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In Hindsight: Non-visible Patch Points

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IN HINDSIGHT: NON-VISIBLE PATCH POINTS

By

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ABSTRACT

In Hindsight: Non-visible Patch Points is an exhibition consisting of seven ceramic vessels. I constructed these objects on the potter's wheel by throwing and joining sections together based on a set of loose measurements and visual guidelines I have developed. This work is the result of my reflections on the concepts of form, shape, balance, time, and connection for the past year.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Javier and Alicia, who have stood behind me through good and bad and always let me be free as long as I could live with the consequences of my actions, and to my sister Dia, who has been a true inspiration.

I would like to thank my thesis committee: Piero Fenci, for opening a beautiful door and having my back unconditionally; Lauren Selden, for being a great teacher, a true friend, always providing opportunities for personal and professional growth; Wesley Berg, for his constant support offering great feedback all the time; and Zac Selden, for being an endless source of knowledge and treating me as family.

I owe my deepest gratitude to Chris Talbot and all faculty at SFA. I cannot name you all, but each one of you helped me grow and be better every day. To everyone at the International Programs Office, your patience and support make all the difference for international students.

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friend and showed me the world of synthesizers. And it was a joy to have shared time with my fellow ex grad students and friends - Gaby, Korey, Bailey, Jimmy Don and Sherry, Jack, and Jeremy. You all have been missed.

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INTRODUCTION

Clive Bell described his theory of *Significant Form* as “lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions” (Bell 11). Subject matter and narrative were secondary for him, and I find this true with my work, as my main concern is finding balance within scale and proportion in relationship to spatial and emotional perception.

I am interested in the idea of short moments of interaction and connection and how they influence decisions that change our course in this world. This is in a level where I like to make a mental linear map of the big chain of events that is life, and by doing so I always remember places, people, and moments. In a similar way I see my work being connected, each vessel came to exist after a learning experience of what came before and the ones after will have the history of the last one made, when looking at the exhibition, this presents a visual map where my constructions show movements and marks that trace back and speak to the history of the making process. This is a key factor as it leaves room for viewers to create their own connections throughout the installation.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

As an industrial designer, I always followed the principle *form follows function*, that an object should fulfill the purpose it was created for in the best possible way, and that the form of that object should be one that also lends itself to its specific function, following the rules of ergonomics and always having the final user as the main consideration. When I first touched clay and ceramic materials, my focus was based on molds and casting slips, all with the idea of serial production. I trained myself as a production potter and learned throwing on the wheel by watching videos and practicing, thinking about mass production that would end in the hands of a final user.

Bernard Leach was my first source of inspiration; his notion of the “ethical pot” - utilitarian objects, naturally shaped and derived from oriental forms that possessed a spirit that went beyond appearance - was the driving force in my desire to learn. Leach promoted pottery as a combination of Western and Eastern arts and philosophies, with a heavy influence from traditional Korean, Japanese, and Chinese pottery in combination with traditional techniques from England and Germany such as salt glaze firings. These influences are visible in the marks and brush strokes on my vessels, freely decorated by allowing my

hand to move without constraints, using the brush as an extension of my body, creating lines and abstract shapes that follow and wrap around the three-dimensional surface. These marks become more intense with soda firing, allowing for the raw clay to develop rich dark colors acquiring a unique expressiveness of its own.

I have always been impressed with the work of Tapio Wirkkala, a Finnish designer that worked with almost every possible material to create objects that were both functional and beautiful at the same time. He found in nature inspiration and ideas for forms that industry could reproduce. High on a wall in Helsinki's Design Museum one can read one of Tapio's famous phrases: *An idea is often generated by chance and the impulse proceeds from something quite different than the original purpose. Material always entails opportunities – it is as if it urges one to create something out of it.* Chance and diversion from the original idea is something that I embrace today, as they can very well be the principles of creating just about everything. Materials themselves inspire and guide us through the creative process, but we also need to know our materials, and if we do that the possibilities are endless. As my friend and great ceramic artist, Michael Kline, recently said: *touching and forming the clay propagates ideas, not the other way around*. The work for this exhibition was developed following this notion; the more I worked and let clay guide me the more the forms changed and developed.

When I discovered Jun Kaneko the window of endless possibilities opened before my eyes. His large-scale sculptures immediately resonated within me, his abstract marks and use of color made total sense. He also works in small scale, one that has a very intricate relation with the way humans perceived ceramics ever since the first pots were created, focusing on the intimacy of the object. In my first explorations I wanted to throw big forms on the wheel; it was never about making giant pots for the sake of it, but rather it was about understanding clay when it's being pushed to its limits. Kaneko's ideas of scale and proportion were a turning point in my practice and my understanding of what I was trying to do. In the book *Jun Kaneko* by Susan Peterson he is quoted saying that "the concept of scale is based on relativity. If everything were the same size, there would be no concept of scale. It is because an object is not as big as another that we perceive it as small, and vice versa. Whether I am making a large or small piece, in the end I hope it will make sense to have that particular scale and form together and that it will give off enough visual energy to shake the air around it" (Peterson 112). Kaneko also talks about "spiritual power in the scale so it will overcome conventional scale." If I am pulled into the piece on a different sensorial level, if the viewer gets the same connection in a way that the scale becomes an afterthought, then that object will be as strong as it can be. This is what Kaneko aims for, and it became a goal for me. I might never get there but the considerations I put in my work are with the goal of reaching that level.

To understand my own scale, I went back to a source of inspiration when I unsuccessfully tried to study architecture, Le Corbusier and the ideas reflected in his seminal book, *The Modulor,* which describes a design standard based on the human form to determine the amount of living space that individuals should have to function. The book was also his way of dealing with differences between the metric and British or American systems. This has always been of interest to me - I come from a country that uses the metric system but I also had to utilize many tools and industry standards based on the British/American system. Because I had to learn both I am interested in how people can be completely at a loss for words when something is presented to them in a measuring system they are not used to, and how in some circumstances we try to explain measurements in an universally understandable manner, by using our body, the distance between our hands or arms, or the height from the floor to our waist or shoulders. Le Corbusier came up with a set of measurements based on the ideas of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man,* and others who used the human body as a proportional basis in architecture. When Le Corbusier used the golden ratio and the Fibonacci series some saw this as a humanistic expression. Others argued that it was the opposite - the standardization of the body. To me it goes back at the necessity of mankind to measure. I felt the necessity to create my vessels utilizing a scale that resonated with my intuitive sensibility. Through practice I found that my decisions were based entirely on the dimensions of my own body, specifically my

arms and hands, those being the tools I mostly use for making. If I told another person the exact amount of clay I use and the movements I employ to make a specific form, the finished work would be completely different from what they might have expected.

