

inner lives

cinerary jars





The Branch House in Richmond, Virginia, home of The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design, came about in a world of change. World War I had just ended and prohibition would begin the next year. Monument Avenue was evolving according to its design as a grand corridor of architecturally significant houses. From the day it opened in 1919, the Branch House's design and location positioned it to play an evolving role in the cultural life of Richmond.

Built by Richmond financier John Kerr Branch and his wife Beulah Gould Branch, Branch House was designed by noted New York architect John Russell Pope (who also designed the Jefferson Memorial and the west building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.). Located at the corner of Monument and Davis Avenues, Branch House remains the crown jewel of Monument Avenue's architectural statements, an exemplification of Tudor Revival style architecture, and an architectural homage to notable 16th-century British country houses. It was the base from which the Branch family served their many civic activities in rooms housing their abundant art treasures from all over Europe.

In 2014, The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design began operations, dedicated to the museum's mission of advancing design particularly design as it impacts the public good. This mission is firmly rooted in the Branch House's century of adapting a functionally elegant structure to evolving needs and uses. The house's design and location further enhance the museum's ability to provide public explorations of the impact that design can have in areas from ceramics to furniture and clothing to urban development. For these reasons we welcomed the opportunity to participate in the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts annual conference, and in particular this exhibition—*Inner Lives: Cinerary Jars* featuring works by Julian Stair and Rob Barnard. While the cinerary jars themselves are utilitarian in form and function, they simultaneously speak to us about the inner life of human beings and tie us to those lives. These works connect us to our human experience in a profound way.

We are pleased to welcome Rob Barnard and Julian Stair to The Branch. Their approach to the unique artform of pottery brings us thoughtful inspiration.

Penelope C. Fletcher
Executive Director
The Branch Museum of
Architecture and Design

