

I grew up in a world of fascination watching my father work in his painter's studio. My earliest memories include drawing contests with my brother and the smell of turpentine. My father made me observant by commenting often on the beauty in the natural world and by interpreting that beauty in his paintings. I escaped to the art room in high school every chance I got, because I felt comfortable there, instead of inept as I felt in Algebra or Chemistry. I went to Art School because of that comfort and chose ceramics because of a few slides I saw of historical pottery that seemed foreign and magical to me. I imagine I was also unconsciously seeking comfort in a distance from the huge talent that I admired in my father. I was lucky enough to have fallen, without knowing it, into one of the greatest ceramic programs, with teachers Ken Ferguson and Victor Babu. They were both passionate and eccentric and they made me fall totally in love with the clay and its history. My work has always referred to and revered that history, while exploring my personal approach to the vessel form, the human form, and the metaphoric symbolism of containment of the life spirit that they both share. My early vessels became figures, my figures later became vessels, and ultimately the two have been joined together in a kind of celebration.

One of the most deliciously intellectual notions put forth by Philip Rawson in his highly regarded book *Ceramics* is the concept of "potter's space." He uses this term to reveal the potential meaning associated with the void enclosed by a pot's architecture of intimate containment. The transformation of the pot by an artist into an object of anthropoid content is a process of great seriousness according to Rawson. He writes about the capturing of a numinous presence by such a modified pot and states that the resulting object-sculpture "looks" at the viewer as if in the posture of another person. Rawson's exact words regarding the transformed pot are as follows:

"Although, it occupies the same space as the spectator does, the potter's space which it contains and which defines it can demonstrate that it is not of this world, but is rooted in another order of existence. It discloses and perhaps explains one of the most deeply hidden, pervasive and often very tenuous intuitions about ceramic containers that people have, but can scarcely lift into their consciousness: that the very act of containing creates a special kind of cell or focus in space which is extraordinary, maybe even timeless."

Potter's space is the underlying connecting link that supports Donna Polseno's investigation into thought and feeling. It is the deeply intuited and clearly recognized ordering principle that facilitates her invitation to the viewer: an invitation to stop, consider and reflect on our sense of self and other, of place, time and the female energy that nurtures. Donna Polseno is an accomplished ceramic artist who has, over a number of years, developed an enlightened vocabulary which speaks to the transformation of the pot into provocative sculpture. Polseno establishes much of her work at the meridian between real, physical-dimensional space and that otherworldly space of supernatural or spiritual substance.

Early in her career Donna Polseno revealed a clear intuition for potter's space. The "baskets" of 1976 were not so much functional, factual offerings as they were structural enticements inviting the viewer-user into an imaginary space of untrodden meadows graced by warm golden light, delicate, windblown grass and flowers. These pieces were realized in earthenware and finished using a post-fire smoking process which effects the surface with patterns of black and white that result in a feeling of light moving across the shapes. Earthenware lacks the density and hardness of high-fired ceramic. As a result of this fact, in concert with the surface treatment mentioned, a subtle feeling of tentative fusion—of delicate calibration regarding the confluence of momentary, complementary natural phenomena—is achieved. This dynamic adds immeasurably to the floating sense of time captured by these pots. There is a delight in positive, nurturing energy revealed here that plays itself out in much of Polseno's work across her career.

Donna Polseno's point of view or attitude is one that defies the route of late 20th century cynicism which lodges a considerable amount of art in a self-congratulatory, indulgent commentary on the afflictions of contemporary life. Of course, it is not that these afflictions do not exist or are not recognized. Donna Polseno chooses, however, to offer rare moments of repose—a stepping back, a lingering in a sunlit landscape or, later on in her practice, the sustaining embraces of domestic tranquility as exemplified by a kitchen table set with fruit and drink. Although Polseno acknowledges the decorative, she positions her pot not as an object of treasure and enrichment responsive to the inventiveness of decor, but as an object of internal mystery that animates external space. She focuses her work on an inner volume of essential emptiness: absolute, necessary, indispensable emptiness. This emptiness can be understood symbolically. It is the emptiness of the Buddhist canon. It is the non-dual essential absolute—the matrix of all being.