For the past two years I have also taken inspiration from modular synthesizers, electronic musical instruments that generate audio signals through different methods including subtractive synthesis, additive synthesis, and frequency modulation synthesis. I know that what attracts me to the work of Don Buchla, Robert Moog and Serge Tcherepnin, to mention a few of the icons that have created such amazing instruments and have put them in the hands of the world, is this idea of different parts that together can create an instrument that will make sounds by running electricity through it using cables to patch form one point to another, these patching points are circular shaped jacks that receive or produce voltage signals, something that can be measured but at the same time is completely organic and serendipitous. These are instruments that are made of industrially and sometimes mass-produced parts but that respond specifically to the individual connecting with them. A small change in the patching points can radically switch the whole sentiment of the sounds produced, and that allows for almost infinite creation possibilities. In the same way my work is meant to be visually connected, a patchwork of pieces that look similar but are completely

different, where the observers are free to look back and make their own interpretations based on their own life experiences and intuitive sensibility.

CONTENT INFLUENCES

I still remember the day I tried to get back to school and change my degree from architecture to industrial design. There was no way of revalidating any courses so I either had to keep on going with something that did not make me happy or go ahead and start all over from zero. I was lost and ready to just do nothing. That is when I called Irene, my professor in architecture, and in thirty seconds she changed my life. She was there to tell me, “just do what your heart tells you to do, but do something,” and so I did. I started over, finished my degree, kept on working at the university, got invited to a conference, met Piero Fenci, and came to SFA. I could expand on this forever, but to cut to the chase, this interaction made me completely change my path in life. I am always looking back at these moments, reflecting on how they happened and how I have moved forward. *In Hindsight: Nonvisible Patch Points* follows the same line of thought. When I see each vessel I can go back and pinpoint decisive moments that led to the formal qualities of my work and how it has evolved from what I was making when I first started my degree. As with many traditional ceramics my vessels clearly have anthropomorphic features - for centuries we have talked about pots having a foot, waist, belly, shoulder, neck, and lip; it is impossible to avoid such

references. To me, however, this group of pots are simply the result of a free exploration of clay as a material using the potter's wheel as my main tool. I still work following steps of the design process. I start with an idea and work until I consider an object a prototype. I then refine it until I am satisfied with its shape, volume, lines, balance, and negative space.

The only recognizable elements are circles, which to me are visual patch points like the ones embedded in modular synthesizers where you can create sound by moving electricity connecting cables from one point to another. In the past I have made marks, dots and buttons that visually connect the work together, and these visible circular shapes are my way of following the notion of closing or finishing a train of thought. New decisions will have to be made and new work will come as a result.

PROCESS

Each vessel is constructed with three sections thrown on the wheel which are then put together. Each section uses roughly 20 pounds of clay. The lids are thrown separately with about 4 pounds of clay.

Clay body

The clay used for this work is a cone 10 dark stoneware. I have worked with this clay body for two years; it is strong for functional ware, but it can withstand the structural stresses of large tall forms while being thrown on the wheel. The clay is designed to mature at 2350°F, but it can easily be used for sculptural work at low and mid-range temperatures, cones 04 and 6 (1958 – 2266 °F), respectively.

Val Cushing's dark stoneware

Goldart Stoneware Clay42.5%

Fireclay 42.5%

Ball Clay 10%

Custer Feldspar 5%

Grog 3% (of the total weight)

Building Process

The process starts with mixing the clay. I combine all the materials in a mixer, adding water and letting the clay body homogenize for about 20 minutes. Once it is at the desired consistency for throwing, I run the clay through the pugmill which aids in de-airing and helps develop plasticity. I thoroughly wedge my clay before starting using about 70 pounds per vessel.

It has been through experience that I came up with the right amount of clay needed for each section. The clay comes out of the pugmill in a cylindrical shape that is 3.5 inches in diameter. I chop it off in lengths that are roughly the distance from my elbow to the end of my hand in a closed fist posture, I simply call this length a *bar* (see fig. 1).

Fig 1. Bar

The base of the vessels is the most difficult and important part to get right as it serves as the support for the whole weight of the work. The base of each vessel is narrow in diameter (about 5 inches), and it ends up at the top having opened to about 16 inches in width. I use two clay bars to throw this section and the height and width are about one bar each (see fig. 2).

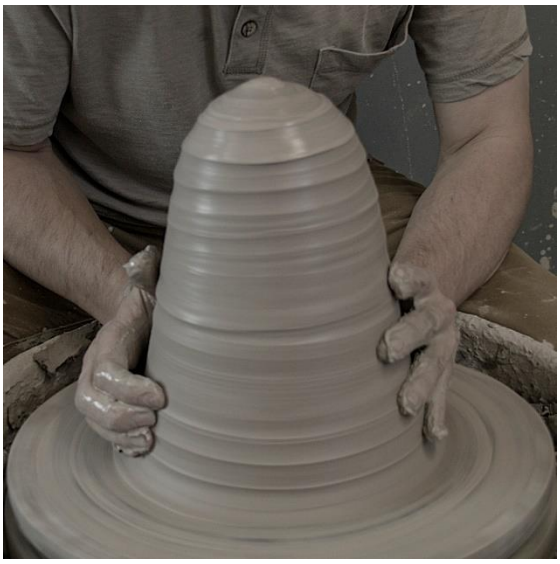

Fig. 2 Throwing the base

The second section will form the *belly* of the vessel, and again I use two bars. I start by throwing a donut on the wheel and then I pull the wall up. The main concern here is not getting to a specific height but to keep an even thickness throughout the section, around half an inch.

