

PETER SHIRE

by Jonathan Goodman

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The argument in which craft is diminished as art is by now cliché. The shift in art-making of the last two generations has been toward a complete expansion of what art can be, and craft is included in this widening of art's definition. At the same time, craft can embrace the practical world in ways that are closely tied to the functions of daily life. This gives craft a practical, if not an aesthetic, advantage in presenting ideas about form.

The powerful survey of Peter Shire's ceramic artworks currently on view at Derek Eller Gallery does justice to a long, and now recognizably accomplished, career. Dating back to the 1970s, and created under the auspices of the Memphis cooperative, later active in Milan in the 1980s, Shire's cups and teapots are marvelous one-off examples of kitchen objects turned into artworks that cheerfully mimic their more prosaic originals. Shire's work is refined and subtle—but humorous, too, in the way he uses sharp angles and geometrical planes to build his eccentric teapots and cups, which in fact function despite their seeming absurdity. *Scorpion Black* (1996 – 2013), a terrific scorpion-shaped sculpture with its black body and aggressive tail (that also mimics a teapot), exudes a certain menace. In the middle, there is a red ball atop a blue cube, which rises from a pale green disk—abstract shapes that contrast with its scorpion shape. Ever since Warhol, there has been emphasis in America on a Pop approach in art, and Shire is no exception to the rule, but his sense of form is strong enough to internalize the freewheeling informality of Pop sculpture and make something else of it.



Installation view: *Peter Shire, A Survey of Ceramics: 1970s to the Present*. Derek Eller Gallery, New York, September 8 - October 9, 2016. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Spun Orbit (2006) capitalizes on the whimsy of Shire's imagination. The bottom half of the work presents the recognizable form of a teapot, while the top half consists of two spheres, with two Band-Aid-like stainless steel planes attached to a thin steel rod, rising upward. The teapot is decorated with black-and-white stripes, while the spheres are orange. The construction rises buoyantly, but also absurdly, into the air, where its form feels like a child's toy. The sculptures, in the totality of their aspect, present a waggish view

of the imagination, which for Shire is youthful and irreverent. In the 21st century, art never seems to stray too far from enjoyment, even entertainment, and Shire reminds us that contemporary art need not be too serious to win us over. Yet, it would be a mistake to see his work as directed only toward gratification. Its irrational, nonsensical elements behave in such a way as to create an atmosphere of circuslike possibility, where anything might and does happen.

The outsize cup *Finestra*, a work from 2015, is covered with Abstract Expressionist decorations. It looks rather like a three-dimensional version of a teacup taken from an Elizabeth Murray painting. Here Shire gives the nod to ceramics' participation in the Abstract Expressionist movement, whose freedoms enabled artists like Peter Voulkos to experiment and generate forms that are truly powerful. Shire has produced a considerable number of large-scale public artworks while based in Los Angeles, and the works in this show, though small in dimension, play with size in ways that echo monumentality.

Shire takes refuge from a world saddled with impersonal authority by being fanciful. It is a form of artistic excitement but also moderate protest. Today, when artists no longer trust any sort of system, Shire's art becomes a way of understanding the ever-changing responsibility of the artist, who must develop an aesthetic to converse with the spirit of the time. And Shire has done exactly that—his teapots and other pieces both apotheosize and undermine the ideal form of the object. To praise and critique in the same moment is not easy to do, but Shire does so in exemplary fashion through exquisite and vigorous expression.



Peter Shire, *Spun Orbit*, 2006. Cone 06 clay and underglazes, with stainless steel detail. 26 × 12 × 7 inches. Courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery.