

Patricia Rieger and Xavier Toubes: Cold Songs and Bichos

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*Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark*

*That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.*

*How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,*

*Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand*

*Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.*

From: Wallace Stevens, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*

The poets—sovereigns in the kingdom of language—will show you that language is a mask we must wear in good faith if we are to better see one another, but it is also a prison, one we can only escape by traveling its labyrinth passageways. What the poets don't tell you is that when they first named themselves in ancient Greece, the name they took was an encompassing word meaning "producer, maker," referring to all skilled craft work. When the Athenian potter Exekias in the mid-500s BCE signed a particularly fine vessel that he had thrown on the wheel and painted with figurative scenes, he wrote as if the work were speaking to us: "Exekias painted and 'poeted' [fabricated] me."

Ceramic artists thus have for their birthright the ancient name of "poet," one that entitles them to a place opposite but no less privileged than that of the language poets. I say opposite, because the truth—the poetry—of the ceramic object starts with the clay, the glazes and the chemical transformations brought on by firing, not with verbal or mental images that we (or the artist) may project onto the ceramic process or its product. This is a consequential distinction. The literary artists who appropriated the title of "craftsman" theorized that their art practice was a truer art precisely because it was an "invisible" craft of shaping convincing mental images. In time, painters (and eventually sculptors), fatally embraced the critical distinction between tangible and intangible artifice, and the overvaluation of the intangible. Academic art traditions draw their authority from devaluing,

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marginalizing, misconstruing the very dialogue between matter and thought that is at the heart of “pottery-poetry.” Modern art critical discourse—a language art, after all—is still very much informed by this “conceptual” bias, which is not modern at all, but as ancient as that first literary appropriation of the term “poet.”

As Patricia Rieger and Xavier Toubes know only too well, being a ceramic poet is a lifelong endeavor, an ongoing exercise in “throw[ing] away the lights, the definitions,” in facing “the madness of space” to get beyond “the crust of shape.” Wallace Stevens entreated his reader to imagine a world beyond the constraints of language and its fictions, but Rieger and Toubes spend their days in the studio making, fabricating just such a world.

This compact exhibition is a study in contrasts: Rieger and Toubes are a married couple with a thorough knowledge of one another’s creative process, but each makes an object-world precisely unlike the other’s: Rieger’s introverted figures, with their deceptively muted glazes and minimal gestures, entice the patient viewer. Toubes’ exuberant gestural objects, all at once vessel-like and figure-like, torque every-which-way and flash into our field of vision with a cascading profusion of colors. Rieger’s glowing figures stand (or sit) alone, even when they belong to a group, such as the silvery Little People in the *Found. Conversation With a Bird* series. Toubes’ objects—even those in the vase-like *Abandon* series—positively resist their own separateness, with indeterminate or sliding boundaries between the materials and the maker, between solid and liquid elements, between accident and premeditation: if you see *Abandon 34* from one side, you may not recognize it when you approach it from another, even though it will be unmistakably different from *Abandon 16* or *Abandon 14*.

We are drawn in by the deceptive informality of Rieger’s standing figures, their gentle affect, only to realize that—in Rieger’s words—“the familiar is often at the edge of anxiety” and the figures concretize “a rich interior world . . . at odds with the ordinary sphere” that they (and we their spectators) occupy. It takes a moment to register that *Cold Song I, IV, V* and *VI* are not *just* standing. Each in its way comments on the archaic sense of the term “statue,” “that which stands.” Rieger’s figures with their small everyday hand-gestures stand as if suspended in the moment, “caught in the act,” while their upright *stance* typically conveys an intrinsic refusal of the pull of gravity. One exception, *Cold Song 5*, with jaunty contrapposto and casually back-flung hands, introduces a thrill of disquiet by decentering the figure’s weight. By contrast, the kneeling figure in the *Found. Conversation With a Bird* group confronts his silvered companions as if with a kind of resignation by accommodating his lower body to the force of gravity. The ravishing figures of *Guideless Cloud I* and *II*, likewise take on the challenge of “statue-ness” by echoing the majestic *ka* statues of the Old Kingdom. The Egyptian seated figures were substitute-bodies often made of the hardest igneous stone: Rieger’s use of vibrant maiolica glazes and lusters “liquefies” the ancient prototypes. The fire-fused layers of the *Guideless Cloud* surfaces bind fast the image of a being seated at the boundary between worlds, much as the fine russet craquelure that veins *Cold Song I* enmeshes in a capillary web the image of a man lost in thought. If images in the literary poet’s sense are mental constructs, Rieger’s glazed clay figures make a place for them to be in and of this world without loss of otherness.

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Toubes, who voices his “desire for the object to be fluid, electrical, absurd, theatrical and existential with wild lone beauty,” aims “to present fluttering inventions.” And how his objects flutter, in the sense that they refuse to stabilize perceptually, to hold still in memory, to pose for a picture, to hold fast to a contour, or be limited to a dominant tonality. And yet they are as sharply individuated as living bodies. The “dorsal” and “ventral” ridges that protrude from the *Abandon* pieces represent a different organizing feature in each work: a grown-over, gorgeously pigmented-over scarring in *Abandon 14*, a glistening serpent-excrescence in *Abandon 16*, a powerful cresting of muscle in *Abandon 34*. In each of these works, the ridge produces a different sort of projection into “the madness of space.” In the same way, each object enacts a different negotiation of color as optical and material substance. Like Rieger, Toubes is a lifelong painter, but the spectacular alchemy of his glazes has little to do with the give-and-take of painting on canvas or panel. If the restless manipulating of clay finally is “abandoned” in the release of a kiln-bound object, the multiple firings and reglazing that this object then undergoes constitute a veritable sacrificial journey in the old alchemical sense. The body of each piece is reformed not once but many times, its marked flesh transmuted at each rebirth.

Toubes, like Rieger, is an eloquent figure-maker, but with the vessel—its hollow body and ansate projections—recurring as figural matrix. In the paired *FLOR 39 and 40 (PushMoon4)*, begun in 2017, we glimpse a handle-and-spout reminiscence, but it is their piquant gestural and coloristic complementarity—*FLOR 40* like a dancing platinum mirror to *FLOR 39*'s sunny brilliance—that makes these figures and the gap between them “electrical, absurd, existential.” The more recent *Figures with Shadows*, *Bichos 67 and 71* develop the choreographic pairing into an especially sensual give-and-take, heightened by the molten yellows, oranges and reds that pour over both of their cloudy torquing bodies. “Bicho” is a Spanish word that means “creature, beast, beastie.” It can be comic and playful, and it can be derogatory. Toubes’ *Bichos* are often poignant, none more so than the unpaired *Figures with Shadows 20*, whose insistent silhouette seems more shadow than figure. This figure’s gesturing towards the unknown is an important point of contact between Toubes’ and Rieger’s art: the riotous exuberance of Toubes’ “fluttering” figurative invention is not an end in itself, nor is Rieger’s introspective figure-world. The ancient yet infinite potentialities of the ceramic *poesis* enable them both to keep searching for new shapes to take “when the crust of shape has been destroyed.”