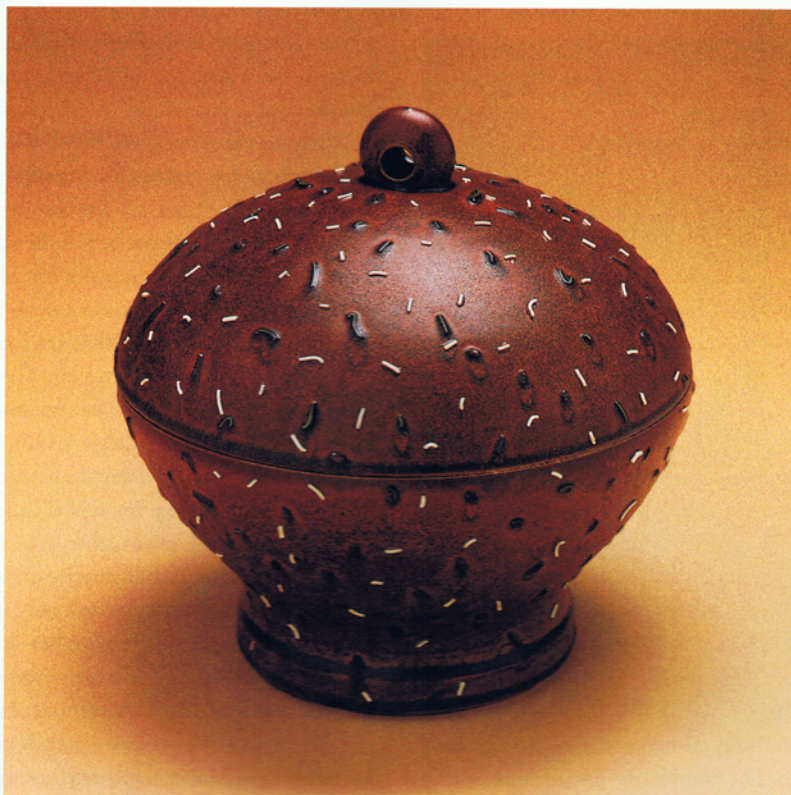


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Covered bowl, 12 inches (30 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown porcelain, with porcelain appliqué.

DON PILCHER REINVENTED

Georgette Ore and the Rascal Ware Story

by Linda Hillman

What do you do when you've studied with the greats—Shoji Hamada, Otto and Vivika Heino, Norm Schulman, Robert Archaibeau, and Ralph Bacerra; when you've had a long and successful career as a teacher yourself; when you've gained national acclaim as a ceramics artist, then scrapped it all out of frustration; when you've struggled with personal demons and come out intact; when you've met and married a woman who one day wants to know why, if you were such a big shot in clay, you don't make any pots for her? If you're Don Pilcher, you reinvent yourself—this time as the enigmatic Georgette Ore. You rediscover your potter's soul. You're on fire with ideas, and you're having the time of your life.

In 1986, Don Pilcher gave up pots and turned his studio toward sculpture. He sold his kick wheel and started teaching design instead of ceramics, which he had taught since 1966, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He'd been there since completing graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design. His personal life had gotten complicated and there seemed nowhere to go with the handsome, perfectly thrown work that had become his trademark in the world of ceramics. "In the '60s,

'70s and '80s," says close friend and potter Tom Turner, "Don Pilcher was one of the dominant ceramics artists in the Midwest, making huge stoneware pots and beautiful porcelain pots with incredible glazes. He had it all—material, process, form." Then he was gone.

In 1989, Pilcher met and married Linda Meyer, a senior researcher in reading and development for children. She would see notices or calls for work or invitations to exhibitions coming in and gathered that he had been someone in the ceramics world, so she began asking him to make her a few pots. He had little of his own work. "My husband's a potter, but he's never made me a pot," she'd say, and every time it came up, he'd say that he'd given up that life, given up those pots, and that he'd never go back again. Years later, she convinced him to throw again and he transformed his sculpture studio into one for ceramics. But, as the saying goes, "you really can't go home again," and Pilcher struggled with where this work might lead.

After a few hundred pieces, Pilcher had his skills back and could make the exquisitely potted elegant Chinese forms for which he had been known. But he wasn't excited enough to show

them to anyone. He needed to reach beyond these comfortable forms and figure out a body of work that could hold his interest. Through his love of challenge, complexity, writing, throwing, manipulating, glazing, pondering ceramics history, and downright fun, he began creating Rascal Ware.