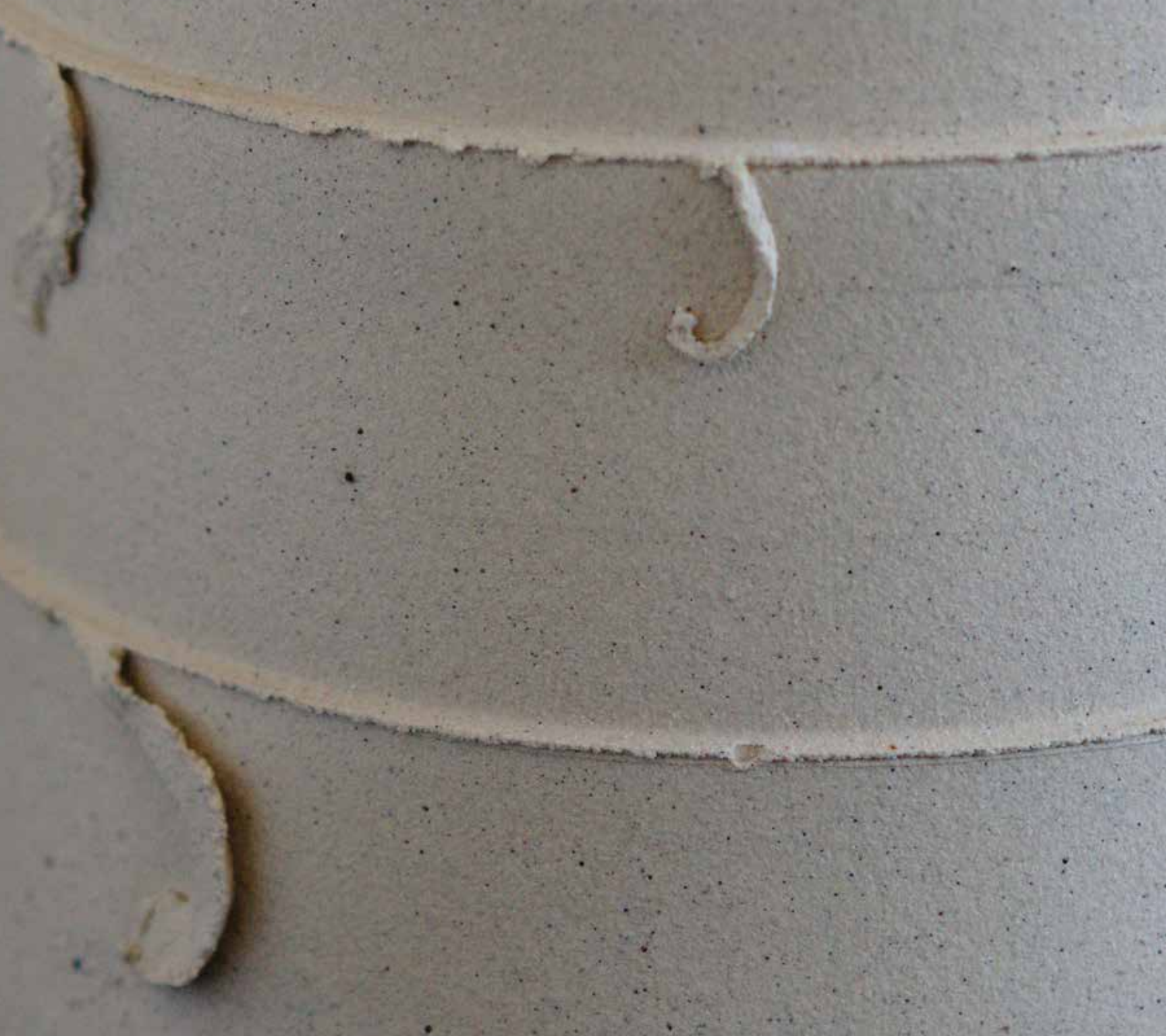


INNER LIVES cinerary jars by Julian Stair and Rob Barnard, was inspired by an exhibition which took place at the Cross Mackenzie Gallery in Washington D.C. in 2017 called TERMINI. This exhibition moved me to approach to Rob and Julian about proposing an exhibition on the same theme as part of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) annual conference that was to be held in Richmond, Virginia. Like this prior exhibition, INNER LIVES explores themes related to mortality by presenting powerfully evocative vessels which were designed as tools to fit within our rituals of death and remembrance.

How does one consider objects meant to carry one into the afterlife? How can one create objects sturdy enough to withstand the uncertainty of loss—the burden and suffering that shears us away from what seems most grounded and reliable? Stair and Barnard approach these questions differently, yet their work shares a common perspective. Each strip away unnecessary adornment and instead offers containers which are simple, direct, and raw. These are contemplative things which offer no resolution or solace, except, perhaps, in the way they direct our attention toward the certainty of form and material. Grounded in their own weight and texture, these are objects that can be experienced through the body. They can be touched like the body is touched, known in ways that the body is known. Stair and Barnard insist in pottery's ability to nourish our inner life and have created containers that function as points of reflection while also offering a final resting place for those who have gone before.

I want to thank the Branch Museum of Architecture and Design and the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Artists (NCECA) for their sponsorship of this exhibition. I would also like to thank Steven Glass and Howard Risatti for their steadfast support. Finally, I am grateful for Julian Stair's and Rob Barnard's visionary artwork and contributions to the field. Their work has been a beacon to us all.

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rob barnard and julian stair: cinerary jars

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INNER LIVES cinerary jars is an exhibition of the work of two contemporary ceramic artists from different backgrounds. Rob Barnard is from the State of Kentucky in the US where he began his study of ceramics; he eventually went on to study at Kyoto University with Yagi Kazuo, Japan's most celebrated post-war ceramic artist. Julian Stair, on the other hand, is from the UK where he studied ceramics at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and the Royal College of Art in London; in 2002 he earned a PhD from the Royal College, writing a dissertation on the genesis of English studio pottery. What Rob Barnard and Julian Stair represent are two very ancient ceramic traditions from two distant and different cultures, one East and one West.¹

Since these two artists, who have written extensively about ceramics, come from such diverse backgrounds and ceramic traditions, the question arises concerning what unites the works in this exhibition. Is it enough that both traditions focus on technical skill and knowledge in the production of functional ceramics or is there more involved?

The answer seems to be that both artists, in their own subtle way, pose the same question to the viewer. What, they ask, is the role of traditional ceramic art in our inner life? Clearly by raising the idea of "inner life" they not only have something serious in mind but also want to point the viewer in the same direction. It is as if they are saying, "look here, not there." By doing this, they focus attention so as to suggest something more than the ordinary, everyday idea of function as something useful that can be easily dismissed. So, while on the face of it the question they pose may seem quite straightforward and simple, upon reflection one realizes it is anything but.

