

## The Ceramic Work of Sterling Ruby – Notes from a Ceramic Archaeologist

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The recovery and recycling of materials represents an important element in Sterling Ruby's work across several different media. In his ceramic work this takes the form of the recovery of fragments of pieces that either cracked or ruptured during firing and their incorporation into new works, as evidenced in several of the pieces in his *Basin Theology* series that are included in this exhibition. Ruby says that this practice renders these works "an autobiographical excavation, my own archaeology."

I am a Roman archaeologist with a research interests in ceramic technology and artifact life history, particularly as this relates to pottery. I currently direct one research project at Pompeii and another at Rome that focus on Roman pottery, and have also done a great deal of ethnographic work with traditional potters in Italy since the 1980s. (Readers interested in knowing about my research can visit *RES ROMANAE*, the website of my research lab, the University of California, Berkeley Roman Material Culture Laboratory, at <http://resromanae.berkeley.edu/>.) Jeff Fleming, the curator of this exhibition, thought that I might be able to offer some interesting perspectives on recycling practices in Ruby's ceramic work by considering these in relation to similar practices in the Roman world, and invited me to contribute a short essay along these lines to the catalog. In order to gain some insight into the artist and his ceramic work I met with Ruby at his Vernon, California studio compound in June, 2017, and he and I spent a couple of hours together discussing his approach to his ceramic work while examining both some of his finished pieces and an assortment of the fragments of failed pieces that he uses in his constructions.

Ruby works mainly with two types of ceramic paste, a buff sculpture clay (composed of 50 percent California clay and 50 percent Tennessee clay with grog) and a red sculpture clay (composed of 60 percent California clay and 40 percent Tennessee clay and grog), made with clays obtained from the Laguna Clay Company. Most of his works are relatively heavy walled, and built using traditional hand forming techniques, principally slab building. He fires these in an L&L KILNS Model CB648472 Electric Car Kiln. Although Ruby allows newly formed works to dry for a protracted period of time prior to firing and observes the regular protocols in the execution of the bisque firing (that is, the initial firing of the still-unglazed piece, which is then glazed and fired a second time in the so-called glost firing), he finds that during this phase of the production process he loses a significant number of pieces due to the cracking that results from the shrinkage of the ceramic body or explosion caused by the vaporizing of residual pore water. (fig.1) Rather than writing these works off as losses and simply discarding the fragments, Ruby found himself gathering up the pieces that were the result of these mishaps and putting them away in storage at his studio. He eventually had the realization that, despite the failure of these pieces, their fragments represented interesting and useful creative statements, and he began to incorporate them into new ceramic works.

Although Roman potters worked within a substantially different set of technological constraints than those that Ruby faces, there are still significant points of similarity between the challenges that they faced in their work and those that lie behind Ruby's practice of recycling ceramic fragments. Roman potters employed clays that yielded an earthenware ceramic body and fired the vessels that they formed using simple updraft kilns generally set out in the open, employing wood, chaff, the prunings of fruit trees, dung, and/or pomace (olive pressings) for fuel. They made little to no use of true glazes, employing slips to surface their creations, and firing could thus be accomplished as a one-step operation that would have lasted anywhere from a single day to as long as a week, depending upon circumstances. It was a far riskier process than it is for contemporary ceramic artists, as there was some chance that the wind might pick up or that it might start to rain at some point during the operation. It was difficult even in the absence of such occurrences to hit and hold the desired soaking (maximum firing) temperature for the requisite amount of time, and it was a challenge to insure that the heated gas produced by the combustion of the fuel circulated within the kiln's firing chamber in a uniform fashion. Finally, there was some risk that the stresses to which the kiln was subjected in the firing process might cause it to collapse, ruining most or all of its load. On account of these factors wastage must have been substantial, with ethnographic analogs suggesting a regular loss rate during firing on the order of ca. 10-20 percent. In recent centuries traditional potters in Italy have sought to contain the risks involved in firing by seeking divine intervention, building a small shrine to Sant' Antonio Abbate (Saint Anthony the Abbot) - the patron saint of fire and thus, by extension, of potters - adjacent to the kiln, and invoking his assistance. In Roman times we know that potters sometimes sought protection of this kind by attaching to the kiln or carrying on their person a good luck charm in the form of an erect phallus.

When excavated, Roman pottery workshops often prove to contain sizable heaps of production refuse, including kiln ash, fragments of collapsed kiln structure, ruined kiln furniture (the props and other items employed to set stacks of pottery inside a kiln for firing), and waster pottery. This last normally includes not just fragments of vessels that cracked or exploded during firing, as occurs with Ruby's works, but also fragments of vessels that were either underfired, leaving them too soft and friable for use, or overfired to the point of bloating, blistering, warping, or collapse, generally accompanied by the reduction of the body to a dark gray or greenish gray color. We typically find waster pottery dumped into disused features on the workshop premises, such as clay extraction pits, clay mixing basins, and kilns, and employed as filler in the construction of new kilns. Waster pottery was also sometimes ground to roughly millimeter size and added to potting clay as grog, thereby recycled for the manufacture of new pottery. By carefully collecting and analyzing the waster pottery recovered at a workshop site archaeologists are able to shed light on a variety of topics, including the array of wares and vessel forms turned out by the workshop, the raw materials and manufacturing techniques that the potters employed, and the dates of the establishment's operation.

