Karen Karnes, Retrospectively

At Black Mountain 1953 Photo Edward L Dupuy Jr

There is a remarkable paradox about Karen Karnes She is both one of America's best known ceramists here and abroad, and, arguably, its least understood. I say this not in search of sympathy but for the sake of accuracy When you speak of Karnes, even to some of her most enthusiastic supporters, she tends to be pegged as a traditionalist Being a traditional potter is a perfectly wonderful pursuit, it is just that this does not apply in this case Traditionalists tend to be at odds with Modernism and skeptical of their contemporary society Their work is often linked to a specific period in the history of their medium that they reinterpret They are not known for experiment and risk Their forms and glazes change little, if at all None of these parameters fit the art of Karnes

She has never belonged to the Anglo-Oriental school of Leach and his followers who dominate traditional pottery here, in Britain and in the Commonwealth But, at the same time, one can see how a superficial reading of Karnes can result in her being mislabeled She is an ardent supporter of the traditionalist potters based on her shared passion with this group of functionalism She continues to make utilitarian wares as well as "art" pots She prefers a rural work setting although she is a native of New York and still loves and is at home in the city, visiting regularly for cultural sustenance Also, she uses traditional techniques from salt-glazing to Wood-Firing which are linked to a more conservative approach to the medium. But this is judging the route she has taken to her kiln, not what she takes out at the end of a firing

If Karnes is a traditionalist then her tradition is that of Modernism itself This is the milieu in which she learned her craft from the outset. She refined her knowledge of design in Italy at the beginning of the 1950's when this country was taking the international lead. She developed her critical understanding of art around John Cage and Merce Cunningham She was never your cookie-cutter version of the country potter; but through her involvement with the communities at Black Mountain College and Gatehill College in Stony Point, NY, she brought a sophistication to the potter's studio, informed, eloquent and inquiring

She did not study ceramics at one of the more usual venues but came to clay in the context of design at the New Jersey College of Industrial Art in Newark. She arrived in 1948, at 23 years old, and ended up in the ceramics department where she fell in love both

with ceramics and with the ceramics instructor, David Weinrib, whom she later married, and had one son, Abel Her first pots (one is illustrated in this catalog) were linked to a style of biomorphism popular in art and design in the 1940's It could be found in the work of Isamu Noguchi, Charles Eames, Joan Miró and others They stood with comfort and élan on the kidney shaped tables that were so definitive of the period The term used for this asymmetrical organic aesthetic was "free-form" and she explored it, not on the wheel because she could not yet throw, but by modeling and then molding her forms Despite this it was never her goal to project the slickness of an industrial object

Karnes learnt to use molds in such a way that her pots could be pressed into their forms and then taken out and altered In this way, impressing textures on the surface, emphasizing seams where elements were joined and opening the mouth, she created objects that were different from one another and carried the sense of being hand-made. She became extremely proficient at mold work and unlike many potters who decry molding because of its industrial associations, Karnes values this period of her work and argues that it taught her more about the architecture of the vessel form than if she had begun the wheel

When Weinrib left the College to work for Design Technics, a pottery company in Stroudsburg, PA, Karnes followed him, designing lamp bases for the factory In 1949, after a short stay they moved to Italy and for eighteen months worked in Sesto Fiorentino, a small pottery town near Florence Karnes set up a pot shop at home, started to throw and continued to work with molded forms The owner of a local factory was so charmed by her work that he agreed to fire her pots without charge. Karnes did not feel confident to carry boards of pots so instead she placed the boards on her motorcycle and cautiously wheeled the wares through the streets of the village to the pottery

The factory owner was not the only one to admire her visually assertive pots The legendary Gio Ponti, architect, designer and editor of *Domus*, was greatly impressed when he encountered her work by chance and prominently featured it in his journal The work attracted kudos in America as well In 1951 she sent two pots to the 16th Ceramic National in Syracuse, New York and won the Lord and Taylor Purchase Prize