Being a serious artist in today's world is an especially daunting task. And being a traditional craft artist, that is to say, an artist whose focus is functional objects based on tradition, is even more difficult. For one thing, unlike the pre-modern Western art world when content was inherent in the common subject matter of the time, for example portraiture (royal and otherwise) or religious themes about the Gods (pagan or Christian), today there is little consensus about subject matter

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1. While Bernard Leach, who had a keen interest in Asian ceramics, did a workshop with Japanese potter Shoji Hamada at Camberwell College in the late 1950s, it is Lucie Rie and Hans Coper who had the greater influence. Rie, who was from Vienna and admired Bauhaus inspired design, taught at Camberwell and the Royal College of Art from 1960 – 1971 and Hans Coper, her friend and protégé, taught at both institutions from 1966 – 1975.

2. See, for example, Glenn Adamson, “Why the Art World is Embracing Craft” (13 January 2020): <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-art-embracing-craft>. In this regard it is worth noting that craft has been under attack in other ways as well. In 1989, Camberwell was renamed Camberwell College of Arts, deleting any reference to crafts from its name. The same thing happened to the California College of Arts and Crafts; founded in Berkeley in 1907, in 2003 it also deleted the word craft from its name becoming the California College of the Arts.

3. This revolt can be identified in its earliest phases with Courbet’s *The Artist’s Studio* of 1855, Manet’s *Olympia* of 1863, and Cezanne’s *Large Bathers* of 1898-1905 and certainly with Fauvism and Cubism of the early years of the 20th century. As to “the new” being a tradition in and of itself, the title of avant-garde critic Harold Rosenberg’s book *The Tradition of the New* (Horizon Press; 1959) suggests as much.

4. Of particular relevance in this regard is the word art of Barbara Kruger, especially her *Untitled, I Shop Therefore I Am*, 1987, a large photographic silkscreen on vinyl.

and its relationship to content and meaning in art. Instead, something prevalent in the contemporary modern world in general is the idea that content/value is inherent in and expressed through the new, especially as seen in formal innovation and invention. This idea of the new has become so engrained in the modern mind that it has been uncritically accepted over the years, so much so that, in a sense, modernity itself can be defined as the “revolt against the authority of tradition.”

Because this idea of “the new” has also become a maxim in modern and contemporary art, it has had a significant impact on the field of craft. For in the world of craft functional ceramics represent tradition. And while tradition in ceramics has its advocates in artists like Barnard and Stair, the result of this widespread emphasis on “the new” is a degree of isolation from the larger art world for tradition-oriented craft artists. Those craft artists who have been accepted into the wider realm of art are mainly ones who have continued using craft materials and techniques but have largely abandoned the idea/concept of function.²

Ironically, since this “revolt against the authority of tradition” can be dated to sometime around the mid- to late 19th century, it is now well over a hundred years old and has, in a very real sense, become a tradition unto itself.³ And while in recent years there has been a pretense in the world of architecture and visual art via Post Modernism of rejecting the concept, it lives on still dictating much of how art is recognized and evaluated. In short, the “Concept of the New” still commands much attention not only in art and design, but in the larger non-art world as well, especially in the current world of social media and the economics of consumption.⁴

This presents a dilemma for artists in general, but especially for artists like Rob Barnard and Julian Stair who are not seduced by such fashions. Their work is centered on tradition, on the mastery of technical and artistic excellence in an effort to communicate something to the viewer that is deep and profound, not superficial and passing. However, such work, like all serious work, falls on “deaf ears” if it doesn’t have an audience—i.e., people who are not only willing to

look, but willing to take the time to actually see. In short, art needs people who are open to the attentive and thoughtful contemplation necessary to engage the work in question and make critical value judgments.