Once I have thrown the two sections I use a torch to dry and firm up the clay (see fig. 3). The unevenness of the studio climate can dry some parts faster, hindering my ability to attach the sections. The opposite can also happen where clay does not dry at all, forcing me to wait one or two days to proceed. The torch allows me to keep on working by bringing the clay to the right consistency in minutes so I can then attach the two sections by scoring and flipping one on top of the other (see fig. 4). Once attached I work on the joint and the curvilinear quality of the connection; if I do not do a good job at getting it right it will be almost impossible for me to fix it later in the process.

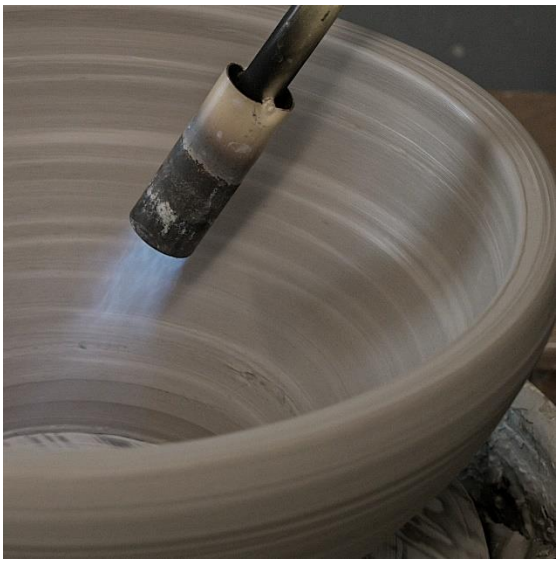

Fig. 3 Torching section 2

Fig. 4 Attaching sections

The third section is the *head,* which is thrown with one and a half bars. Again, my main concern is to get the form right - I am looking for a continuous curve without breaking points from top to bottom. I then proceed in the same way to attach the third section (see fig. 5)

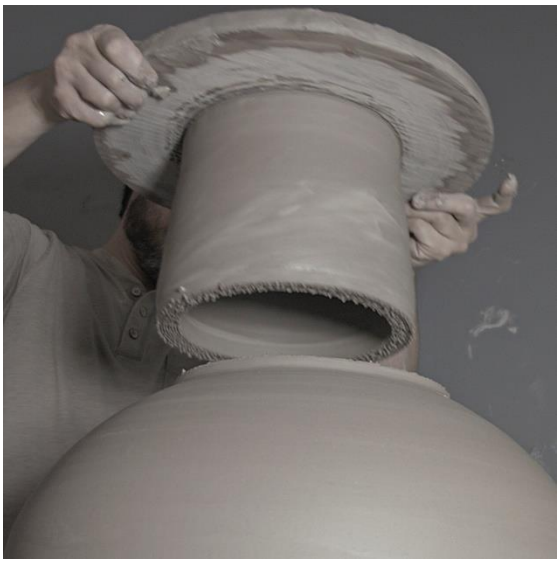

Fig. 5 Attaching head section

The final part is the lid which I make using half a bar. This is the highest point in the vessel, and with it I mimic the curves of the main body of the piece to give continuity and create an aesthetic ending to the work of art. The lid is then torched and trimmed to fit properly (see fig. 6).

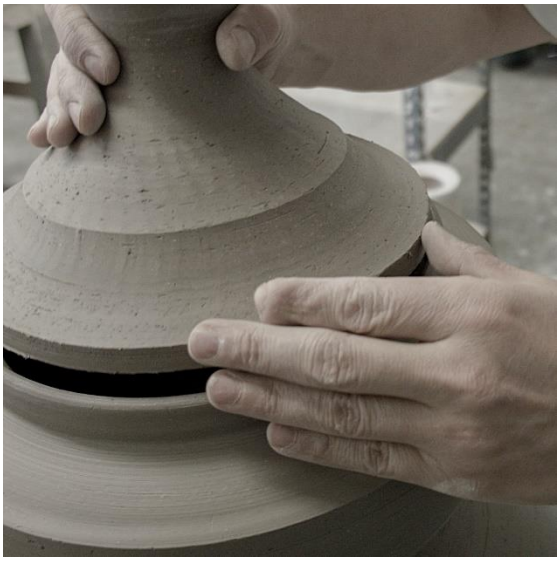

Fig. 6 Fitting the lid

Once a piece is completed (see fig. 7), I dedicate a lot of time to trimming. This achieves two things - first, I am able to get rid of excess weight, and second, I can make sure that the form, curves, and negative space are just right with no visual interruptions along the surface (see fig. 8)

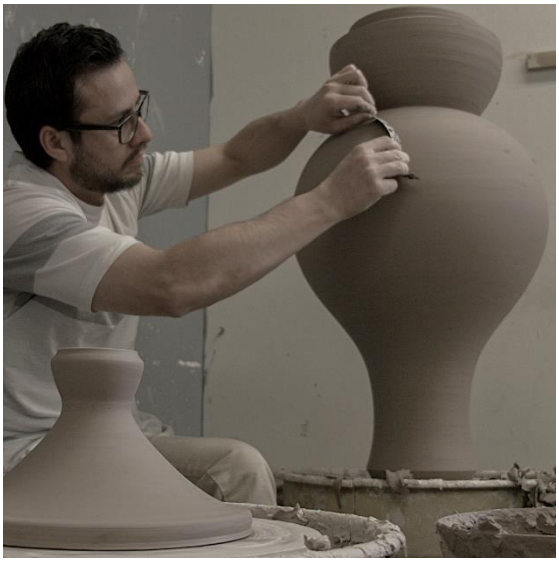

Fig. 7 Finished body

Fig. 8 Trimming

Surface treatment

The preservation of the marks and the color they are made of is key for the work to come alive. The clay body I use fires to a dark walnut-like color that can visually overwhelm anything on its surface. To help with this I apply a coat of white slip to create a lighter toned surface on some of the pieces (see fig. 9), and on others I apply a mix of Amaco underglazes not only as a base layer but for brush marks as well (see fig. 10).

Fig. 9 Pouring white slip

Fig.10 Brush marks

The appearance of the work will change dramatically throughout the process; when it has reached the leather hard stage the surface looks semi satin, and the colors are bright and vibrant. Once it has dried, the surface and colors turn matte and flat, and the work continues to look pretty much that way after the first firing (bisque) at 1958°F (see fig. 11).

