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Peter Shire, *Mexican Bauhaus Bridge*, 2006, clay with underglazes, stainless steel, 14½ × 15 × 12½".

Peter Shire
DEREK ELLER GALLERY

In 1974, Peter Shire set out to accomplish a seemingly nonsensical goal: that of creating a three-dimensional teapot. Having recently graduated from art school with a degree in ceramics, he was of course aware of the longstanding tradition of teapots having not only height and width but depth as well; an enclosed volume is, after all, a necessary precondition for containing the hot liquid from which these vessels take their name. But Shire was referring not so much to the form of the container, per se, as to the processes through which it was conceived and produced.

Most ceramic teapots are thrown on a wheel, which means that they are essentially a single curve rotated 360 degrees to produce a three-dimensional shape. In other words, their entire form can easily be captured in a simple contour drawing, and they can be designed in profile rather than truly in the round. Shire was in search of an approach that would allow for a more open-ended composition—one that inhabited space in unpredictable ways—and he rejected the customary potter's wheel in favor of a technique known as slab construction, in which sheets of semihardened clay are cut to size and adhered to each other with slip.

If all this sounds quite architectural (*slab construction* is itself a term that ceramics shares with the building trades, where it describes a method of cast concrete assembly), the resonance is not coincidental. Since the beginning of his career, Shire has been open about his fascination with the buildings of his hometown of Los Angeles, going so far as to cite John Lautner's famous design for the Googie's coffee shop on Sunset Boulevard as "absolutely one of the biggest influences" on his work. Lautner's building gave its name to the poppy, space-age modernism that defined LA's postwar vernacular, and the influence of so-called Googie architecture was obvious in the survey of Shire's ceramics recently on view at Derek Eller Gallery. Many of Shire's pieces could almost be masquerading as architectural models, their brash colors, wild cantilevers, sharp angles, and soaring planes offering a pastiche of LA's most garish retrofuturism.

Yet to describe these works as simply *architectural* is ultimately to overlook the ways in which they radically transgress the rules of architecture. As already suggested by its etymological roots in the Greek *tekton*, which refers to the craft of carpentry and the art of joinery, architecture is inevitably concerned with problems of material assembly—even the most outlandish Googie buildings were still bolted or welded together, built up piece by piece from wood and glass and steel. But there are no joints to speak of in Shire's works—the magic of clay is that adjacent volumes can simply be moistened and bonded, stuck together almost any which way.

Take *Mexican Bauhaus Bridge*, 2006, in which the titular structure is embodied in a thick rectangular frame of clay that looks very much like a truss except that it doesn't hold anything up. It simply spans a generic cubic volume and an oddly shaped fragment of clay, overhanging both and sitting between them at an awkward angle. Nor does it seem to have any connection, material or conceptual, to the inverted cone resting atop the central cube or the crooked protrusion sprouting from the cube's side. This disjunction is redoubled at the level of surface and color: *Mexican Bauhaus Bridge* sports patterns from polka dots (white on black) to horizontal stripes (soft pink and lime green) to painterly brushstrokes (a ghostly gray on a darker ground); *A Long Long Way, Green*, 2016, is an unlikely collision between pyramidal volumes in which the central piece is treated with no fewer than three shades of yellow, applied in a geometric pattern that seems to have no correspondence to the shapes beneath.

Architects have a long-standing obsession with ceramics—Frank Gehry's fascination with Ken Price's bulbous blobs is only the latest example of a trend that dates back at least to the fluid organicism of Art Nouveau stoneware. But this obsession tends to focus on the seemingly infinite plastic possibilities of clay. Ironically, Shire's works suggest precisely the opposite: that the most fascinating objects—and perhaps the most fascinating buildings as well—are not those that achieve the most inventive form but those in which form falls apart altogether.

—*Julian Rose*