Karnes returned to America and in 1952 became a graduate fellow at Alfred University She was just getting settled when an offer arrived for her and Weinrib to come for the summer to Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina Black Mountain was then the most avant-garde arts school in the country Its pottery was founded in 1949 by Bob Turner and the facility's design was by architect Paul Williams She never returned to Alfred to complete her degree and remained at Black Mountain for two and a half years Her loss of a degree never bothered her, "I did not want to teach so it was of little use to me." Karnes was committed to being a working potter and she realized that ambition. She raised a family, built two homes and has lived solely by the income of her pottery ever since

Black Mountain was a stimulating, nonconformist environment with a constantly shifting faculty of artists that included John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Anthony Tudor, Franz Kline, Jack Tworkov and Robert Rauschenberg Karnes and Weinrib wasted little time in turning the pottery into a centre for progressive ceramics Within months of their arrival they hosted an important symposium, moderated by the Bauhaus potter Marguerite Wildenhain with Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi (who were on a lecture of the U S at that time) The next year they invited Peter Voulkos, Daniel Rhodes, and Warren McKenzie Rudy Autio noted that those three weeks at Black Mountain were the turning point in Voulkos's life and career, "He came back to Helena but was never the same again It must have been the most important thing that had happened up to that time."

Weinrib has later voiced reservations about Black Mountain He felt that the crafts community was not treated as the equal of the fine arts. Certainly Albers had been insistent in not wanting to have a ceramic facility fearing that "clay, lacking the resistant prop-

erties of other materials, was too easily abused by the beginning craftsman," and the crafts courses that were added after his departure were controversial. Karnes did not feel that she was marginalized. She felt welcomed and the Black Mountain community provided "a sympathetic environment with fantastic art stimulation...a very lively place to be." In fact despite some patronizing behavior at the outset, many of the painters, sculptors and photographers welcomed their presence and felt that the potters, with their regular work rhythms, tangible results and closeness to materials and process, actually provided the school with an astringent dose of pragmatism and prevented it from degenerating into a metaphysical Disneyland.

Karnes worked mainly on the wheel at Black Mountain. She had started to throw in Italy and proved to have a gift for this technique. She made mainly functional wares, including elegant but sturdy tea and coffee services, and these reveal not just a crisp strength but also an undercurrent of lyricism in her throwing, with distinctive narrow throwing rings spiraling uniformly through her pots. This expressive facility was unusual in one so new to this method of producing forms.

In 1954 Karnes and Weinrib left Black Mountain to become founding members of the Gatehill Cooperative in Stony Point, Rockland County, New York. Black Mountain College's resident architect, Paul Williams and his wife Vera, had grown disenchanted with the school's endless financial and political wrangling, they disagreed with some new policies and so decided to leave and found an artist collaborative. He acquired a bucolic one hundred acre swath of wooded land with its own stream and built a model resident art community with Karnes, Weinrib, Cage, Tudor, and Richards amongst its first residents. After a few years Karnes and Weinrib began to have different goals as artists. Weinrib eventually gave up ceramics and moved to sculpture and plastics. He also moved to India and later Japan. In 1959 the couple divorced leaving Karnes alone to raise her son and so her approach to her career and an income now become more focused.