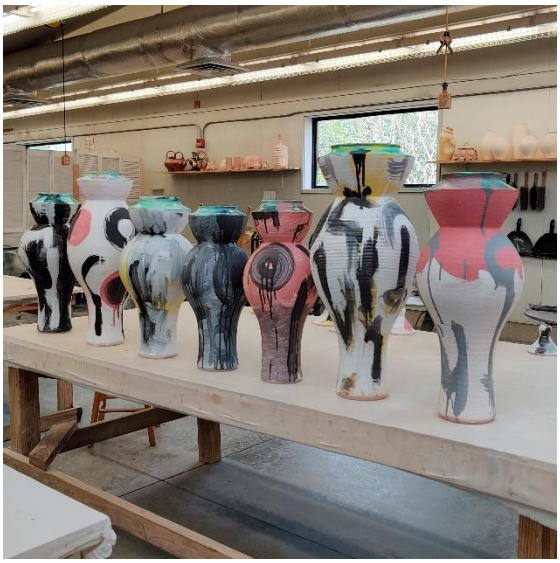

Fig. 13 Work after bisque fire

Firing Process

After a year of experimentation, I decided to soda fire the work for this exhibition, working at mid-range temperature, cone 6 (2266°F), allowing for the color to contrast with the dark clay surface. In this technique a solution of soda ash is introduced in the kiln at peak temperature. The soda vapors travel alongside the flames around the kiln chamber fluxing the surface of the vessels and creating a glass-like surface without using any glazes. This references a tradition of functional pottery making which started in Germany and England hundreds of years ago. Although my work is not meant to be functional, I work very much following the steps and techniques used by traditional potters all around the world.

THE WORK

In Hindsight: Non-Visible Patch Points is an exhibition of seven vessels which are the result of a personal exploration with the ideas of balance, space, form, and connection. During my time at SFA I have made dozens of ceramic objects, some more successful than others. It is common for me to not be completely satisfied with an object after hours of work, often I find most of the joy in the making process than in the final result. This group of vessels are a strong ending for this journey; each one of them has powerful qualities that make them unique and help me visualize exactly how they came to exist. The strength of the exhibition is them being together, making a linear map in my head about the experience I have gotten from graduate school, creating connections that will remain with me and that will help define what is next in my future.