In her "still-life" pieces of 2004, Polseno uses her concept of potter's space to suggest the space of domestic, rather humble architecture that contextualizes the fruit, table, window, wall, wallpaper, dishes in a sense of place that radiates

peace, calm, quiet and care. The physical bowl as three dimensional shape and space implies a gentle, non-rigid cradling of the visually narrated moment. The rim of the dimensional bowl that delimits the field of the imagery undulates; the color is warm, soft—the overall shape, an oval suggesting a place that seems barely fixed. It is unassuming, even a bit awkward, as if unaware. This bowl formulates a kind of ordinariness. Here Polseno captures the often unrecognized poetry in the simple reverie of being home. These "still-life" bowls are of salt glazed porcelain. The porcelain material used is very fine grained and when fired to high temperature, melts internally to reveal a delicate, but hard and dense surface. An irrevocable timelessness is infused into the work. Salt glaze engenders a gesture of movement across this dense surface, gracing it with illusionary light. This softens the work to the eye and suggests that it is somewhat contingent. As a consequence, the still-life takes on a feeling of firm, established yet transitory essence. A feeling not far removed from our sense of self—body, mind, moment. This dynamic achieved via the material-process collaborates perfectly with the oval shapes and the undulating rims. Ultimately, the gentle, barely-fixed, cradling content of quiet care is achieved through a highly sensitive, savvy integration of artistic intention, imagination, intuition and craft. The art is the craft. The craft is the art. In a nutshell, this is what makes Donna Polseno a ceramic artist of consequence—an artist of distinction rather than simply another impassioned individual who works with clay, glaze and fire.

The particular sense of the domestic—of home, family or household—which these still-life pieces forefront affirms Polseno's concern for female discernment. Most of her work reveals, with refreshing sensitivity, a focus on the female—the woman as sensual being and reflective intellect. Her work does not force or demand attention to the female gender. It securely and forthrightly reveals female gender as unquestioned strength, yet also as vulnerable, open, reassuring and centered.

The classically shaped vases of 2000 are related to the still-life tableau bowls, but whereas the still-life pieces reflect an obliquely feminine viewpoint the vases celebrate the female as a physical and psychological entity. Potter's space in this



case creates a complex scale relationship in which the pot, via an imaginary size reversal, becomes part of the image conceit of the female and her environment while simultaneously functioning as a larger than life repository of emptiness that carries forth a highly cultured connection to all past and present enigmas of femininity. Donna Polseno's woman is an earthbound goddess that is at once real and symbolic.

With her recent 2006 series, which advanced the 1997 series of similar content, Polseno presents the female figure with vessel. Here Polseno reaches her most definitive transformation of potter's space into the independent anthropoid presence that Philip Rawson considered such an important development in ceramic art. He writes of the transformed pot's historical background, "as either a funerary vessel to contain the ashes of the dead, or to be dedicated as an icon meant to contain some sort of spirit." In Polseno's work it is the spirit of the female that ultimately resides in the potter's space. If we look retrospectively back at the progress of Donna Polseno's work it becomes evident that these figures evolved from the decorative, anthropomorphic vases of the early 1980's which were then reformed as emblematic abstractions of the female during the later 1980's until in the 1990's they were completely transformed into figurative sculpture. Sculpture that took on in 1997 a concrete status of personage—the earthbound goddess, a female Bodhisattva, a mortal that forgoes final liberation in order to reach out in concern for all beings. It takes little to imagine that the vessel held by this goddess represents nourishment.

At this point, we might do well to pause and reflect on Donna Polseno's credential as a utilitarian potter. Her hand and mind have delivered many beautiful functional pieces which, of course, carry the gesture of nourishment into the actuality of the world. Artists of Polseno's scope often indulge across a spectrum from design

problem solving—to pure invention. Clearly, in a fundamental way Donna Polseno's concern for gestures of "nourishment" and the potential of the open volume of pottery inspire her practice from fact to metaphor. Of course, there is no art in function. There is no art in nature either. Artists contextualize and create a point of view that informs the viewer. They tell us what to think, to feel, to understand. They reveal. We know about the sunset because artists have revealed it to us. Likewise, we know about utility in this case because Donna Polseno reveals it so poetically.

