

Painting in the Dark

By Glenn Adamson



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481 52 Walker St
New York NY 10013
212 714 9500
jamescohan.com

James
Cohan

It's one of the most memorable scenes in film: Dorothy's house, plucked from Kansas by a cyclone, plummets down, down, down to Oz. It lands, and somehow remains intact. Tentatively, with Toto in her arms, Dorothy makes her way to the front door. She opens it on to a world that is no longer in black and white – as movies, including this one, have always been until now – but glorious Technicolor.

Every kiln opening is a little like that. It is a fact little appreciated by non-potters that glazes, be they blue, green, red, or yellow, go on more or less beige. Only when they are fired to temperature, forming a glassy sheath over the clay body, do they attain their brightness and color. For all practical purposes, ceramic artists are “painting in the dark.”¹

This hasn't stopped them from making marvels. This exhibition looks at seven ceramic artists, spanning more than a century, who have explored the outer limits of glazes' expressive possibilities. Their works exhibit just as much sophistication of palette, mark-making, and composition as any artist working with oil and acrylic, despite the inherent unpredictability of the medium.

Perhaps it's actually because of the rupture in the process – the hiatus that occurs between the application of color and its realization – that ceramic is such a fascinating domain for painterly effects. A glazed surface is always, to some degree, an encounter between conscious intention and chance operations.

This relationship can itself be managed in various ways. Greater control can be achieved through the use of standard formulas, for example, or by carefully regulating the firing curve (that is, the rate at which the kiln heats up and cools down). Conversely, a potter can bring more risk into play, putting diverse pieces into the kiln together (the materials in one will chemically react to those next to it), or by firing a piece multiple times, gradually adding complexity

to the surface. As Otto Natzler, a master of these effects, once said, “you never know until you open the kiln after the very last firing what you have created.”²

Shape is another primary consideration. A vessel form offers myriad possibilities to allow glaze to slip, slide, and pool. This topology is obviously much more complex than a flat canvas. Yet there is an analogy to be made, here, between painters' use of edges, corners, and open field, and the way that potters exploit the dynamics of interior and exterior, foot, body, and rim.

The artists in this exhibition, then, are distinguished not only for their skill in glazing, but also the way that they integrate shape and surface, resolving the two into a powerful union. Their sensibilities range from the volcanic to the serene, the vividly experimental to the perfectly resolved. Yet in each case, there's a fusion of painterly surface and volumetric form that could not be approximated in any other discipline.



Hugh Robertson, *Experimental Vase*, ca. 1896-1908.

The earliest figure included here is Hugh Robertson (1845-1908), an English-trained potter who settled in the Boston area in the 1860s, and went on to be a leading light of the American Arts and Crafts Movement. Though less well-known today than his contemporary George E. Ohr, Robertson was equally experimental. Working in parallel with the grand feu

¹ I owe this wonderful phrase to Martha Russo, the Denver-based artist and a former apprentice of Toshiko Takaezu. She got it in turn from her colleague Bruce Price, a painter who was experimenting with ceramics for the first time, which felt to him like ‘painting in a dark closet.’ “He hated it,” Russo says, “He said, how on earth do you clay people deal with all this uncertainty? How do you ever know what you are doing or do you strive to be in the unknown?”

² Quoted in Rita Reif, “Theirs Was a Blissful Marriage Of Innovative Form and Finish,” *The New York Times* (Aug 1, 1993).

“art potters” of France, he was inspired to the point of obsession by historic Chinese wares – particularly those with a deep red “oxblood” glaze, a secret he labored for years to reproduce. Over the course of his restless investigations, he created an extraordinary range of glazes, many of which positively seethe with polychromatic and textural effects.

Considered outré to the point of incomprehensibility at the time, in retrospect Robertson’s work (like Ohr’s) is a clear precedent for the creative explosion that came to American ceramics in the postwar era. The story of this transformative moment is typically anchored on Peter Voulkos and his colleagues in California, whose seismic avant garde intervention was primarily structural in nature.³ Our exhibition sheds light on the different trajectory, more closely parallel to contemporaneous developments in painting, undertaken by Toshiko Takaezu (1922-2011) and Rudolf Staffel (1911-2002).



Left: Toshiko Takaezu, *Untitled*, ca. 1990s.

Right: Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, ca. 1970s-1990s.

Takaezu was the prime exponent of Abstract Expressionism in ceramics. While her signature “closed forms” synthesized many different trajectories of thinking, including historic East Asian precedents, they were above all an opportunity to paint in the round. Takaezu masterfully articulated her expansive

³ Though Voulkos did have a strong interest in painting, and even essayed a few canvases himself, in his ceramics he tended to use mark-making mainly as a violently disruptive contrast to constructed forms, a method more formally akin to Cubism than Abstract Expressionism. In this sense, John Coplans’ early attempt to claim him as a West Coast equivalent to New York action painting was somewhat tendentious. Coplans, “Abstract Expressionist Ceramics” (University of California, Irvine, 1966). See Glenn Adamson, Barbara Paris Gifford, and Andrew Perchuk, *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years* (Museum of Arts and Design, 2016).

circular “canvases” – scroll-like compositions, without beginning or end – with a broad vocabulary of splashing, brushwork, and pouring, employing oxides and glazes of her own devising. In some of her best works, veils of superimposed color create a sense of infinite depth, and seem to coalesce within the profundity of the pot. She also activated the interiors with small beads of clay, which rattle and chime when the piece is manipulated, thus establishing a unique experiential connection between kinetics, tactility and opticality.