Perhaps the closest Roman analog to the kind of failure that Ruby encounters in the firing of his works occurred in connection with the manufacture of *dolia* (singular *dolium*), the

massive jars that the Romans used for the storage of wine, olive oil, grain, and other substances. These vessels were truly gigantic, with capacities ranging up to ca. 1200 liters and a girth approaching 1.5 m. They were often set into the ground in a warehouse or a farm villa, with just the vessel's shoulder, neck, and rim exposed. Highly similar storage jars remain in use today in many parts of what was once the Roman world, including the *tinajas* of Spain, the *orci* or *ziri* of Italy, the *pithoi* of Greece, and the *kvevri* of Armenia. *Dolia* were too large to throw on a potter's wheel, and were formed on a turntable by the coiling and slab building techniques. Their walls were exceedingly thick, ranging between 3 and 7 cm across, and for this reason *dolia* were subject to considerable stresses during both the drying and firing phases of manufacture, often resulting in the formation of sizable cracks that ran right through the vessel wall. This phenomenon frequently took the form of coil fracture – regular horizontal cracks that run along the joint between two adjacent coils – and dunting cracks – vertical cracks running downward from the vessel's rim that form when the more exposed rim area shrinks at a faster rate than the rest of the vessel either as it dries after forming or as it cools after firing. It is not uncommon to find *dolia* with cracks of these kinds that have been repaired by the introduction of lead filler into the fissure, sometimes supplemented by the insertion of a row of lead staples or clamps that straddled the crack in an attempt to brace the damaged vessel. (fig. 2) These repairs were apparently made immediately after firing and represented the final phase of the manufacturing process. Fragments of *dolia* that failed during firing in such a way as to render them beyond repair were repurposed for a variety of applications beyond the workshop, e.g., a fragment preserving the base and lower wall might be employed as a basin, while one preserving the rim, neck, and shoulder might be used as a light well. In one instance at Pompeii a fragment preserving one side of a vessel appears to have been utilized as a dog house.

For basic technical reasons it was not possible for Roman potters to adopt recycling practices akin to Ruby's. Since for the Romans firing was a one-step operation, if a piece cracked or exploded during firing that was effectively the end of the road so far as it was concerned. While it is true that, as noted above, Roman potters did sometimes grind up waster pottery for use as grog in the manufacture of new vessels, this practice had no visible consequences in the finished work, and thus differed in a very fundamental way from Ruby's incorporation of large, readily identifiable fragments in his creations. But perhaps this is the wrong way to be thinking about the matter. I would propose that there is a point of intersection if we regard Ruby's works that incorporate recycled ceramic fragments not as the equivalent of a Roman pot, but rather as the equivalent in microcosm of a Roman pottery workshop. As is the case with an excavated pottery workshop, the attentive reading of these works by a viewer alive to the stories that these recycled fragments have to tell can provide insights - if only partial and imperfect ones - into the history and scope of Ruby's past creative efforts. In this sense, Ruby is entirely justified in his claim that these works represent "his own archaeology."

In visits that I have made to art museums and art galleries over the past two to three years I have seen that Ruby is not alone among contemporary artists in his appreciation of the value of failed ceramics. For instance, Jean Shin, a Korean-American artist based in Brooklyn, collected large volumes of waster celadon ware from pottery workshops in

South Korea and has used these fragments to create large-scale mosaic installations, such as her *Celadon Remnants* (2008; LIRR Broadway Station, Queens, NY) and *Celadon Landscape* (2015; Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, TX). Emily Sudd, an American artist based in Los Angeles, deliberately subjects elaborate arrangements of ornate ceramic pieces to catastrophic over-firing, producing disturbing, Dali-esque tableau of distortion and collapse, as in her *Bridget's Cake*, *Carousel*, and *Shelving Unit* (all 2013). Ruby's approach, of course, differs from these, in that he is recycling his own accidentally ruined pieces, reinserting them into his ongoing creative effort. In doing this he is coming to grips in his own novel way with the challenges of failure that people who create in clay have been confronting in one way or another for millennia.

## FIGURES

Figure 1: Fragments of works that fractured during firing on table with tools and finished works. Sterling Ruby Studio, Vernon, California, June 16, 2017.



Figure 2: *Dolium* with dunting crack repaired with lead filler and two lead clamps. Second century AD. Caseggiato dei Doli, Ostia Antica, Italy.