"These are pots about ideas," Pilcher says, "ideas that honor what it is to put the clay on the wheel and spin it in space." One of the things he asks himself is whether he can make something that no one else has made before. It sets the bar high, but it's not impossible. He says, "It has to connect to you. You have to reinvent yourself, and that's hard work. It takes intellect. It's cerebral work."

The challenge for Pilcher in reinventing himself is the same as it always is for creative people: continuing to make honest, aesthetically ambitious pieces that are engaging. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, documenter of the practices of highly creative people, notes that to keep enjoying something one has to increase its complexity. Pilcher has given himself this challenge. The keen professional can look at his bowls and realize that you don't see this very often. With the glaze drips for feet, he's pared away a lot of the things that usually enhance and sell a product—in this case, a nicely trimmed foot, a beautifully turned and articulated rim—both things he's done before. The complexity reveals itself with a closer look.

Pilcher wonders, "Can I make these pieces on the wheel so when they come off, without benefit of foot or rim, they are

whole, complete, engaging statements, using a modest series of means—the wheel, the wily fingers and these many years of skill and practice? That's the journey that keeps me interested."

Pilcher recalls that there was a concept required at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, one of his *alma maters*, which stuck in his memory. "Your reach must be greater than your grasp." That is, the most ambitious outlook on life would be to do something you hadn't done before. From that, Pilcher extrapolated that the artists with the most courage were the ones who dealt with the question, "What can I do *today*?"

Now he's potting, writing and feeding his imagination. The literary side of this work is Pilcher's story. Autobiographically told through three voices—Georgette Ore, Junior Bucks and Pilcher—it's gentle, humorous, deeply honest truth. To spin his web a bit further, he published photos of Georgette's pieces photographed in the context of a head of hair. He did this for several months before he released a full autobiography on this debonair, but fictitious potter, Ms. Ore.

In this incarnation, Pilcher has decided to do things differently. He wants Rascal Ware to produce interest, but he says he has no other goal for it than to test his own imagination. "Basically," he says, "this project is a body of work based on a fictional narrative, which is actually my autobiography sprinkled with a few gems from the life of an American original, George Ohr. The point is to apply the essence of Ohr but not his particulars."

"It's Pilcher dreaming again," says Norm Schulman, Pilcher's former Rhode Island School of Design teacher. "If it's not his dream works, it's his *daydream* works. He's playing with us, trying to get us to commit to saying what this is about. He's putting us on, as would George Ohr. As I see it, this is not a comeback for Don; it's a continuum. The only thing he's come back to is clay. He's still teaching design through his work."

Rascal Ware: What Is the Story?

I interviewed Pilcher at his Champaign, Illinois, studio. At one point he said, "I'm going to throw one of these Ore bowls so you can see what's involved." We moved from the house through a garden to his absolutely immaculate, spotless, two-year-old studio.

Looking at these luscious, undulating, asymmetrical shapes in Pilcher's workspace forming tableaux on his shelves, worktable, everywhere, I quickly take notes as he throws one of Georgette's pieces for me. (He usually throws and manipulates four at a time in about one-and-a-half hours, he says,



"Rascal Ware Bowl," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain.

but then his mind starts to wander.) He muses on the questions he's answering in this body of work.

"I'm at the point in my life where I can ask myself, 'If I could make anything, what would I make?' I've answered that question and I'm only making what I want to right here, right now. I have chosen to explore Georgette's story, Junior Bucks' story—my story—through Rascal Ware. Pushing my imagination and my material, I'm comfortable working things out through Georgette.

"This new work may answer a question that continues to plague me: 'How do we explain the ubiquitous Asian influence on potters in the United States?' I can't solve this quite yet, but if an American potter such as Georgette wanted to make a new body of work that had no Asian influence, what would she reference? European pots—Miró, Picasso? Indigenous Native American pottery? The face jugs of Chester Hewell or Lanier Meaders? The hill pottery of Ben Owen I? I can't imagine making anything like these because each of their shadows is so long. But George Ohr? Well, maybe. He was an original American potter."

The studio exhaust fan is banging and Pilcher talks as he throws. What he's done today is make a deeper waist in the pot than usual. I note that he throws very dry. He's considered waiting for the forms to set up a little before he manipulates them, but has decided against this. He touches this one immediately after throwing, making conscious, cavernous, erotic movements on every side. Knowledgeable potters and viewers will know how dry, how well thrown the piece must have been to take this much distortion and still stand up. Each of the pot's profiles is different—one does not predict another.

