

Dan Leonette

About ten years ago I met Dan Leonette for the first time, *the painter* Dan Leonette. Or rather, his work, realistic, skillfully executed paintings with motifs from the immediate surroundings: a lounge chair in the greenery of a garden, roosters and hens, the interior of a forest. Later I found out that this artist with the Italian sounding last name was born in 1941 and grew up in California – his father of Italian heritage and an Irish-American mother – and that he also was a potter with stoneware utility items in his repertoire.

He has been drawing since childhood, an interest he had an opportunity to develop further at Cerittos Junior College. In Santa Barbara he took his first steps into the field of ceramics. He was able to center the lump of clay directly on the potter's wheel when the teacher encouraged him to try the difficult art of throwing.

At the end of the 60's he moved to England where he became an apprentice with the ceramist Emanuel Cooper. He also entered the art circle around Bernard Leach (1887-1979), the British 20th century ceramics' prominent figure, then in his 70's, whose lectures on the Japanese ceramist family Kenzan Dan had an opportunity to attend. Kenzan VI, descendent of the first in the line of famous ceramists, Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743), had been Bernard Leach's teacher in Japan around 1910. Dan also became good friends with John Leach, representing the third generation of the Leach ceramist family, with whom he has since maintained close contact. He also mentions other English "studio potters" of importance to him, among them Rickard Batterham and Colin Pearson.

After a while, Dan moved to Sweden where he first settled in Halmstad as an artist and potter. However, in 1983 he settled on Gotland where he combined his artistic work with bee keeping. This

developed into a large-scale operation with about 90 beehives. When the bee colonies started to move into chimneys and outbuilding of the farms in the area he gave up bee keeping. Instead he moved, with his wife Kerstin, into an abandoned dairy in Kräklingbo, where the family now lives and works in the impressive main building, built of light grey silicate brick in the beginning of the 20th century. A large wood burning oven, just outside the house, bears witness to the ceramic operation that also utilizes some of the outbuildings.

Dan's production of bowls, plates and mugs in stoneware, simple, powerful and obvious in design, with grey-green glaze and fired in the gas oven at 1260-1280 degrees is still extensive. But in the middle of the 90's he was hit by what one can call raku-fever: he started to experiment with raku and other types of lowfired ceramics, where the decorative effects are achieved through an interaction between creator and chance; one can, as Dan expresses it, *influence* the processes of glaze firing but not *control* the result.

The firing processes, an intricate play between reduction and oxidation of varying kinds depending on technique - "raku", "sawdust", "copper", "peel off", "saggar" – are the basis for the work with these techniques that historically go back to the classic Japanese raku with Tanaka Chajiro (1515-92) as "creator". The writing character for "raku" also means *joy*; a stamp with the raku sign was handed over by the warrior Toyotomi Hideyoshi to Chajiro's nephew Jobei (1561-1633), the first in a still living dynasty of raku masters. It is exciting to remember that the plot in Akira Kurosawa's movie "The Seven Samurai" from 1954 takes place during this troubled time in Japan's history. As a curiosity, it can be mentioned that it was raku that awakened Bernard Leach's interest in ceramics: at a party in 1911 in Tokyo, where he was working as a banker and graphic artist, when the guests had to decorate a raku piece. This started his important achievement as initiator of the "studio potter" movement with its fusion of European and East Asian ceramic traditions

The material – the clay – used with the different techniques is in Dan's case either stoneware clay ("raku", "copper") or porcelain clay ("peel off", "sawdust", "saggar"). All types are biscuitfired in an

electric oven at 950-960 degrees before the various glaze firings take place in metal barrels with different mixtures of sawdust, shavings or salts, or in a saggar filled with straw, seaweed and other items heated in the large wood burning oven. The firing procedure is not without its dramatic elements: the ceramist can be compared to a sorcerer, when surrounded by smoke and fire during the firing he treats the pieces in the various metal vessels with their mysterious contents.

Consistently the simple designs are spherical pots with lids, pots with quadratic cross sections, open bowls, and vases. The surface is the carrier of the decorative effects, partly directed by chance: the light grey raku with its net of black crackles, the rainbow colors of the "copper", the soft colors of the varying patterns of the polished vessels in "sagger" technique – the variations are endless.

What is it that makes these items feel so alive and important in our world, where according to many the real symbol of our time is the computer? Maybe it is the *materiality* contrasting with the IT-society's immaterial information exchange. In addition, "the pot" represents thousands of years of tradition that can give the busy person of today a sense of belonging and continuity.

Jan Brunius