Staffel is best known for his “light gatherers,” vessels made in translucent porcelain that blaze into ethereal glory when illuminated. He is perhaps a surprising choice for an exhibition about painting, for his best-known works are porcelains in monochrome white. A closer look at his oeuvre, however, shows him to be one of the great colorists in ceramic history. So much was made clear in a 2014 exhibition juxtaposing his work to Robert Ryman; for both artists, the color white contained multitudes.⁴ Staffel exploited the translucency of porcelain to create abstraction in depth, the variable thickness of the vessel walls summoning shadowy expressionistic form. He was also, like Robertson, an inveterate experimentalist, constantly searching for new materials to add to his porcelain bodies, changing their plasticity and appearance. A lesser-known aspect of his practice is the use of pigments in a range of hues – pinks, blues, and yellows. In their diaphanous, stain-like effects, these works suggest comparisons to contemporaneous color field painting.

A third midcentury figure included in *Painting in the Dark* is Rose Cabat (1914-2015). A singular figure in ceramics, she was a miniaturist who concentrated her energies on tiny pots that she called “feelies.” That term points to a link with Takaezu’s work – both were interested in appeal to the touch as well as the eye – and she clearly intended her works to be appreciated up-close, intimately, held in the hand. Cabat was yet another self-taught glaze chemist, who built up a huge palette of colors and textures over time; each of her pieces is somewhat like a single brushstroke within an ongoing pointillist composition.

⁴ *White Magic: Robert Ryman, Rudolf Staffel* (David Nolan Gallery, 2014).



Rose Cabat, *Collection of 7 Feelies*, ca. 2012-2013.

Three contemporary artists included in *Painting in the Dark* suggest the range of painterly exploration currently unfolding in the discipline. The work of Tony Marsh (b. 1954) seems to have been not so much made as unleashed. *Painting in the Dark* features his aptly titled series *Neo-Crucibles*, an allusion to the vessels in which chemists (and before them, alchemists) bring about their reactions. The works are indeed compounds of color and texture, simultaneously recalling geological specimens and modernist collages.

Marsh's contemporary Marit Tingleff (b. 1954) works at spectacularly large scale, making full use of this arena of action, covering the surface with coursing rivulets of glaze. In terms of format, Tingleff's work is the most explicitly painting-like of the works included here, yet its weight and assertive materiality clearly establishes its medium-specific character.



Left: Tony Marsh, *Neo-Crucible*, 2022.



Right: Marit Tingleff, *Standing Tile Series: Red and White*, 2020, and *Standing Tile Series: Black and White*, 2020.



Kathy Butterly, *Taking Form*, 2022.

While Kathy Butterly (b.1963) is widely celebrated for her polymorphous sculptural shapes, this exhibition context places particular emphasis on her use of color. Informed by her deep interest in historical and contemporary painting, her works are often like canvases that have been furled and manipulated, forming compositionally complex, internally relational topologies.

Taken as a whole, *Painting in the Dark* provides viewers with an intense and sensually gratifying aesthetic experience, while also making clear that the discipline of ceramics, so often marginalized in the past, has played a crucial part in the history of painterly abstraction.

GLENN ADAMSON

Glenn Adamson is a curator and writer who works at the intersection of craft, design history and contemporary art. He has previously been Director of the Museum of Arts and Design; Head of Research at the V&A; and Curator at the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee.

He is the co-host of “Design in Dialogue”, a weekly online interview series co-presented with Friedman Benda gallery.

Adamson’s publications include *Fewer Better Things* (2019); *Art in the Making* (2016, co-authored with Julia Bryan-Wilson); *The Invention of Craft* (2013); *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* (2011); *The Craft Reader* (2010); and *Thinking Through Craft* (2007). He contributes regularly to *Art in America*, *Crafts*, *Disegno*, *frieze*, *The Magazine Antiques*, and other publications.

Adamson was the co-curator of *Crafting America* at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (2021); *Objects: USA 2020* at R & Company Gallery (2021); *Voukos: The Breakthrough Years* at MAD (2016); *Beazley Designs of the Year* at the Design Museum, London (2017); and *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery* at the Yale Center for British Art (2017). His biographical study of the artist Lenore Tawney is included in the John Michael Kohler Art Center’s exhibition catalogue *Mirror of the Universe*.

This essay was commissioned by James Cohan on the occasion of *Painting in the Dark*, a group exhibition curated by Glenn Adamson and Kathy Butterly on view from June 23 through August 5, 2022 at 52 Walker St.