

Urning a Living the Cool Way

Whimsy and craft merge beautifully for our Selfridges

By Alan Kellogg

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Carol and Richard Selfridge are wading through their chicken caesars and Remembering When, back to their first summer open house. Having recently established Selfridge Pottery, the couple had talked it over and decided throwing a backyard party wouldn't be a bad way to thank friends, neighbors and patrons for past support, not to mention drumming up a little business in what can be a slow season for anyone who sells almost anything.



It was a big success. At a time when Carol says they could live on \$300 a month, "butter and eggs money," the soiree-show brought in \$1,500, an impressive total when you consider the most expensive piece went for \$60. Things have changed a bit since then, 25 years ago this weekend. The kids are grown and out of the house, the Selfridges now lecture and hold workshops across the continent and their work is included in juried exhibitions in France, Australia, the U.S. and in many private and public collections. The overhead has gone up, along with the quality of work and, of course, the prices. These days, a single piece can fetch more than the entire weekend take in 1976.



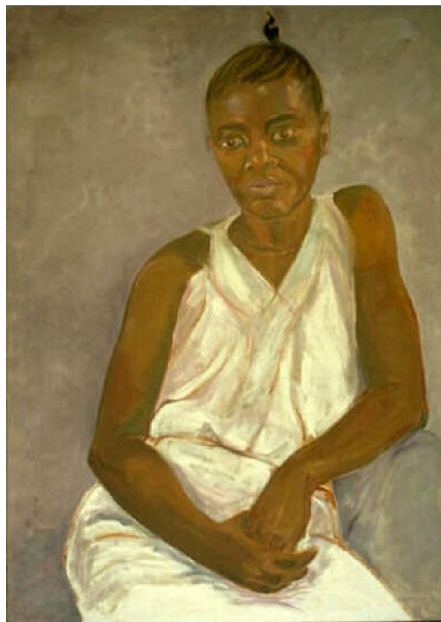
"Imari Geisha Teapot for Van Gogh Tea Ceremony"
"1999 Sidney Myer International Ceramics Award", Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, Australia.



"Translucent Porcelain Demi Mugs"
Available from the studio showroom only

On the other hand, you can still walk in and buy a tea cup or salad plate for a wedding shower, as long as you don't ask to have the lucky couple's names written on the side, a request that can provoke the fightin' side of any serious potter. And serious the Selfridges must be, since the actuarial tables on married artists working collaboratively and succeeding both professionally and personally (not without the odd counseling session they hasten to add) for more than a quarter century must be on the daunting side of improbability. A local success story, definitely. World headquarters, then and now, are a pleasant wood frame house set mid-block on a leafy Mill Creek street. A small sign in the corner of the porch window - you could easily miss it - announces the business, an understated touch that no doubt pleases the neighbours, with whom relations apparently remain sunny.

The royal tour. Richard - a self-described working-class kid from Seattle with something of the pitchman, albeit an erudite one, about him - leads us downstairs to the cramped, whitewashed basement studio where he and Carol sit at their wheels, making whimsy more often than not. The room smells of hot wax. They fashion their own clay, they make their own glazes - wood ash from Barriere, feldspar from Lytton. They're interested in colour, he says, in painting flat things to look round and round things to look flat.



"I Miss My Homeland"

oil on canvas

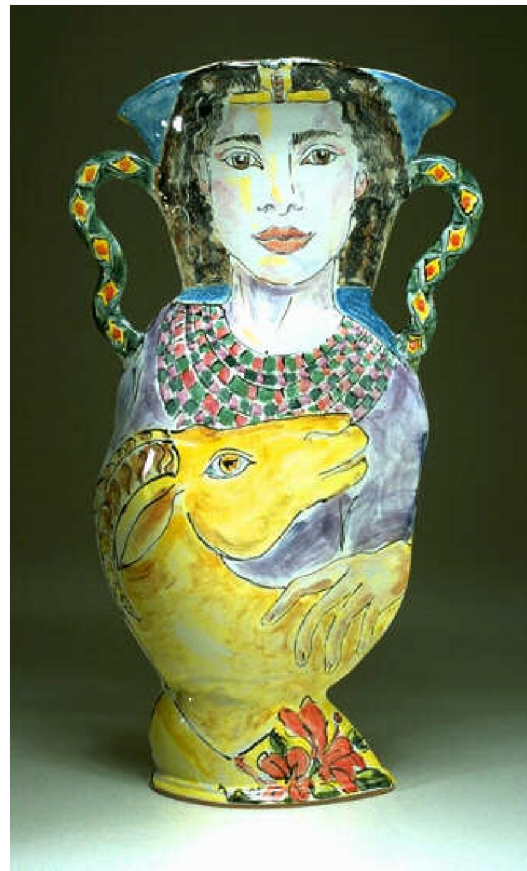


"Canola Window"

glazed majolica tile framed painting

Each is also a painter: Carol also works in oils, Richard fancies landscapes. The images on their near-trademarked illusionistic majolica - a Selfridge piece is pretty easy to spot in these parts - frequently spring from mythological references. Often, Carol will paint one side, Richard, the other. They're often playful - imagine a pot in a painting by Matisse or Picasso - as Carol says, giant caricatures of traditional, historic pots, "but flattened." The Selfridges seem to live and work as transparently - translucently is

closer - as some of the lovely porcelain pieces they make along with the majolica and functional stoneware.



"Selket, Goddess of Magic; or "the Girls Sell our Work at Sotheby's"

And they could teach IKEA something about inspired space-utilization. The family washer and dryer sit near the photo studio used for shooting slides, just around the corner from the ball mill and vats of glaze, shelves of stock, molds and materials. Outside, wood-fired kilns - a third is on the way, bricks neatly stacked - share a backyard with a barbecue. A gas-fired kiln sits on the back porch. A small sales gallery occupies the front porch. The house is packed with good art - many trades from local artists, along with irresistible purchases made in their sundry travels.

Over lunch, they answer my questions about life and times. The two met at Pottery West here and became friends for a while before getting more serious. Carol was an Air Force brat, born in Belleville, Ont., who picked up an English degree and taught at St. Joe's and in Vancouver, travelling to Japan and southeast Asia along the way, dazzled by their ceramic art. Richard went to Washington State and UCLA, worked as an aviation tool maker and picked up a Masters in political philosophy; his students at the U of A included Grant Mitchell and Derek Fox.



Carol, who says she shares a "boss personality" with her partner, thinks things have worked out so well because they also share a natural affinity for risk-taking. They're not so sure it could be duplicated if they began today, with required initial capitalization of over \$100,000. They say they've pretty well given up on recognition (Richard likes to call it "consensual validation") by public

institutions like the EAG - which does not own a Selfridge to date - content to take their professional bows in the many conferences they attend throughout the world, and in that big marketplace out there.

"Many of our patrons are aging hippies and their children. They are generous and loyal. Getting into a museum collection is nice, but selling work (to the public) is sustaining in itself. It's like Jules Olitsky, who said he made paintings for seven people whose opinions he cared about," says Carol. Nor do they resent making the smaller, more functional pieces anyone can afford. "Potters are funny. We make these squared whiskey cups in series, and I can look at three out of 20 and keep them for my friends, knowing that I'd like to drink some Glenfiddich in one of those. Perhaps it's a gender thing, but I don't mind working with small things. I don't get bored."



It took some time, but by the end of our chat, the secret of Selfridge longevity in all things finally emerged. "He's the one with the energy. We'll be working on something and Richard will get excited and tell me all about it. "And I'll say Richard, that's a really good idea. I'm not doing it."