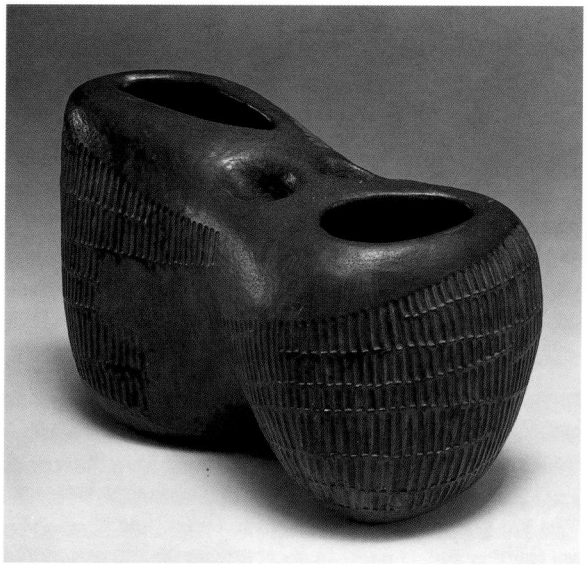
In 1957 she was recommended to the owner of a clay mine in New Jersey who had offered free clay. The owner turned out to be a ceramic engineer and he lectured both Karnes and M.C. Richards on technical ignorance and lack of invention amongst studio potters when it came to clay and function. To make his point, he asked why potters did not make flame-proof pots adding that he had the recipe for a flame-proof clay. He offered to share this information and Karnes grasped the opportunity. Within a few months she was soon producing distinctive flame-proof casseroles, a sophistication undreamed of amongst potters at that time. (And still a rarity today.)

The casserole proved to be an immediate success and sold for about $35, a huge sum at the time and has remained the bread-and-butter item in her pottery. The casserole, unaltered in its design is still in production today, nearly fifty years later, and is one of the great classics of post-1950's American pottery. It has a low centre of gravity, which spreads out the food for even cooking and also makes it easy to handle and balance when handling a heavy pot filled with piping-hot food. The wide and generous mouth makes for ease of serving and cleaning. The gently curved walls and domed lid encourage an even distribution and circulation of heat. The simple shape and brown color give it a sober appearance, but for a single moment of visual theatre, the handle on the lid is made from a twisted ribbon of pulled clay. It is applied quickly and has a wonderful gestural energy.

The next ceramic signature to come from Karnes was her move into salt-glazing in 1967, a perfect marriage of form, surface and aesthetic sensibility. Karnes did her first salt-glaze firings at a workshop in Penland, North Carolina in 1967. This venerable technique was first introduced by German stoneware potters in the 13th century and involves tossing salt into the kiln at a crucial point in the firing. The salt then vaporizes and attaches itself to the surface of the pots in the kiln, leaving them glazed with a distinctive sheen and a texture not unlike that of an orange rind.

Karnes's response to salt-glazing was remarkable It was love at first sight. It was not as though she was merely "applying" a surface so much as she was feeling it The understanding of it was not a matter of chemistry, at least not of the ceramic variety, it was much more visceral and interior and for the next fifteen years produced the most extraordinary body of salt wares that we have seen since the pots of the magical Martin Brothers in Victorian London nearly a century earlier. The way in which she manipulated the salt and the fire to produce a wide range of colors and textures was unprecedented and it was this achievement that established her at forty-two, as a master ceramist of international significance

One tends to notice the color first. Karnes combined the traditional blues and tans of salt fire with spirals of bright green, sharp mustard yellows and sultry mauves. Even the pieces that seem at first glance to be monochrome reveal themselves to be surprisingly polychromatic at closer inspection. The facetted lids on her jars added another dimension, directing the firing across their cut planes to leave some sides of the facets unglazed and others scorched with halos. Karnes had taken salt-glazing from merely a process to becoming an art. Even as a student in London in 1972 I was aware of this singular and ground-breaking body of work



Double Vase, 1951 Earthenware 9 5"h x 13 75"w
Collection Everson Museum of Art,
Purchase Prize given by Lord & Taylor, "16th Ceramic National," 1951
Photo © Courtney Frisse

Her achievement went beyond the rich color palette and into form She did not take the direction that most contemporary salt-glaze pottery seems to follow, towards hard-edged, geometric, almost metallic form (This tendency comes with the tradition, when German salt-glazed wares first appeared, and for centuries hence, the stoneware potters deliberately mimicked the shape and crisp formality of metal vessels.) Rather than follow this handsome but rigid approach, Karnes's pots unleashed a soft-focus anthropomorphism and a latent sexuality which had always been present but in more restrained form The sensuality of the surface (it feels glorious to the touch seductive, smooth and dimpled) is what I believe unleashed a fecund and erotic quality in Karnes's forms. Do not expect the artist to confirm or deny this. Karnes does not like talking about the psychology of her art, but the evidence is in the work

