

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Studio Visit with an Artist Who Is No Longer a Secret Ceramicist

by John Yau



*Joanne Greenbaum's ceramics and paintings in her studio
(all images courtesy Joanne Greenbaum)*

Even though you can no longer drop into Weiser's Bookshop to browse through the shelves, looking for a book on Aleister Crowley, John Dee or Dion Fortune, in New York you can still learn almost anything you want to know.

For many artists, the Art Students League, started in 1875, has been an important resource for self-directed study. Ai Weiwei, Lee Bontecou, Thomas Eakins, Helen Frankenthaler, Maurice Sendak and Cy Twombly either taught or studied there.

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Charles Simic has written about how important the reading room of the New York Public Library was to his development as a poet. Generations of young writers have taken classes at the St. Mark's Poetry Project on the Lower East Side, where they studied with — depending on when they took classes — Bill Zavatsky, Tony Towle, Bernadette Mayer or Lisa Jarnot.

In the early 1990s, the photographer Marco Breuer spent a lot time in the Museum of Modern Art print room; he also made an independent study of papermaking, bookbinding and printmaking.

Joanne Greenbaum is a recent example of someone who has taken full advantage of what New York has to offer. Already an established abstract painter, in 2003, she began making very tiny sculptures out of Sculpey. In 2004, she enrolled in a ceramics class at Greenwich House. This gave her access to materials and a kiln. She has been going there regularly ever since. (Although Joanne never says anything about this, I suspect that she has inspired other artists to go there as well).



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Joanne tells me that she didn't want to learn the right way to make ceramics. This makes sense, as I suspect that she would have needed to unlearn everything after she learned it.

For her, ceramics has the feel of drawing, a three-dimensional drawing. It is structural and elemental. She often works with pottery's basic shapes — coils and slabs — but she isn't interested in making vessels. She wants to move the basic shapes into something more freeform, rather than what is expected. When she works with porcelain, which has no grog and therefore no memory, she needs to make something quickly; the material demands it. But, while the porcelain might not have memory, our muscles do. Ask any dancer.

The teacher has no idea what's going on. The other students in her class are puzzled by what she is up to, which isn't surprising.

On a large table filled with ceramic pieces, I see vase-like shapes, base-like shapes and curled/coiled lines and slabs. None of them look "right." Which, if you think about it, immediately raises important questions about why something should or shouldn't look right. Robert Creeley titled an essay after a question he was once asked, "Was That a Real Poem or Did You Just Make It Up Yourself?" He wasn't kidding.

Greenbaum's interest in structure suggests a change in her thinking, though perhaps I am overstating the case. I remember Kathy Bradford talking eloquently about the first paintings that Joanne showed in New York in the mid-90s, how they all seemed to have started with the artist making a line. For Kathy it was a revelation that a painting could be started this way

Someday someone will organize a survey of abstract ceramic sculpture. It will not matter how funky, misshapen or downright weird any sculpture is, as long as there are no vessels or figures in the exhibition.

The show would include work by:

Joanne Greenbaum
Mary Heilmann
Norbert Prangenberg
Ken Price
Joyce Robins

This list is by no means comprehensive. I offer it simply as a starting point.

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The first view I had of Greenbaum's ceramic sculptures was in her monograph, *Joanne Greenbaum: Painting*, edited by Dorothea Strauss and Susanne Titz (Hatje Cantz, 2008). It was published on the occasion of her exhibition at Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich (March 6–May 4, 2008), which later traveled to the Städtisches Museum Abeitag Monchengladbach in Germany (June 15–August 24, 2008).

(Like a number of American abstract artists, Greenbaum is better known in Europe than in America, which is to say that she has had a traveling museum exhibition, but hasn't had something comparable happen here.)

It was a black-and white image with the caption, "Ceramics by Joanne Greenbaum, 2006." The minute I saw the image I knew that I was going to have to arrange a visit to Joanne's studio.

I believe that if you like an artist's work, you should try and see examples from all the mediums the artist works in.

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(Thomas Nozkowski's drawings are a revelation, as are Norman Bluhm's works on paper, dating to the late 1940s. Their drawings were not included in the group donated to the Museum of Modern Art by the Judith Rothschild Foundation. Conformist thinking is more endemic than you think.)



Joanne Greenbaum's ceramics in her studio

If mechanical reproduction and appropriation are the only games in town, as any number of museum curators have crowed, Greenbaum's decision to work in ceramics signals, in the larger context, a refusal to fit into the narrative that discounts the hand or believes in the hierarchal view that elevates Conceptual Art over the handmade or deems that being painter precludes being conceptual. (Doesn't this view of the mind over the body discount choreographers and dancers altogether?)

I openly admit my bias — I am interested in artists who resist aligning their work with master narratives, which are, in my view, a form of subjugation.

As Bradford's observation about Greenbaum's early paintings suggests, she has always been an artist who goes her own way. She doesn't belong to a club. (As far

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as I can tell, clubs are the gathering of the many for the climbing of the very few. This is one reason why I left the *Brooklyn Rail*).

The layering and structuring going on in Greenbaum's current paintings are swayed by her exploration of ceramics. I see her interest in glazes, and her impulse to use them in unconventional ways. This influences her palette, leading her to juxtapositions of different groupings of color within the same painting.

At the same time, let me be clear, the ceramics are not a subsidiary of the paintings — they stand on their own. In their folds and bends, and in the way the different colored glazes might run down uneven surfaces, something particular happens, something that Greenbaum got to happen.

The multifaceted strata in Greenbaum's paintings evoke systems, skeletal structures, circuitry, and diagrams. There are lines, bands, geometric order and freehand disorder. They remind us that a painting is first and foremost a construction, something built out of paint. (About this, she and Dana Schutz would agree). And yet, however much we see of it, something remains hidden and even remote. In this

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regard, Greenbaum's paintings and ceramics can be understood as analogues for the quest for self-knowledge. That hardly seems a subject about which everything has been discovered.

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