

*From Paul Kotula:*

It is with great sadness that I announce the passing of Tony Hepburn, influential artist, educator, writer, mentor and friend. He died January 5, 2015 at his home in Chicago, IL.

Born September 9, 1942 in Manchester, England, Tony Hepburn attended Camberwell College of Art receiving his N.D.D. in 1963 and later attended London University earning his A.T.D. in 1965. He recalls his early study with Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, Frank Auerbach and Ron Kitaj as pivotal to his studio practice involving a consistent embrace of ceramics and drawing.

With his highly defined traditional skills and adventuresome inclinations, Tony Hepburn was to become an important figure in ceramics from the onset. His influential "Letter from London" column that appeared in *Craft Horizons* from 1967 to 1970 introduced him to his American contemporaries and he began to travel to the United States beginning in 1968 as part of an exchange program sponsored by the British Craft Council. His exposure to the pioneering work of Peter Voulkos, Ken Price, Jim Melchert and others in this circle inspired him. His career at home was gaining ground. In 1969 his work was included in "The Digswell Experiment" presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Seibu Gallery, Tokyo; and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. In 1970 he was awarded the Gold Medal for his work included in the prestigious Ceramic Biennale in Faenza, Italy. A highly significant solo exhibition, "Recent Work (Materials Pieces)" presented at Camden Arts Centre in London in 1971, affirmed Hepburn's growing disposition toward a new presence in ceramics. Clay in varying degrees of process and form including extrusions, often supported by systems of metal and rope, represented the medium through gravity rather its more common impulse of volume.

Tony Hepburn became Principal Lecturer in Fine Art at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry (now called Coventry University) in 1971 and remained there through 1975. In Coventry he became affiliated with a group of conceptual artists collaborating under the title of Art & Language, including founders Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell. During the 1974-75 academic year, he took a position as Visiting Artist and Head of Crafts at the Art Institute of Chicago. He and American conceptualist Jim Melchert from the University of California, Berkeley, took a defining approach to teaching -- each taught the other's classes from afar. The following year (1976) he became Head of the Division of Art and Design at the noted New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University where he continued as Professor of Ceramics until 1992.

At Alfred, Hepburn's work shifted to embrace the vessel, the epitome of ceramics at the university, and to celebrate the people who sought and made life in rural America. He formed still lifes using the cup and varying combinations and states of unglazed, yet fired clay to form precarious and tenuous situations. Hepburn also formed works with represented and real objects. Sculpted and found watering cans, boots, an array of mallets and funnels, were common symbols for veneration and humanity. A key work, "R.T.," pays homage to his colleague and neighbor, the late Robert Turner. On the center of a supporting structure is Turner's "Canyon". It is flanked equally by six sensitively hand-built studies by Hepburn. Under the table lies a very large mallet set upon a stand as if it were a gavel. While this was art about art, it was a humble version of it. Turner remained a fascination for Hepburn.

He would later co-author a monograph “Robert Turner: Shaping Silence, A Life in Clay” with former critic and art writer Marsha Miro. Larger structures, ‘Gates’, also emerged in multiple forms during these years, mostly during on-site installations in solo projects or collaborative ones with Jun Kaneko. His use of drawing, on paper and on walls, also became more prominent in his practice as way of understanding, building and recording form.

Hepburn had numerous solo exhibitions during his tenure at Alfred University including those at Theo Portnoy Gallery, New York; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England; Exhibit A, Chicago; The New Gallery, Bemis Project, Omaha; Bellas Artes, Santa Fe and Ester Saks, Chicago. His work was also included in “100 Years of American Ceramics,” Everson Museum of Art, Everson, NY; “Clay Revisions: Plate/Cup/Bowl,” Seattle Art Museum, WA; “The Eloquent Object,” Philbrook Art Museum, Tulsa, OK; “American Ceramics,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul; and “Drawings,” Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

In fall of 1992, Tony Hepburn accepted a temporary position as Visiting Head of Ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art while its then Resident was on leave. What was only to be a one-year arrangement turned into a sixteen-year commitment. He once stated, “Detroit reminds me of my native Manchester.” His first studio, designed by the esteemed Eliel Saarinen, was soon filled with remnants of ongoing experiments that he began at Alfred, but added castings of mannequin heads replete with blindfolds would later be presented in numbers within his commanding 1993 installation and performance “Do Not Think About the Blue Door” presented at Cranbrook Art Museum. Later, three residencies at the European Ceramics Workcentre (EKWC) in `s-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, would transform Hepburn’s practice. There he formed bodies of work based on the paintings of the city’s namesake Hieronymus Bosch, Salman Rushdie’s writings on hybridity, and the transforming language made possible through digital process and the potter’s wheel. All of this work was made with ceramic materials and technologies less common to his practice and the work explored multiple histories simultaneously.

