

Sizing Up The Latest From Stan Bitters

The last time ceramist Stan Bitters had a one-man show at the Fresno Arts Center was in 1962, when "Big" was still "Beautiful," and most folks would have thought any suggestion that America was in its twilight as the land of unlimited expectations was just plain silly.

Today, we listen with deepening gloom as commentators and economists forecast a future of "lowered expectations" and "thinking small." But it's hard to see the season's first exhibition at the Fresno Arts Center without the passing thought that somebody didn't tell Stan Bitters.

Inherent in Bitters's ceramic sculpture, or most of it at least, is the kind of positivism, even heroic energy that once was thought to represent the national character, from an era when America's growing iron and steel industry was accepted as the source of all progress, the solution to humanity's problems.

You may not find everything Bitters does appealing. Like many contemporary potters, his work has nothing to do with traditional notions of ceramics as craft: containers such as jars, bowls or cups, or maybe large tear-drop-shaped bottles with necks so small they might take a decorative stalk of grain or two but nothing so large as a cat-tail.

These days clay is the principal medium for modern sculpture, replacing wood, stone or metal. The Arts Center's exhibition of work by Bitters is the most spectacular representation you're likely to see here of just how malleable a substance clay can be for producing sculpture.

"Flamboyant" is probably the first assessment the viewer assumes of the personality of the artist, walking into the gallery at North First Street and Yale Avenue. How many other artists would dare to line the walls of the entranceway with ceramic tiles and bars bearing photo images of the artist in the glazed finish? And offer them for sale at prices ranging from \$25 to \$100.

Certainly, few artists are so prolific and energetic that they could create enough art in a matter of months to fill all three galleries of the Center. Simply, Bitters is the Central Valley's most prodigious and inventive hander of clay. Other adjectives which spring to mind, browsing through (more specifically, around) the art, most of it incorporating organic allusions to landscape, range through "exuberant," "forceful," "brusque," "monumental," and occasionally "humorous."

The autobiographical blocks or

plaques are Bitters's concept of "fun art," created, he says, as a diversion from the complex larger works.

He has also added, since the opening night reception, small (about 10 inches in-diameter) spheres in which abstract reliefs and variegated glazes on one side are contrasted with the elegant, minimal chrome of the flip side (you're right, if you guessed they're hub-caps).

But that sort of thing is strictly commercial stuff, calling to mind what other clever, contemporary ceramists used to do to get away from convention. More in character with Bitters's real concerns is the artwork which looms up as one steps into the foyer — work that runs to a bulk feasible only for a ceramist who fires with a walk-in size kiln, that is so large the exhibition's installation was delayed while carpenters enlarged the Arts Center's front entrance-way.

The artist has called it "Monolith," and that's a specific enough label. At first glance it's just a series of stacked blocks, very much in the minimal style. But the upper end is pitted, tunneled and eroded as if by natural forces. Towering about eight feet high there, it might be (somebody suggested) a monument to abused earth, or an architectural fragment of some ancient civilization.

The most immediately appealing part of the show is nothing so metaphorical, but a grand installation for the backyard. It would have to be a very affluent neighborhood, of course — consisting of a wall relief with spraying fountain, pool, wood deck large enough to seat a wedding party dinner, overhead cover and tree-lites in outside ceramic pots.

Assuming that one finds esthetic pleasure in the expansive, gourd-like structure of the wall relief, anyone would find such a constructive wedding of art and architecture a refreshing and secluded oasis.

Unfortunately, the fountain and pond were dry and disassembled for repair when this viewer was there so much of the effect was lost. (The plastic liner of the pool was perforated by workers' feet during installation and there was water, water everywhere at the opening night reception.) But the leaks were to have been taken care of and the water flowing again by publication date.

Today, as back in 1962, such an installation makes a spectacular demonstration of Bitters' theory that art and life ought to merge in everyday life. As he did in a book on the



Kathryn Funk, curator of exhibitions, Stan Bitters, center, and R. Andrew Maass, executive director of the arts center, confer before the

Bitters' mural "Peanut Butter Forest."

See Photo

subject, "Environmental Ceramics" a couple of seasons back, Bitters has often made the case that man's quarters — whether business or home — ought to be constructed with an eye to strong visual as well as functional considerations.

A statement Bitters made for a newspaper interviewer on the occasion of that first Arts Center exhibition fits his present viewpoint about "warm, humanized structures."

"A garden is one of the few places in the world where you can find privacy," he said. "If you don't have time to create a beautiful garden, you suffer visually."

"By a beautiful garden I don't mean a large expanse of lawn, but a rich visual statement using the tex-

tural qualities of clay, stone, wood and plants, instead of paint or canvas. We need places like this to survive the sheer ugliness of much of what surrounds us."

The exhibit contains several pieces, notably some panoramic wall relief murals, that Bitters designed to add color and visual appeal to the stark, blank window-less walls, so common in corporate office buildings (corporations have commissioned a number of Bitters fountains and wall murals).

Bitters believes things are looking up these days, in terms of the attention paid to architecture putting greater emphasis on warmth through organic art. That may be because over the past decade the artist has

become the Central Valley's most successful one-man industry in architectural ceramics.

"I have a beard now," he says with characteristically mocking humor. "I look older. (He's 44.) More people take my ideas seriously."

The more massive abstract pieces on display are plainly designed to command a public view, in office, auditorium or courtyard. Among them are "Landscape Fountain," the show's single most spectacular construction in size (about 20 feet long and four feet wide, up to five feet high), use of color, and imaginative allusion to rolling hills and stream; "Big Cloud," which incorporates cumulus cloud and the symbology of an oak tree's strength in a powerful,

free-standing clump, and "Peanut Butter Forest," a wall-sculpture so amusing for the awkward, childlike simplicity of its forms, with trunks that come off the wall and roots like earth shoes that sit on the floor.

Bitters has said his artistic concerns today remain the same as those of the early 1960s. What changes he has wrought otherwise are principally in the areas of refinement and in greater emphasis on color.

One thing hasn't changed: He still hopes to create sculptural forms with clay "that people can walk into rather than around." The public may never be invited to see his first real-life demonstration of the feasibility of clay as a building material: An addition to his picturesque, creekside home in the foothills.