On one hand, a bowl is offered for use and comes with allusions to the tender, tranquil and reaffirming presence of nature. On the other hand, Polseno presents us with a bowl as hollow recess carried by an earthbound goddess as a symbol of sustenance that, in and of itself, is an encoded female gesture.

The earthbound goddess as sculpture that is the capstone of Polseno's work so far can be seen as autobiographical in the more mundane, secular sense of representing the artist. No doubt such work must grow, as all art does from the experience of the artist. However, this work is also clearly embracing of a much larger universal paradigm of female energy which is recognized as a basic truth of human consciousness in the world. Donna Polseno has molded earth, confirmed its presence by fire and in so doing structured an enduring insight into potter's space that reflects her deeply felt and knowing connection to the poetic, psychic energy that is woman.

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March 2006



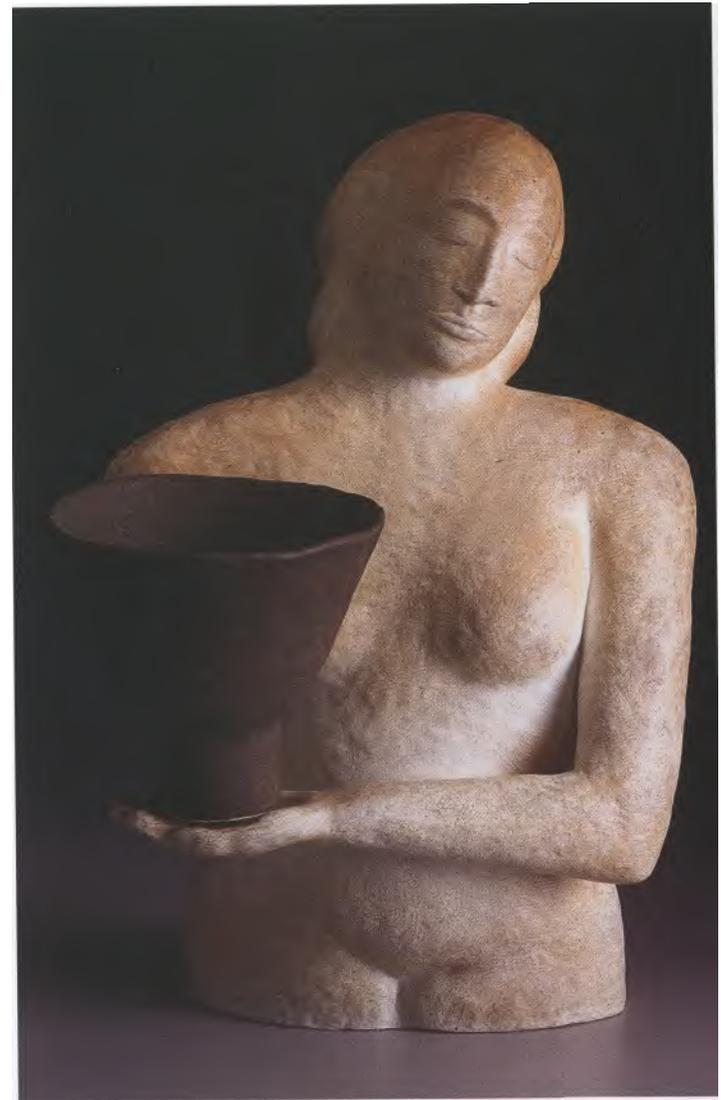
Untitled, twisted vase with yellow top, 1984, earthenware, 27 x 10.5 x 7 inches