Hepburn’s experiences at EKWC influenced more than his studio research. He based the design of the new ceramics studio at Cranbrook Academy of Art on those of EKWC making the studio at Cranbrook among the most advanced in the country. And, as Hepburn’s growing interest in new technologies surrounded him, he began producing photographs based on centrifuge; the camera was at the center of each work. His life then changed drastically. His wife Pauline’s illness and passing from cancer overwhelmed him, so Hepburn created potent, yet mournful hymns in clay and other media that incorporated images and objects representing the technologically advanced medical equipment that was used in an attempt to cure his wife’s disease and to alleviate her pain. One, a 4-foot-square black Formica-covered board supported by over-scaled prescription bottles and protected by chrome bed railings, contained in its center two small vessels, one a dark and roughly textured simple pot that holds the other, a delicate smooth porcelain bottle.

In his late years at the academy, Hepburn committed to large-scale invitational commissions including his “Korean Gate” for Clayarch Gimhae Museum, South Gyeongsang, Korea. When asked about his vast and varying bodies of work Hepburn stated, “I have never wanted my work to be visually coherent or stylistically linear; the world changes, so too does my work...the mediating condition that resists confusion is the choice of clay as my... filter through which things pass.”

During his Cranbrook years, Hepburn's work was presented in solo exhibitions at Revolution, Detroit and New York; Dorothy Weiss Gallery, San Francisco; Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock; and the Clay Studio, Philadelphia. It was also included in such significant group exhibitions as "Interventions," Detroit Institute of Arts; "Ceramics Annual 2000," Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont; "World Ceramic Exposition," World Ceramic Center, Seoul; "Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics 1950-2000," Los Angeles County Museum of Art; "The coffee was very slow in coming," Paul Kotula Projects, Detroit; and "Ceramic Modernism: Hans Coper, Lucie Rie and Their Legacy," The Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto.

After retiring from Cranbrook in 2008, he moved to Chicago where he continued to draw and write. Along with his column for Craft Horizons and his co-authorship of "Robert Turner: Shaping Silence, a Life in Clay," Hepburn's words have appeared in such periodicals as American Craft, Ceramics: Art and Perception, The New Art Examiner and Ceramic Review. His work has also been the subject of many writers, from book authors to critics.

Hepburn has received many awards during his lifetime including those from The American Craft Council (2008), The Virginia Groot Foundation (1991), the New York State Council on the Arts ('90/'86) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1985). His work is included in numerous public collections such as Icheon World Ceramic Center, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul; Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Kanazawa Art Museum, Japan; The Museum of Contemporary Art, 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands; Mint Museum of Art, Charlottesville, NC; International Ceramics Museum, Faenza, Italy; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI; and H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth II, England. He became an American citizen in 2000.

Tony Hepburn has also engendered hundreds of students that will continue his legacy through their work, writing and teaching. Hepburn had an uncanny ability to know each of his student before they knew themselves. He was brilliant, sometimes frighteningly so, but their understanding of who they are and what art could be perpetually pushes them forward.

Hepburn is survived by his daughter Laura Hepburn-Para, son-in-law Kevin Para, granddaughter Elsa Milani and grandson Keegan Rawlins and daughter Abigail Kraft, son-in-law Steven Kraft and grandsons Oliver and Augustus Kraft.

Funeral Services will take place at The Episcopal Church, Hammondsport, New York on Monday, January 12th, 11:00 AM. For further information please contact LeMarche Funeral Home, 35 Main Street, Hammondsport, NY 14840. 607 569-2174.

A memorial For Tony Hepburn will take place in Spring in Detroit. Arrangements forthcoming.

In lieu of flowers donations may be made to:

Tony Hepburn Scholarship in Ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art  
Pauline Hepburn Ceramics Travel Fund at Cranbrook Academy of Art

Gifts should be sent to Cranbrook Academy of Art Development Office, P.O. Box 801, 39221 Woodward Avenue, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48303. Checks should note the Scholarship Fund or the Travel Fund.  
248-645-3214

or

Midwest Paliative and Hospice Care Center, 2050 Claire Court, Glenview, IL 60025 /  
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