At the Darkest Hour

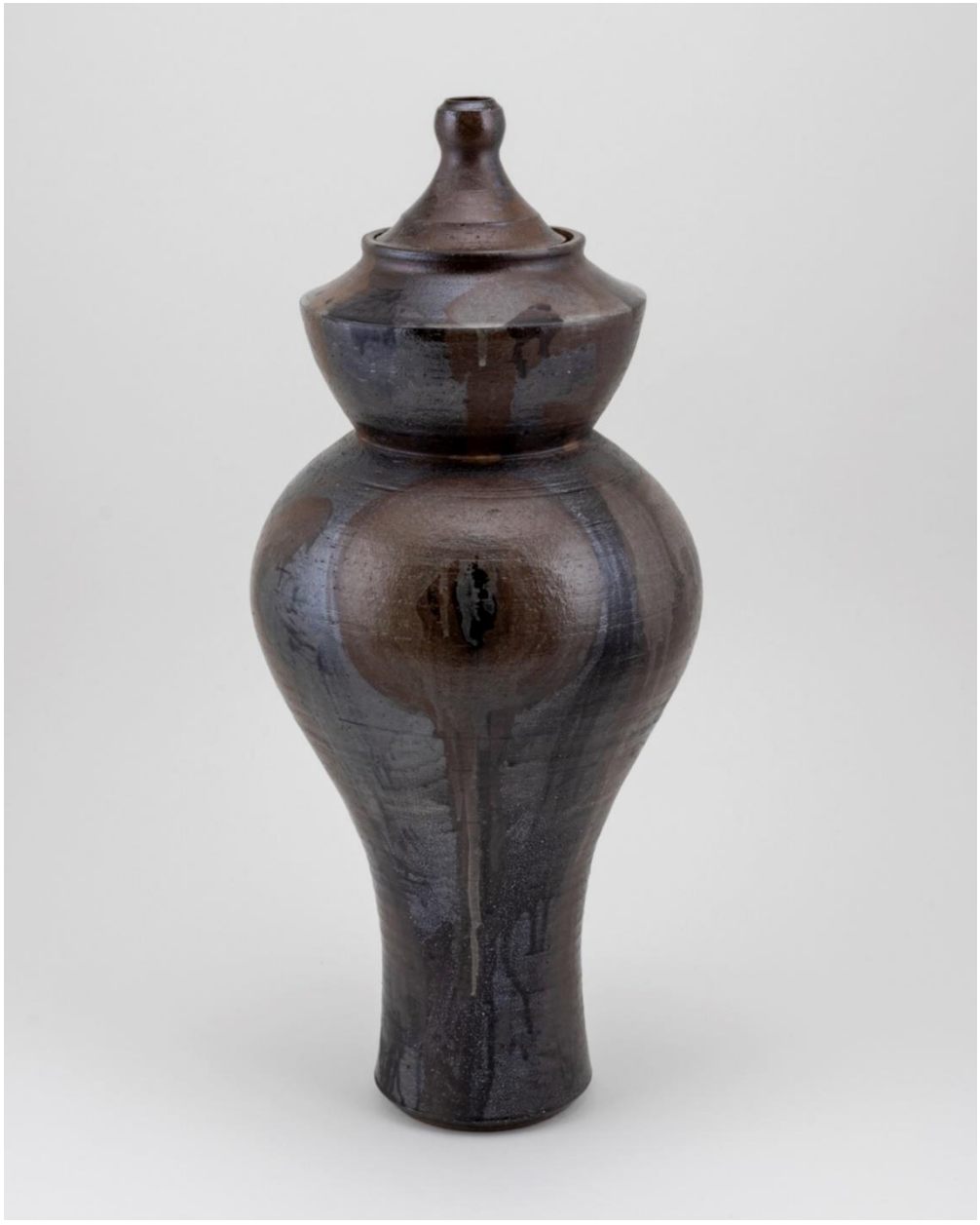

Fig. 11. Cone six soda fired, 25 x 11 x 11 inches, 2020

Dreaming About Green Swirls

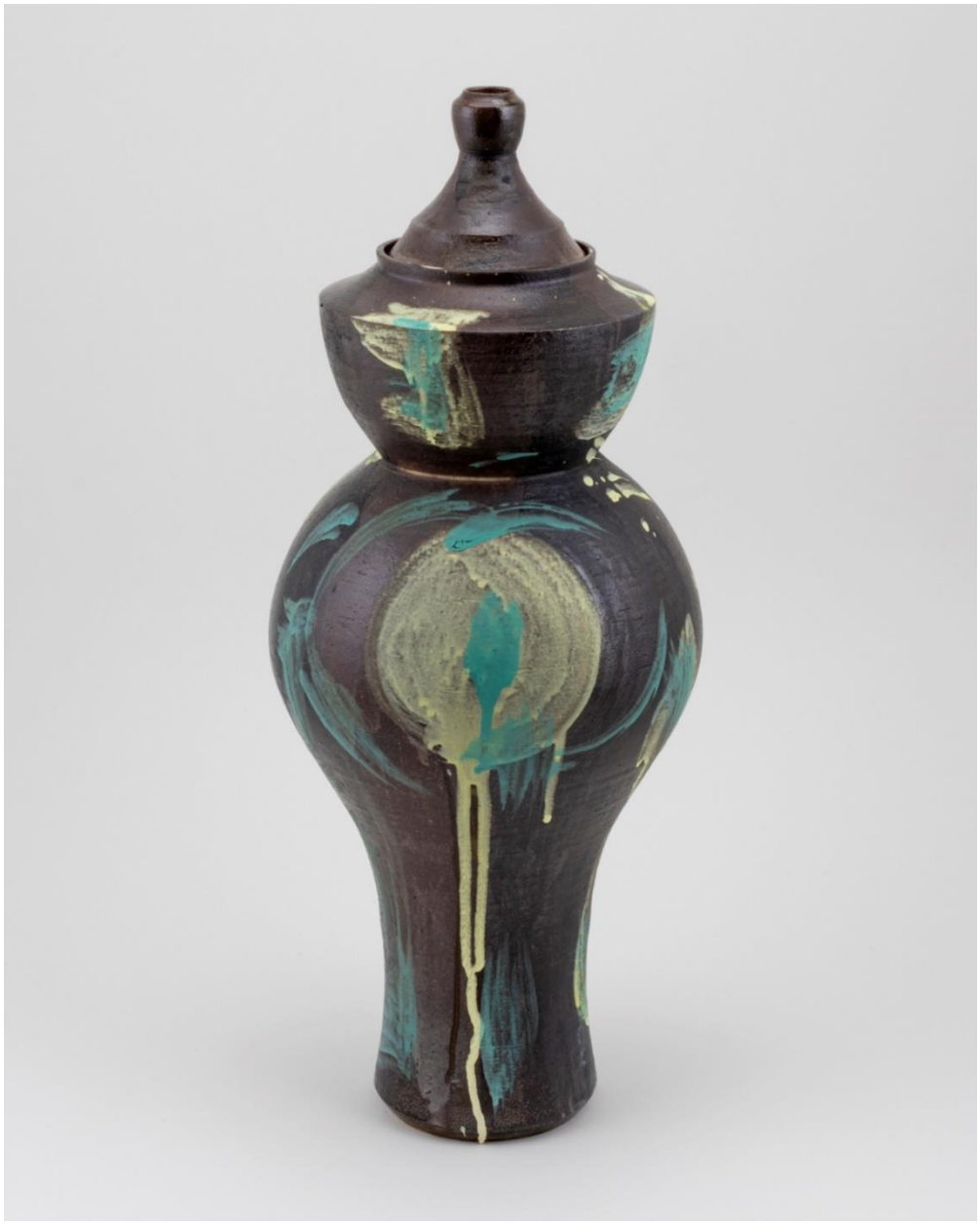

Fig. 12. Cone six soda fired, 24 x 10 x 10 inches, 2020

In Memory of RED

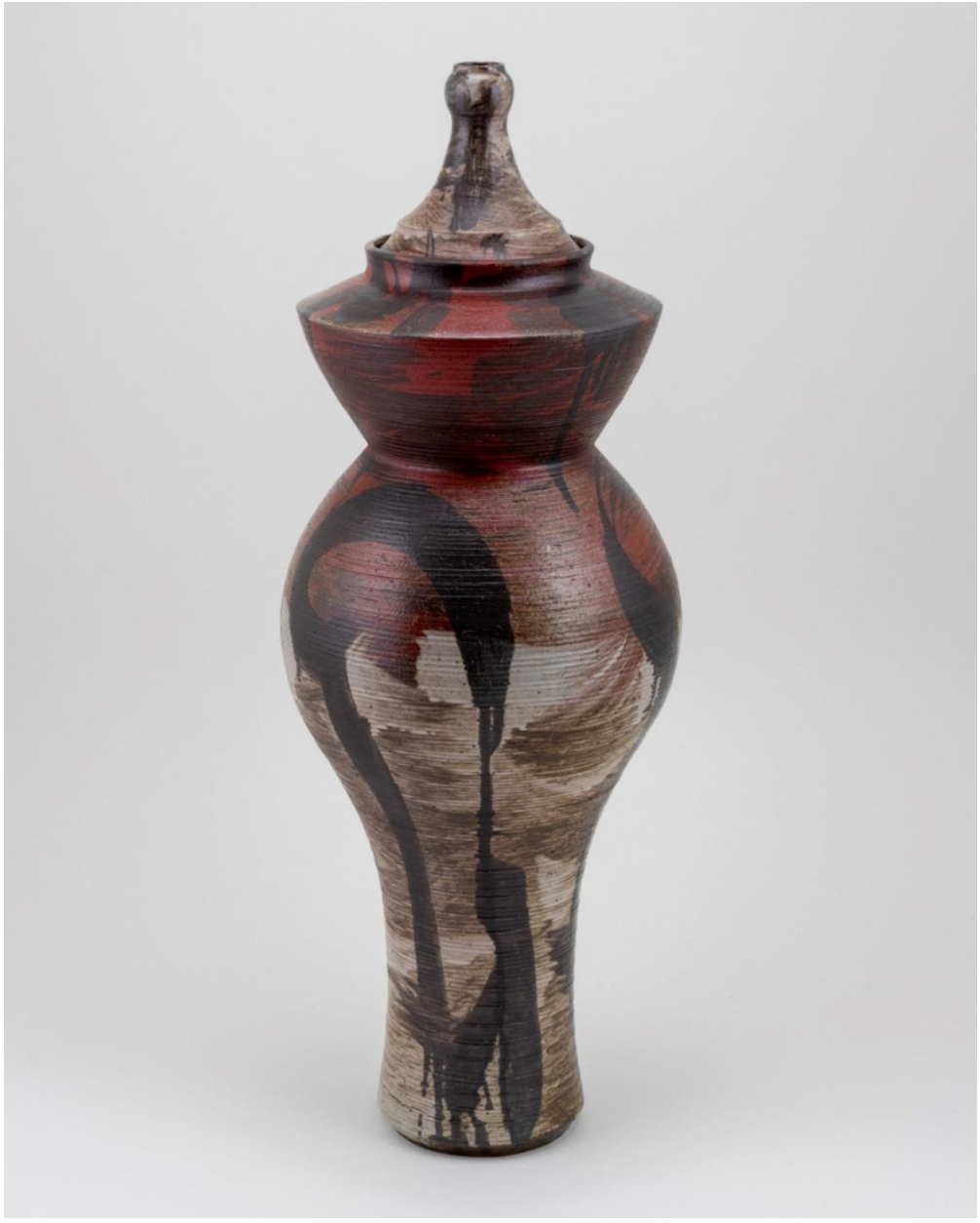

Fig. 13. Cone six soda fired, 27 x 9 x 9 inches, 2020

Dreams from October 2039

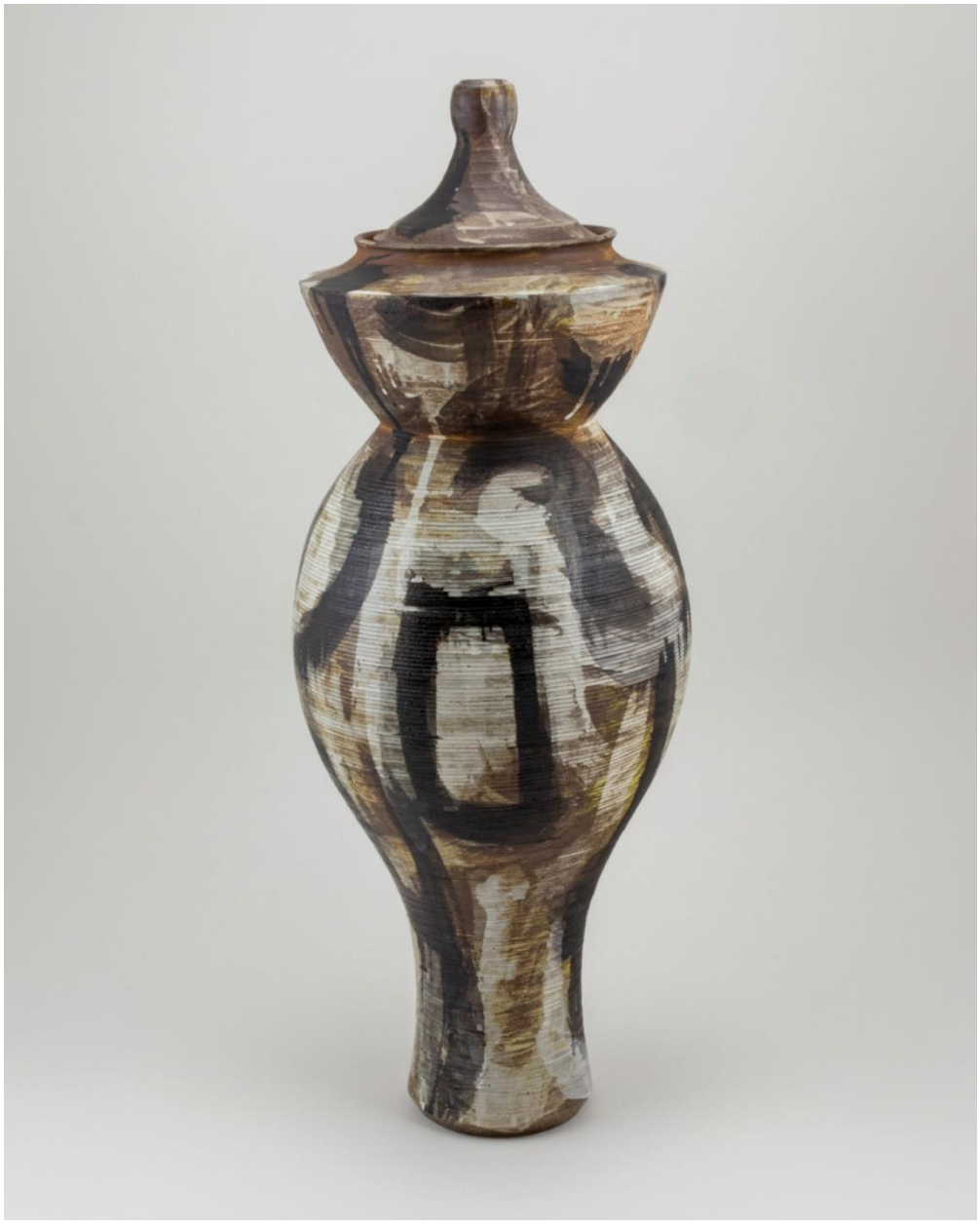

Fig. 14. Cone six soda fired, 31 x 12 x 12 inches, 2020

Attenuverter