Schulman looks at these Ore bowls and says, "This lumpy twisted form, you look at it and you begin to see things. It's like clouds. If you don't turn off to it, you see figures, faces, nipples, toes. It's an exquisite piece of throwing. You don't do all that to porcelain unless you know how, and unless you have a very special clay body. He tortures the daylights out of these pieces, but they still have amazing integrity. It's not a haphazard thing he is doing—it's beautifully executed."

Pilcher says that, though his fingers are wily, they are always the same size. In order not to get redundant images, he made clay "fingers" of different sizes to make different moves and to shift the scale ever so slightly. The idea of using clay to form clay is nicely resonant. For every "in" there is an "out" but some outs have no ins, making a Bach-like variation-on-a-theme statement.

"I have a streak of Peck's bad boy in me and a wicked sense of humor that I never found an outlet for in ceramics. Suddenly here it was! I was asking myself, 'Now that I've got the work, how am I going to show it? How will it be received?' So I sent a piece of Rascal Ware along with Georgette's artist's statement to a number of my colleagues and to several galleries. You should see the responses! David Rago of Rago Arts does secondary reselling of American Arts and Crafts movement pots at very upscale prices. He has bought and will auction probably \$1 million worth of George Ohr's pieces. Well, David Rago acknowledged receipt of his Ore bowl and said he'd be happy to auction it off!



"Rascal Ware Vase," 9 inches (23 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain.



"Rascal Ware Vase," 10 inches (25 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain.

“Tom Turner, a potter I admire, said he was blown away by the pot Georgette sent him, and even more so by the writing describing it by Georgette herself. He also quipped that George Ohr is lucky he didn’t have to deal with me or Georgette! Tom told me that our old friend, Tim Mather, who teaches ceramics at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, said, ‘No one should be able to have this much fun!’ I am so lucky.

“I also sent a piece to The Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi, and ironically, I got it back. It seemed ironic to me because George Ohr had once sent quite a bit of work to a museum for a show. They chose a couple of pieces and sent all the rest back. Ohr was so angry that he told them to send everything back, which they did. Well, the museum in Biloxi had kept Georgette’s piece for a month and then wrote that their acquisitions committee had rejected it. The letter thanked me for my offer of a genuine Georgette Ore, and said that if I had a genuine George Ohr, they’d accept that instead. When you’re doing comedy that is also deadly serious, you’re throwing people very complicated stuff.

“I have to say this. Georgette’s pots are not for everybody. To the people throwing and trimming clay, making pots and selling to the public, what I’m talking about here is ivory-tower bull. They are ideas, concepts, attempts that no self-respecting studio potter who’s got to put stuff out there for the public could ever indulge in. They don’t have time for that. It looks dumb, stupid, like a waste of talent and a waste of time.

“My former student, Dave Toan, once said, ‘You’ve always made pots about ideas.’ He’s right. This is just more of that. It’s also about intent, motives, and why, when you’ve made one kind of work for so long, would you make work like this? Is it only a late-career adjustment? I’m calling it an adjustment because I have made my clay carefully since 1958. That’s 45 years. I was a careful worker. Now I am nearly reckless. Whatever I’d hoped to prove or to express in the early days, I did as well as I cared to do it and as long as I cared to do it. Now I’m just looking for fun.”

Pilcher admits that George Ohr beat him to making an American pot without Asian influence by 100 years, but ultimately he says, “The value of this work is personal: It gives substance to my own imagination.”

If the personal value of the Rascal Ware project is individual creativity—the successful expression of his own imagination in a way that is personally satisfying—he is not sure that the function of his bowls or their aesthetic content are going to connect with people as strongly as their *hook*, which is, getting people to ask “What is Pilcher doing?”

He’s treating clay as plastic—heated and malleable—in response to a line in the movie *The Graduate*, where the character Benjamin is told that the future is in plastics. This line stuck because Pilcher saw the film at about the same time he made the decision to go into ceramics. It made him wonder if he had gone into the right business. Now he says he never knew what a fringe field he had chosen. “Potter is right up there with horse-shoer. They’re important, but there aren’t a lot of them.

“So what’s important about Georgette? That’s a good question, but let me substitute a word—meaningful—and I can give a better answer. We need to ask what is meaningful about her because I’m not sure it is important work, but it is meaningful to me. It’s given me the opportunity to go back and successfully answer that other question: Can I sit down and do something I have never done before?

“And then the bonus question: Will this project find a life outside my studio where people in the field might recognize it as having some kind of value? Will it start other conversations?”

In an exhibition at Terra Incognito Studios and Gallery, Pilcher planned a “Rascal Ware Smorgasbord” where he presented each pot in some well-known ceramic surface treatment and firing method that he’s worked in during his career.

I ask whether Pilcher is fomenting a revolution in the clay world. He replied, “No it’s not a revolution; it’s more a temper tantrum. I don’t expect to convert anybody. Once you’re a tenured professor, to speak your mind is really not very bold, but it’s what you need to do. When I was at the university, I used to do that. A lot of times I was a pain in the ass, but many times I was right. I don’t think that I converted anyone.

“I would like to be well thought of in the contributions I’ve made, but unpredictable in what comes next. It’s a challenge because I have been known for making substantive, aesthetically beautiful work. To come in with this stuff, people may think I’ve gone off the deep end. But that’s fine. I’ve got a lovely wife; my kids are up and on their own; I have a wonderful home; I have my health so far as I know; clay that works; kilns that fire.

“This other life of service work that Linda and I have makes Rascal Ware real playtime stuff. We are court-appointed special advocates for juveniles. We’re in court with serious cases of neglect and abuse, drugs, sexual assaults—grizzly stuff that’s as real as it can be. Making Rascal Ware is the bright side and the balance of the court activity because after spending three hours trying to get an eleven-year-old out of jail, what is it to come in here and photograph a pot and send it out? So it is in this context that Rascal Ware is the sunny core of my life.

“I am where I am now because I continue to look for new ideas. It becomes a habit. What I like most about the field is its complexity. There are lots of art forms, but ceramics requires as complex a set of skills, knowledge, experience, persistence and flexibility as I know.”

Pilcher is not hopeful about the future of handmade pottery in America. In his opinion, the culture is becoming more and more disconnected with things that really count. Things that are urgent, rather than important, drive us. People’s attention spans have become hopelessly short. The population is no longer reflective. It’s reactive. “Who do you want as an audience for your art?” he asks rhetorically. “Reflective people, I say to myself, and yet I know that everything about our popular culture stimulates reactive response.”

When viewers encounter Georgette’s Rascal Ware, will they see how very dry and agile the throwing was? How the glaze



"Rascal Ware, Late Afternoon at the Nude Beach," wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, unfired, by Don Pilcher (Georgette Ore), Champaign, Illinois.

droplets become the bowl's foot? How the rim was lovingly touched? Will a trained eye see how Pilcher intentionally addressed the Iga and Bizen aesthetic (not form—his potting will always be thin) in a European rather than an Asian way? Will they note that some of these pots look scorched, not because bundles of straw were packed among the pots during firing, but because of his attention to glaze application? Will the viewer reflect on the questions Pilcher is addressing? Will they see him as courageous?

Val Cushing, a potter who received one of Georgette's bowls in the mail, sums it up: "There has not been a lot of humor and wit in American ceramics since the days of Arneson, Gilhooly, Baldwin and a few others. As I read Georgette's artist statement and held this beautifully made bowl in my hands, I was puzzled. It was obviously made by a sophisticated and highly skilled potter, but who wrote the clever spoof on one of America's icons? Who also would have been fully capable of doing the same sort of thing himself? When I realized who this really was I laughed and thought, 'Welcome back Don Pilcher.' His previously striking ceramics have, in recent years, been in a kind of silent period, but his talent, humor and insight are very much with us again."

And yes, he is with us again. Aside from Pilcher's off-handed manner of dealing with queries concerning the value of Georgette's

work, he is raising serious questions about issues facing the thoughtful contemporary potter. Rather than being ivory-tower bull, they are concerns regarding the viable future of making pots. What can pots be *besides* the humble pot we have come to romanticize and love? Where is the American aesthetic? What do pots (as material culture) made in the 21st century tell us about 21st-century Americans? Who are the new Don Pilchers—those who push the limits of what a pot can be but stay true to the essence of a pot? Where are the necessary technical and historical foundations being laid in the education of new potters (not clay workers or ceramics sculptors, but potters)? Will young new potters know and respect what came before?

Pilcher's personal questions—dealing with the complexity that working with clay offers; the ideas that these pots propagate; and the dreams that they might spin—in addition to questions stimulated by his intellect, keep him acutely challenged as he reinvents himself. He is reaching way out there—greater than his normal grasp—and he and Georgette Ore, Junior Bucks, Mosley Bunkham (a new hire) are having a great time doing it!

the author *Linda Hillman is a freelance writer and studio potter living in Chicago.*