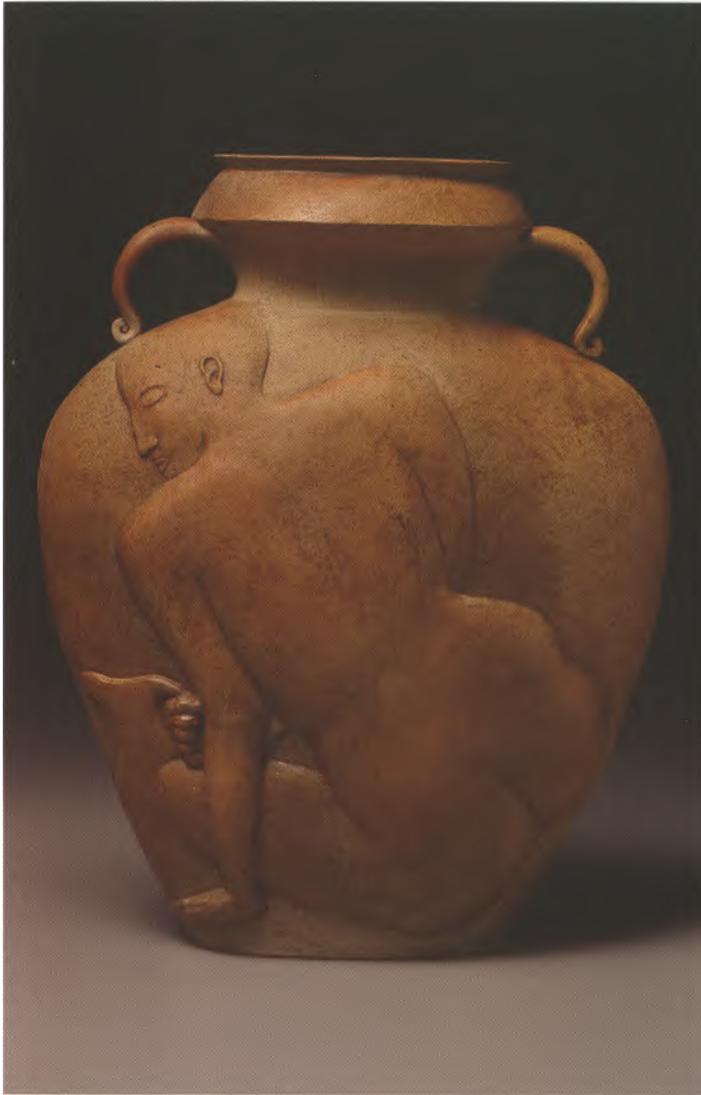
Untitled, figurative vase with curl, 1985, earthenware, 26 x 12 x 4 inches



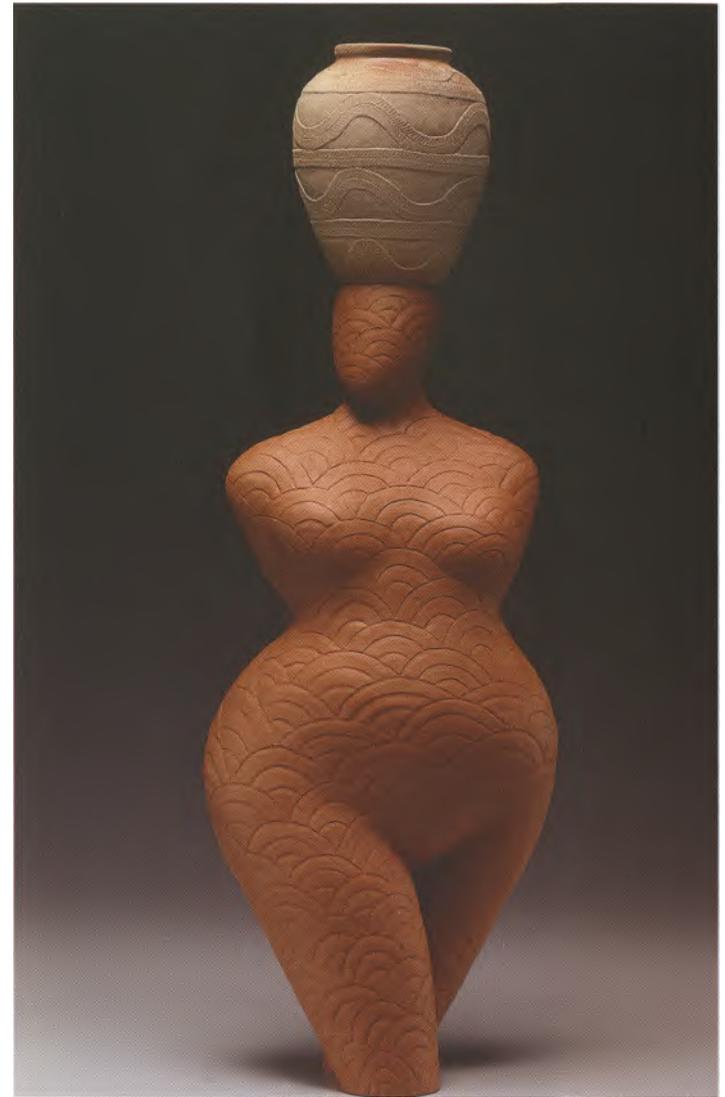
Untitled, pink and green striped figure, 1988, earthenware, 33 x 18 x 11 inches