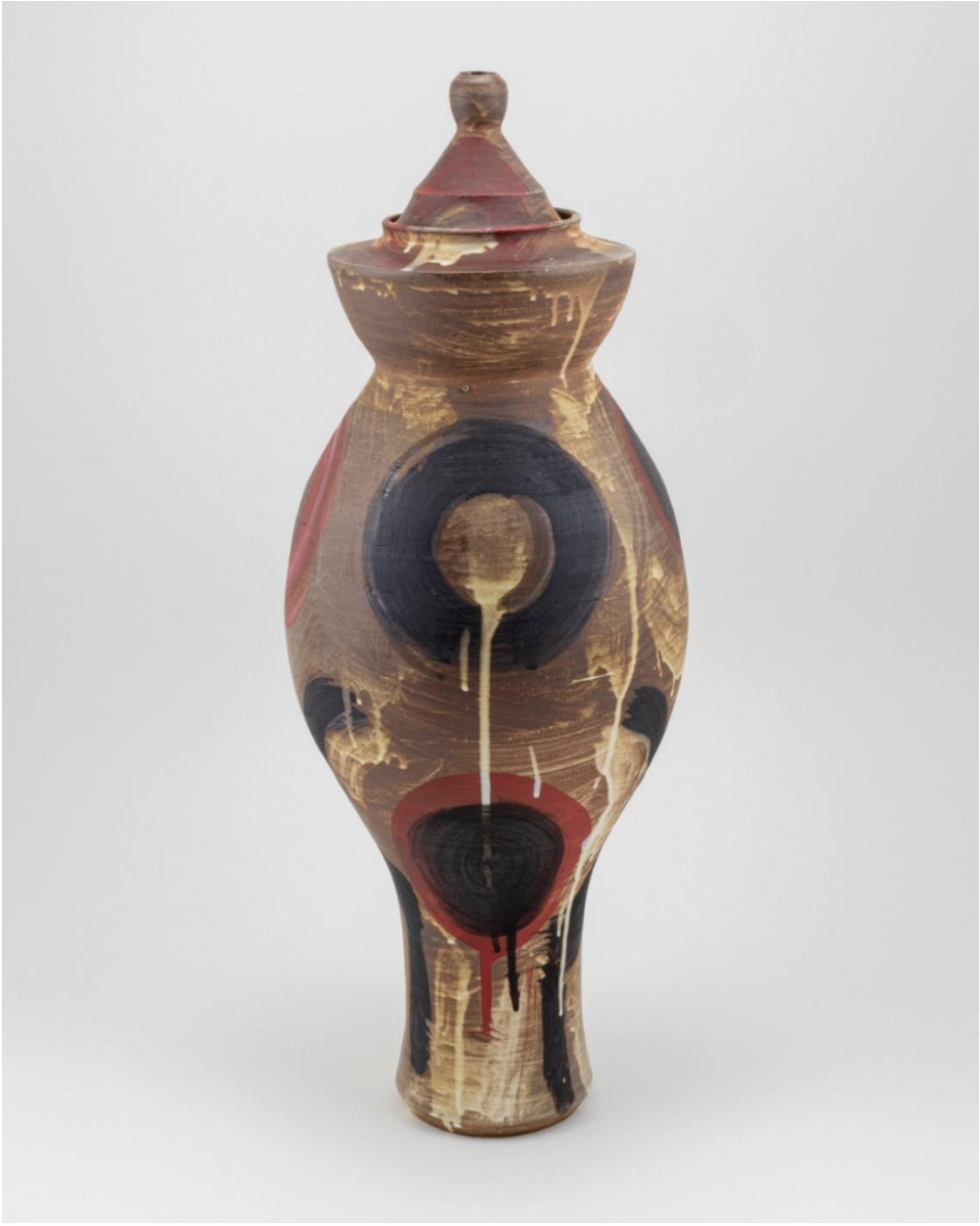

Fig. 15. Cone six soda fired, 28 x 11 x 11 inches, 2020

Yellow Melting Heart

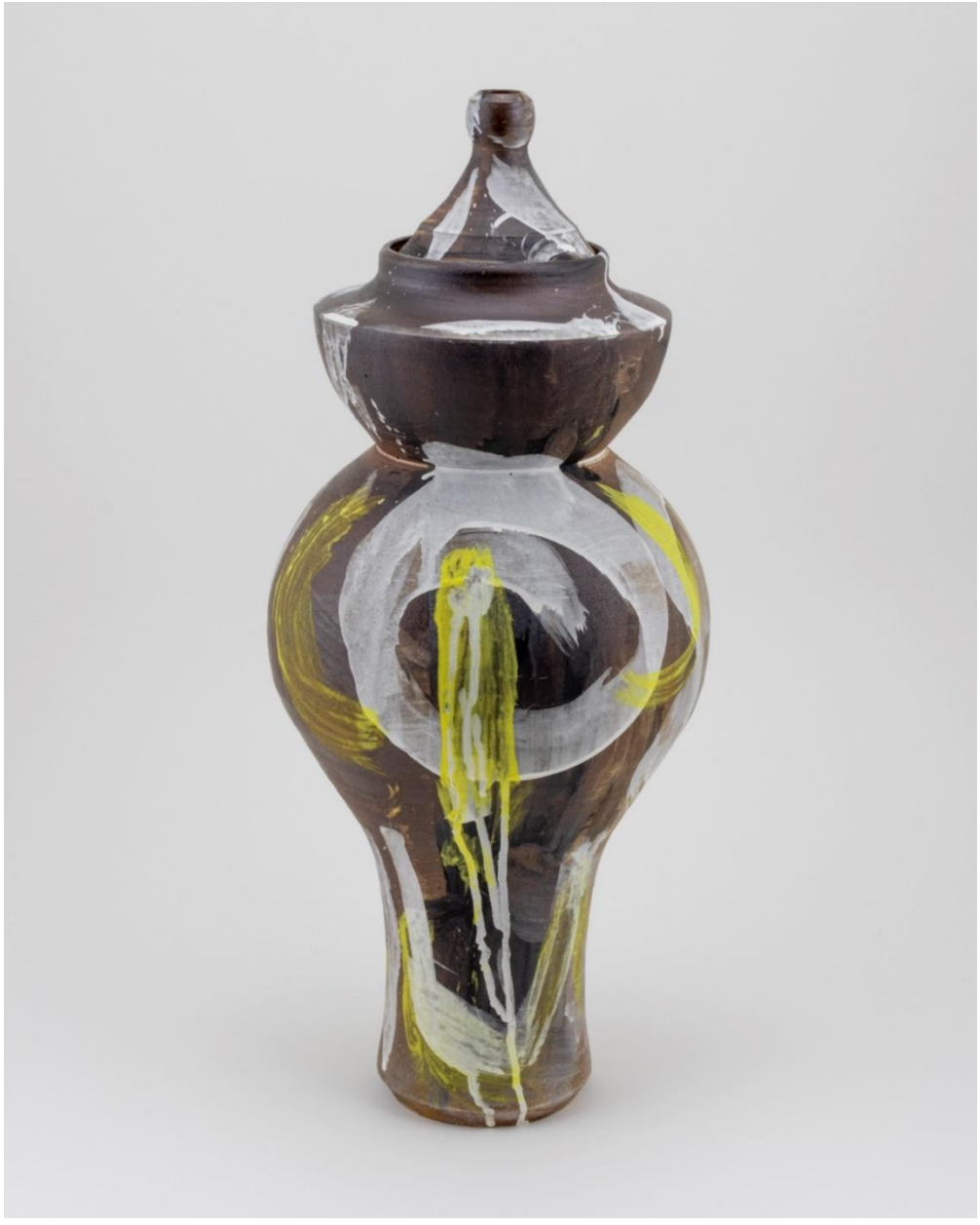

Fig. 16. Cone six soda fired, 25 x 11 x 11 inches, 2020

Black Atoms

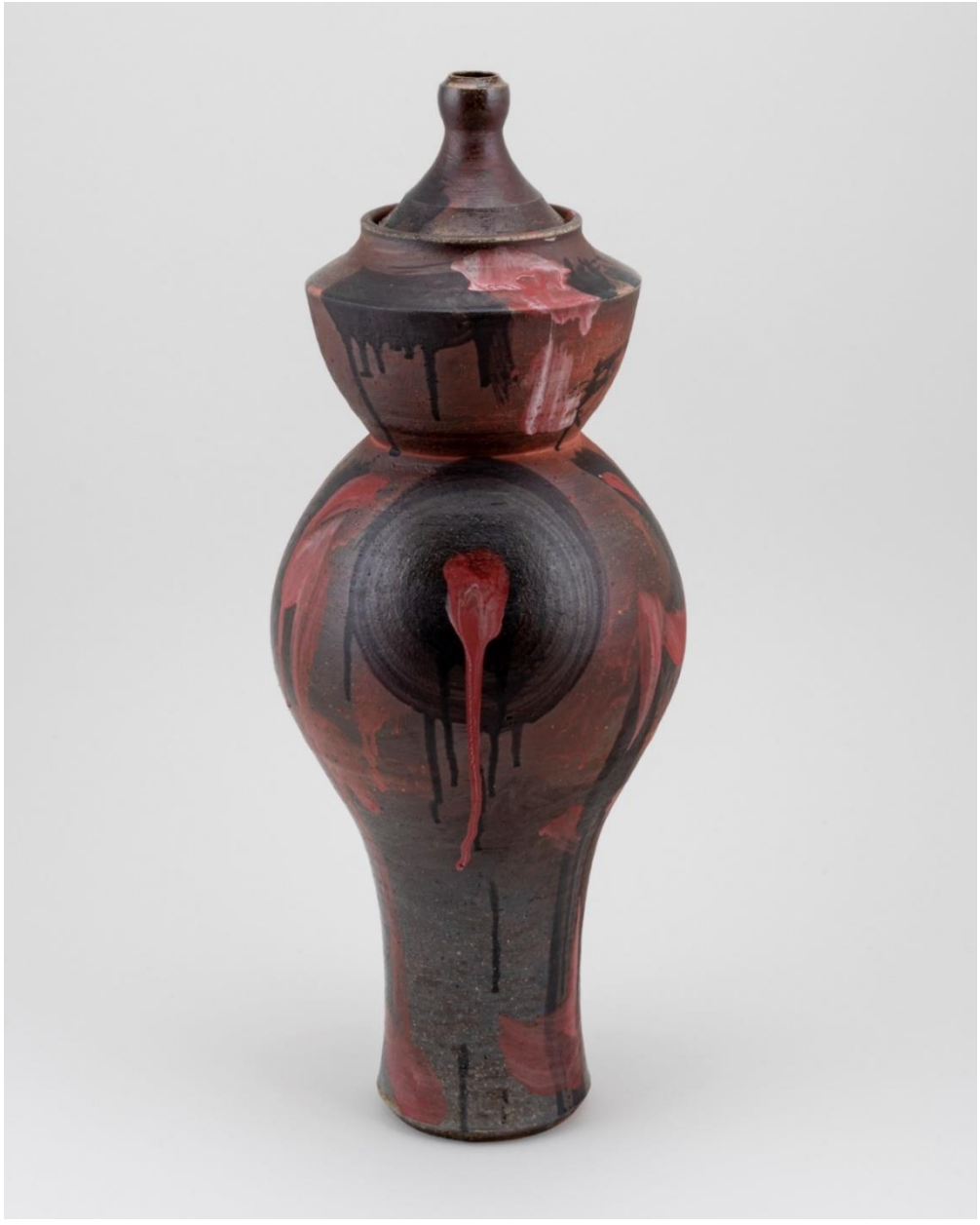

Fig. 17. Cone six soda fired, 24 x 9 x 9 inches, 2020

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VITA

Erik Ordaz Lozano was born in Mexico City, Mexico, October 9, 1979. After two unsuccessful attempts at studying Engineering and Architecture he earned a bachelor's degree in Industrial Design in 2015. He continued to work as a research assistant at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana while training himself on the potter's wheel and in ceramic production techniques. In 2017 Erik was accepted into the Stephen F. Austin Graduate Program pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree. While at SFASU he served as a graduate assistant for three years and taught courses in 3D design, and both intro and advanced ceramics as a teacher of record. As a student he maintained an active exhibition record including invitational and juried shows in the United States and Mexico. Erik attended the Penland Winter Residency for two years in a row, and that experience was instrumental in the work produced for his final exhibition. He was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree in May 2020.

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MLA Style Manual

This thesis was typed by Erik Ordaz Lozano