Karnes achieved this in part through the way that form and surface caressed one another but also in some more overt details, in particular the distinctive shallow orifices she created on the pots' surfaces. Sometimes she did this by applying clay to create the illusion of an opening on the side of the pot or else in other cases she would carve irregular depressions into the belly of the vessel. Yet, at no stage did this become coarse or blatant; it was always clothed in abstraction But it was a powerful life-enhancing presence, and, if one may use an abused term, sexy

Penland provided Karnes with more than just a breakthrough in her art. At this craft school in the following year it also brought Karnes into contact with two important people in her life, Paulus Berensohn and Ann Stannard, providing her with a guru in the one case and a life-partner in the other. Berensohn, author of the inspirational book *Finding One's Way With Clay*, is a philosopher who makes

pots. His pots were pinched (a handbuilding technique) which did not influence Karnes's work visually but the deeply felt spirituality and his principled set of ethics that these pots represented had a profound effect on her own creative credo. Karnes was hardly adrift philosophically. As her friend and fellow potter Michael Zakin remarked (a comment echoed by many contacted during the course of preparing this retrospective), "I have never known any artist who has lived her life and made her art with such unswerving integrity and with such a clear sense of purpose." But Berensohn's influence was able to sculpt, reinforce and clarify her personal mission and give her added confidence.

Ann Stannard, was then teaching art at King Alfred's College in Winchester, England when M.C. Richards, who had met her through The Society for Education Through Art, brought her to America in 1967 to give workshops on kiln building. It was at a time when both she and Karnes were seeking change and commitment and the camaraderie they established blossomed into friendship and then a life-long partnership. Stannard moved from England, settled in with Karnes at Gatehill and for a while also made pottery but later shifted her focus to spirituality through the Sufi movement.

In 1979, Stannard and Karnes, now both in their fifties, decided to leave Gatehill and create a home of their own. They moved to West Danville in Northern Vermont where they homesteaded for 3 years under conditions that would have intimidated potters half their age. The house was a mile and a half from the road and the movement of materials and supplies was an arduous trek. At first their pioneering had a certain raw appeal but the heroism of what they were doing soon wore off and prompted a move to a more accessible home in Morgan, Vermont near the Canadian border.

Karnes ceased salt-glazing, despite the fact that she was by now considered the most significant practitioner in this technique and that these works were still eagerly sought after by galleries and collectors. She began to make wood-fired pots, a logical and perhaps symbolically correct move in a tree covered state. But again Karnes surprised her community. She did not take her wares in the direction that the nascent American wood-firing movement was following. Instead of attaching herself to the growing popularity of the Japanese Anagama tradition of Bizen and Shigaraki, with brown crusty surfaces, ash-flashing and kiln-tears, she reinvented the tradition. Her pots, at first huge lidded vessels and later other shapes, were a polychromatic delight. She created rich colored surfaces in midnight blues, royal purples and acid greens fading to softer tones like a set of veils. It was quite unlike any other wood-fired pottery. They were lightly speckled with iron and their tonal spectrum gave them great depth. The first exhibition of these massive lidded jars with precise almost geometric forms was held at the Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery in New York in 1979 and was the talk of the ceramic world.

Ever since, Karnes has been ceaselessly innovating. While surprising as each new body of work might be, there are no arbitrary shifts in the creative path. There is consistency to her changes that has an organic inevitability. The first response is one of shock, but as one examines the pot further one accedes "well, of course, that is the next step." Lidded vessels were followed by vases with huge disk-shaped lips, then with forms from which long arms jutted invitingly from their sides, with multi-mouthed vessels, segmented nesting bottles in which two or three forms are locked in embrace, large pods that were not actually pots but spoke about pots with new intimacy, insight and freedom. Then there were pots with multiple spouts sprouting from the tops of her forms such as the one of the cover. And there were several other series besides.