Woman Presenting Bowl, 1997, salt-fired stoneware, 22.5 x 15 x 10 inches
on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson



L'Arroseuse, 1999, salt-fired stoneware, 21 x 18 x 7 inches
on loan from the collection of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC



Urn with Woman, 2006, mid-range stoneware, 35 x 12 x 7 inches
on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson



Untitled, footed raku basket, 1977, raku-fired earthenware, 14.5 x 10 x 8 inches



Still Life Bowl, 2005, salt-fired porcelain, 11 x 17 x 8.5 inches
on loan from the collection of Pamela Cadmus



Untitled, wavy floral vase, 2005, mid-range porcelain, 12 x 10 x 4 inches

H x W x D in inches

<i>Untitled</i> , footed raku basket, 1977, raku-fired earthenware	14.5 x 10 x 8
<i>Untitled</i> , raku bowl, 1978 raku-fired earthenware	9.5x 11x 11
<i>Untitled</i> , vase with peach top and kidney shapes, 1984 raku-fired earthenware	23.5 x 10.5 x 5
<i>Untitled</i> , vase with pink top and hip bottom, 1984, raku-fired earthenware	21 x 10 x 6.5
<i>Untitled</i> , vase with rings, 1984, raku-fired earthenware	22.5 x 11 x 6
<i>Untitled</i> , twisted vase with yellow top, 1984, earthenware	27 x 10.5 x 7
<i>Untitled</i> , figurative vase with curl, 1985, earthenware	26 x 12 x 4
Untitled, pink and green striped figure, 1988, earthenware	33 x 18 x 11
<i>Untitled</i> , maroon full figure, 1991, earthenware	40 x 18 x 9
Untitled, turquoise figure, 1990 earthenware on loan from the collection of Jonathan and Jeri Rogers	33 x 11.5 x 8
<i>Woman with Kutani Vase</i> , 1995, earthenware on loan from the collection of Jonathan and Jeri Rogers	15 x 18 x 5
<i>Woman Presenting Bowl</i> , 1997, salt-fired stoneware on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson	22.5 x 15 x 10
<i>L'Arroseuse</i> , 1999, salt-fired stoneware on loan from the collection of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC	21 x 18 x 7
<i>The Bather</i> 2000, salt-fired stoneware on loan from the collection of Jonathan and Jeri Rogers	21 x 18 x 7
<i>Woman with Grecian Urn</i> , 2005, salt-fired stoneware on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson	21 x 18 x 7
<i>Woman with Black Water Jar</i> , 2005, mid-range porcelain on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson	29 x 8 x 5
<i>Urn with Woman</i> , 2006, mid-range stoneware on loan from the collection of Rhonda and Joe Wilkerson	35 x 12 x 7
<i>Floral Woman and Vase</i> , 2006, mid-range stoneware on loan from the collection of Jonathan and Jeri Rogers	31 x 10 x 6
<i>Still Life Bowl</i> , 2005, salt-fired porcelain on loan from the collection of Pamela Cadmus	11 x 17 x 8.5
<i>Elongated Still Life Bowl</i> , 2005, salt-fired porcelain on loan from the collection of Jonathan and Jeri Rogers	10 x 20.5 x 6
Untitled, wavy floral vase, 2005, mid-range porcelain	12 x 10 x 4