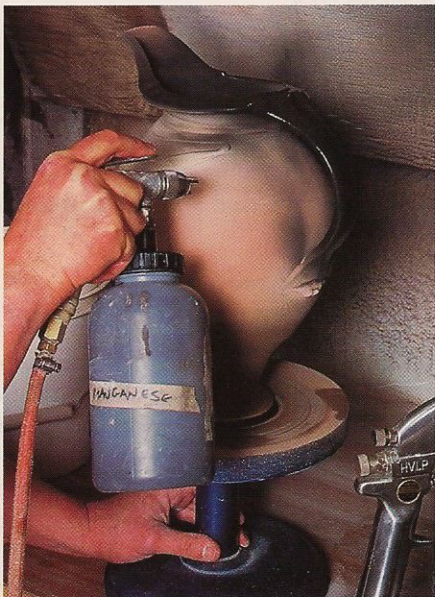
I use an automotive touch-up gun for all the detail work, and a larger gun to spray the body of each piece. It is a relatively straightforward process, and the small amount of overspray doesn't prevent me from making abrupt color changes from rim to neck to body, etc. In fact, overspray



Teabowl, 5 inches high, thrown and altered stoneware, with sprayed Shino and manganese glazes emphasizing the spiraling form.



Oval tray, 19 inches in length, thrown, altered and assembled stoneware, single fired.



Spraying glazes allows subtle variations, yet the small amount of overspray does not prevent abrupt color changes.

allows the additional opportunity to blend glazes together for subtle variation.

The downside of spraying is the compressor noise, the need to wear an appropriate mask and the difficulty judging thickness of glaze application. Nevertheless, any negatives were more than offset as I discovered the flexibility that spraying offered. Soon, I was glazing pots to emphasize the various elements of their form, influenced by those ancient walls of Tuscany.

You cannot count the miles until you feel them...

In retrospect, it all seems so simple. The changes I have made are obvious to me now, but they didn't come easy. There were no maps to lead the way and the road was initially obscured by my own preconceptions and resistance to change; however, once my objective of emphasizing architectural elements was established, the puzzle pieces began falling into place.

While my journey was mostly intuitive, and it's only in looking back that I can see with this much clarity, I would like to suggest that pottery deserves as much in-depth analysis as any other form of art. Furthermore, perhaps intuition



Covered jar, 4½ inches in height, thrown and altered stoneware, with contrasting glazes sprayed to emphasize spiral on lid, single fired, by Steven Hill, Kansas City, Missouri.

and analysis are no more separate or disconnected than breathing in and out. It is this breath that sustains our life and growth.

Working within the relatively narrow framework of function should not be a limitation for a potter, but a point of departure. The small design decisions we make are magnified in importance, and no aspect of form or surface is insignificant. Without paying attention to these details, our techniques can easily take on the stagnant, lifeless and mindless repetitiveness of factory work. Is this what we want? Isn't this the antithesis of why we got into this potter's life in the first place?

If we approach each piece as if it had the potential of being the best pot we've ever made, however, then the way is clear for an important journey. The explorations we make will keep our work alive for us and ensure that we will be in a different place tomorrow than we were yesterday.

For me, this road of discovery is more important than the finished pots (although you might not believe I mean that

statement if you were around while I was unloading a disappointing kiln!). By remaining open to change, I hope to come to a deeper understanding of myself and the ceramic processes I am involved in. And if I'm lucky, I might leave a few good pots behind.

*To live is to fly, both low and high,
So shake the dust off your wings, and the sleep out of your eyes.*

For now, I'm enjoying the feeling of satisfaction derived from seeing the need for change, following through with it, and finally achieving a sustained level of success. Although excited about my latest solution, I know it won't be my last. Pretty soon, complacency is likely to settle in. The road will once again beckon and as the late Townes Van Zandt said, "I'm thankful that old road's a friend of mine."

Yes, those pots that were ready for change three years ago are finally good and gone, and even though we'll all be good and gone someday too, it's the gettin' there that keeps giving us the opportunity to make it count. ▲