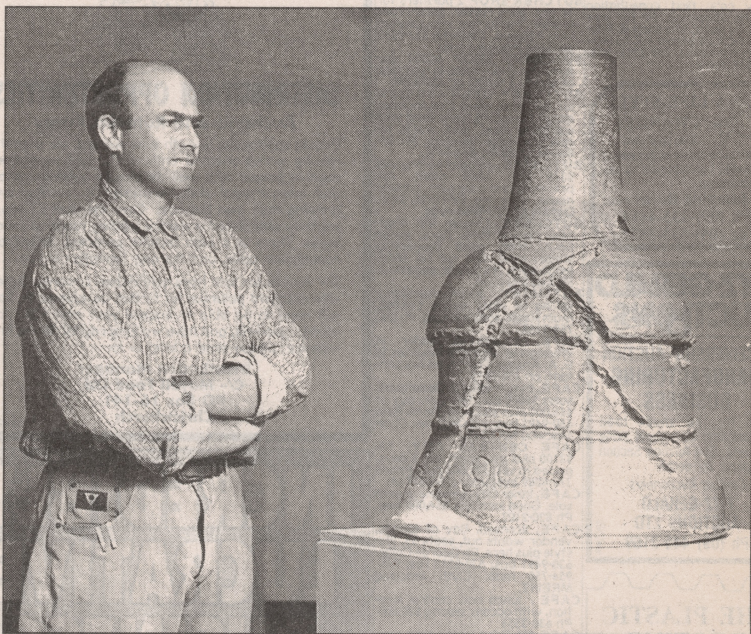


A titan among potters

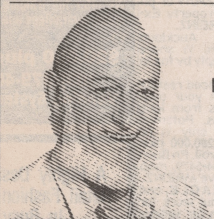
Howard Williams

AROUND THE GALLERIES



Fisher Gallery director Tim Renner with a ceramic artwork by Peter Voukos.

HERALD PICTURE / MARK MUNRO



Peter Voukos, *Ceramics in Action*, at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, until February 11

There are no pretty pots in this exhibition.

American potter **Peter Voukos**, now in his seventies, is a giant among ceramic artists. Internationally he is considered instrumental in fragmenting the barriers between art and craft, driving pottery into the realms of serious contemporary ceramic sculpture.

Through the 1950s, inspired by his contemporaries who were exploring abstract impressionism in painting, architecture, music and dance, he became increasingly satirical, creating works whose function was to make statements questioning the given parameters of functional ceramics.

In 1954 he founded the Ceramics Department at the Otis Arts Institute, Los Angeles, since when he has taught more than 10,000 students in workshops throughout America, Europe and Japan, seeding a revolution in the craft of clay.

His now famous *Rocking Pot* (1958) was a teapot riddled with holes, standing on slabbed rockers. From clay slabs he built containers which contained only ideas. They were ripped, holed, fractured and stacked; out of scale, asymmetric, heedless of accepted aesthetic concepts.

Voukos exploited the plastic nature of clay in a raw, emotional way, blowing holes through the prevailing artistic mind set and breaking the bonds of traditional craft forms and uses.

The dynamics he explored strongly influenced the aesthetic directions of ceramics world-wide. Today, against the context of an international exhibition such as the Fletcher Challenge Ceramics

Award, his early work may seem dated, but he was a prime mover in liberating clay, opening the way for new generations of ceramic art.

In 1958 Voukos visited New Zealand as the main demonstrator at the *ClayAzArt* conference in Rotorua. He astounded local potters with his elemental energy; a raddled hulk of a man throwing massive weights of clay with seemingly superhuman strength, yet with a fluidity that made the effort look simple.

He raised a great dome of clay, then ripped its top open to accept a concave cylinder which took two men to lift into position. On top of this was stacked a tall chimney, creating a three-section tower which was then added onto, stamped into, torn and slap-mended, punched through and beaten. All this to the ac-

companiment of animalistic grunts, flying sweat and jokey, throwaway asides.

Some of the audience left, unable to cope with the "all American Roadshow," the titanic gouging of clay into splitting, teetering stacks, or into ripped platters like volcanic plateaus.

Those who stayed to absorb the whole process breathed in the charisma of the man and his primitive, but intellectual understanding of the material and the emotional energy he could express with it.

Now, Voukos works are on exhibition in Auckland for the first time. *Ceramics in Action* is a seminal collection; two towers, four platters and a bucket-shaped vessel. They record the processes of their genesis so directly, they and their maker cannot be separated. A must for all students of contemporary ceramics.