



# Betty Woodman

## Seeing Art from the Inside

*A Review by Jan Garden Castro*

WITH A LIGHT TOUCH, BETTY WOODMAN MERGES painting, ceramics and art history. She is the 2014 American Craft Council Gold Medalist, with a solo exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles forthcoming in January 2015. Her groundbreaking ceramics solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006, her March 2014 exhibition at Francesca Pia in Zurich, and two art books titled *Betty Woodman* – from Monacelli Press (2006) and Skira/with Salon 94 (2014) are five reasons why this octogenarian is everyone's favourite ceramics artist.

The cover of the new *Betty Woodman* book is composed of what Woodman calls "spare parts"

which she has painted and fired. She describes how these came about while making *Of Botticelli* (for 2013 exhibition at Salon 94) to Barry Schwabsky: "... in fact a lot of those pieces are simply spare parts. The process of making the columns was first to make forms on the potter's wheel and then to stretch and flatten them on the floor. Using a paper pattern, I then cut out the shapes in the columns. So there are many smaller clay pieces 'left over'. And I save them. I find them interesting because I would never intentionally cut them out that way. I never would have made that shape for its own sake. Then I look at them. I fire them and then I put them away and eventually I use them..." (pp 87-88).



In addition to these pieces, which are either nailed to a wall or laid on paper on the floor as though they are Persian carpets, Woodman's sculpture takes dramatic turns in this book. As in the show at The Metropolitan Museum, some works, such as *Avant-Garde Room* and *Red Room with Lattice*, combine glazed earthenware pieces with broad looping and curving brush strokes of acrylic on canvas. The painted and ceramic forms could be abstract human or animal body parts, vases or silhouettes, depending on one's imagination. *Avant-Garde Room* breaks up the interior space using three different patterns – dots, diagonal stripes and vertical stripes, all in combinations of green, red and white. The 'window' area is a swirl of blue paint with a white pattern on top. The mix of

Facing page: *Avant-Garde Room*. 2013.  
Glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, acrylic paint, canvas and wood. 68 x 82.75 x 10.5 in. (172.7 x 210.2 x 26.7 cm)  
Above: *Red Room with Lattice*. 2010. Glazed earthenware, acrylic and canvas. 86 x 86 x 13 in. (218.4 x 218.4 x 33 cm)

basic colours and forms is complex and varied. *Red Room with Lattice* offers a vase with a round centre and flat wings against a canvas painting in two hues of pinkish-red that set off the white-on-green lattice and three green-on-white Egyptian vase or figure forms. The ceramic shape above the green forms could be a vase with a black handle or the back of an exotic long robe.

One feature of Woodman's vases is that they provide different scenes, shapes and hues from



**Tulip Vases/Yellow Room.** 2010. Glazed earthenware, canvas and acrylic paint. 96.5 x 84 x 12 in.

Facing page, top row: **Color Sample Vase (Side 1 and 2).** 2009. Glazed earthenware. 35 x 28 x 6 in. (88.9 x 71.1 x 15.2 cm)

Facing page, second row: **Aztec Vase 13 (Side 1, 2, 3 and 4).** 2011. Glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer and acrylic paint. 36.5 x 36 x 28 in. (92.7 x 91.4 x 71.1 cm)

Facing page, third and fourth rows: **London Diptych (Side 1 and 2).** 2010. Glazed earthenware and paint. 31.75 x 80 x 9 in. (80.6 x 203.2 x 22.9 cm)







different sides and angles. *Color Sample Vase*, has cartoonish black outlines with white, red and gray solids, stripes and curves on one side and dashes of glaze with black numbers on the other side. *Aztec Vase 13*, is austere and formal, more black and white on one side with a series of wavy brown lines dividing a colour-coded esoteric language on the other side. In *Tulip Vases/Yellow Room*, 2010, convex and concave vases 'converse' with each other, with ceramic tulips on the wall and with the paintings with ceramic 'scraps' above them.

Salon 94 Director Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn's introduction movingly portrays her early consciousness of Woodman's "pillow pitcher atop a Giacometti table in our childhood dining room. Before my mother entertained, she cradled this vessel in her arms and carried it into the butler's pantry, where we would fill it with flowers. With roots in Etruscan vessels and Chinese porcelain pillows, this form, now signature, never behaved as a mere vase; it stood clearly in our home as an object of ceremony" (p 11). Rohatyn concludes, "Betty's vessels carry a sheer force built over a lifetime. She has barrelled her way through huge swaths of art history, quoting Japanese woodblock printing on one side and a Matisse or Bonnard still life on the other . ." (p 13).

Woodman's unique union of painting and ceramics adapts patterns, hues and lines that juggle art's histories and the artist's own visions.

*Facing page: Betty Woodman's Studio.  
Above: Red Room with Lattice (Detail).  
Below: Betty Woodman Working Detail.*

#### ENDNOTES

Betty Woodman.  
Foreword by Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn  
and Conversation with Barry Schwabsky. Milan:  
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See also: [http://craftcouncil.org/  
post/2014-american-  
craft-council-awards,  
www.salon94.  
com/artists/detail  
betty-woodman](http://craftcouncil.org/post/2014-american-craft-council-awards, www.salon94.com/artists/detail/betty-woodman).




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Jan Castro's books include *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (Crown & Random House) and *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* (Japan Association of Art Museums). Contact Jan at [www.jancastro.com](http://www.jancastro.com) to receive her monthly "In the Studio" blog at [www.sculpture.org](http://www.sculpture.org). All photos Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.