It needs to be pointed out that the idyll in Vermont was marred by a catastrophic and potentially fatal detour. On May 10 1998, Karnes was firing as usual in her kiln shed as she had for years. While she was always very careful and observed all the safety rules, the wooden shed had, after continuous firings and little rain become totally tinder-dry and flammable. Towards the end of the firing it

exploded in flames and within fifteen minutes had not just engulfed the shed and studio but the house as well. Stannard barely escaped in time. Insurance covered the loss of the house and it seemed as though Karnes's career as a working potter was over.

As often happens with seemingly bad events there can be a surprising positive consequence. Pre-fire, Karnes had only a vague sense at best of the deep affection and reverence with which her community held her. After the conflagration, hundreds of potters, collectors and other supporters across the country rallied to support her, replace her lost materials and equipment and made contributions to a rebuilding fund. It was an immense, immediate outpouring of respect and an acknowledgment of how much Karnes had given to her field-not just her pottery which speaks for itself-but for that which was less obvious, her generosity to her field; the artists who attended her workshops, the many potters she assisted in setting up their studios and guiding their careers and the many working potters who depend upon the revenues that come from the annual Old Church Pottery Sale she organizes every December, the most successful event of its kind in America. And then there was a final but concrete footnote. While everything else was destroyed, what survived, perfectly fired were the pots in the kiln and these were shown at our gallery in 1999 as a homage to a courageous career.

Karen Karnes and Ann Stannard moved back into their rebuilt home and studio in 1999. The fire and the rebuilding had changed Karnes as an artist. This event has placed over fifty years of labor into a new perspective. Karnes now had a better understanding of her legacy and its value. Perhaps it is even what encouraged her to take an even greater risk than usual and produce her most adventurous body of work to date. For the past two years, Karnes has been toying with radical extensions of what a pot can be. This unapologetically anthropomorphic art comprises vessels in groupings of two, three or more. They are tall, thin, undulating and sensuous. They move and turn with the ease and authority of dancers, like stoneware groupings of a team of Louie Fullers without the veils. They blend the pot with sculpture, the vessel with figure, volume with linearity and emotion with cool, objective abstraction. They are, at least from this writer's point of view, as exciting and as nuanced as any vessels being made today.

Yet when one adds these vertical volumes to eighty or so pots that make up this long overdue retrospective, they do not appear as aliens. They can all chatter with each other, these children of her kiln, from the oldest to the youngest, about mouths and necks, about lids and spouts, about the sensuality of line and the pregnancy of volume and how the same vocabulary can produce so much difference. There is no point at which one finds one body of work silent and alienated from the other as sometimes happens in an artist's career. There are no experiments in faddism gone horribly wrong at the expense of continuity.

This seamless journey through seven decades and tens of thousands of pots is perfectly captured in the following quotation; "[Karnes] produces pottery of graceful strength and unstudied dignity, expertly fashioned to fulfill the requirements of its service. Created quietly from her living and for living with, her stoneware fits the round of days, the rhythms of the weather, the rituals of the hearth, with their seeming sameness yet infinite variety." While these words fit her current work like a glove, they were written forty-five years ago and are drawn from the closing coda of an article written for Craft Horizons by Dido Smith in 1958. Karnes's sense of "service" may have adjusted with time, attending a little less to the functional and a little more to the contemplative. But as we gaze over this vista of pots, short and fat, long and tall, we realize that Karnes's determination and courage has been rewarded. She has achieved that goal that all artists seek and only a few achieve; Karnes has through her depth, consistency and authenticity, managed to grow beyond mere invention and has succeeded in channeling the universal.

Garth Clark

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