Unfortunately, this is another problem of our age; it is not necessarily one that encourages contemplation. In universities the liberal arts and humanities, the focus for developing critical awareness and understanding, are in decline; students are encouraged to put economic interests first and pursue courses that lead to “good” jobs and money. This is not only an issue in the US but also the UK.⁵ Today the belief that disciplined critical engagement with the world is fundamental to ethical and moral behavior, something gained through the liberal arts and humanities, seems passé.⁶

This trend is not totally new. It is something that art critic Clement Greenberg already warned about in 1939 in a prescient article titled *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. This article helps explain why the decline of the humanities and liberal arts is so disappointing. Greenberg argued that lack of critical awareness is exploited by commerce through the production of a new commodity, what he called “ersatz culture, kitsch.” This kind of culture, he argued, has replaced genuine culture for those who are insensible to the values of genuine culture. He goes on to write that:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.⁷

Now, instead of seriously engaging the important issues facing our world, we seem preoccupied with the latest fashions and the newest electronic gadgets as we fantasize over Hollywood-movie “super heroes”—as if they will save us from peril. Symptomatic of this is the fact we are continually inundated with news of the latest styles and the “hottest” and “hippest” devices and new artists—this is tantamount to the art world’s “flavor-of-the-month” club. Unfortunately, its allure seems irresistible. Why else would people line-up outside stores in the

5. For the US version, see Donovan Hohn, “Fierce Convictions,” a review of Marilynne Robinson’s book *What Are We Doing?: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 2018); this article was published in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 11, 2018, see esp. p.11, 2nd column. For the UK version of the issue see Richard Noble, “Art is an academic subject: so why does Britain persist in this false dichotomy?” *The Art Newspaper*, No. 305, October 2018, p. 5.

6. Despite the preaching of many economists to the contrary, ethical and moral sensibilities also seem fundamental to economic success. One wonders, for example, if a greater sense of ethical and moral responsibility and duty would have prevented the recent economic disaster (not to mention loss of life) at Boeing Airlines over the 737 MAX Jetliner.

7. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press; 1961), p.10.

middle of the night to be first in line to spend large sums of money for the latest electronic devices. Such devices are a way to avoid being alone with one's thoughts; they are a source of constant "entertainment" which thereby provides a diversion from any form of serious contemplation, so much so that they seem to be cherished more than actual human contact.⁸

It seems to me that Rob Barnard and Julian Stair are well aware of these difficulties. But rather than surrendering to this consumer world of late-Greenbergian kitsch, they have decided to confront the issue "head on." Not by changing their work, giving in to the pressures surrounding them, but by posing a fundamental question to the viewer: "What does it mean to be human?" This question crosses all boundaries—social, political, religious, and otherwise. Ironically, however, any engagement with the issue can only happen through a sense of contemplation, something viewers are generally disinclined to do. Barnard and Stair attempt to solve this problem by pointing the viewer towards the second part of the exhibition title, *Cinerary Jars*, which they have chosen because it conjures a sense of gravitas, of seriousness as it identifies the works in question not as mere containers, but as containers intended to house the ashes of deceased human beings. Once this connection to the human is made, hopefully related ideas will begin to coalesce in the mind of the viewer, especially the realization that their fate is inevitably ours as well.

With these thoughts in mind, it becomes apparent upon looking that these works are made with special care and thought as befitting their title. They are done in a range of shapes and sizes that seem intended to echo the variety of shapes and forms of the human body—tall and slender, plump and round, angular and curved. Stair, whose works are all lidded in a similar fashion and topped with a kind of twisted shape, creates forms that are very geometric (oval, circular, rectangular, even triangular) with consistent and fairly plain, smooth surfaces. However, to dispel any connection to the apparent perfection of mechanical production typical of modernity, he somehow manages to leave slight burrs of clay along the rather coarse seams that articulate different sections of

8. This may help explain why something like Tweeting has become so popular; it is another step removed from actual physical human contact. It also encourages people to write things they would never say directly to another human being.

his jars. He also uses different firing methods and clay bodies to produce jars in a wide range of colors from reds, whites, grays, and even blacks. The result of his geometric shapes with their firm edges and range of colors, one could argue, seems intended to echo the psychological variety of human natures and also the variety of ethnic and racial skin colors—all given the same careful attention and care as befitting their intended purpose.

Barnard, for his part, takes a somewhat different approach that reflects his study of ancient Japanese traditions in Kyoto. While his forms also echo the variety of human body types and hence, human psychological mind sets, they are much more organic in shape. Throw marks left by his fingers during the making process are intentionally left visible on his jars (sometimes prominently so). And by using white slip and limestone glazes that are thick and runny and somewhat hard to predict in terms of final outcome, he creates surfaces that are likewise organic with no hint of the mechanical. The result of Barnard's surface treatment gives his jars a ghostly appearance, something that connects them to their function as cinerary jars, as containers for the remains of the once living.

Like Stair, in these works Barnard is at pains to dispel any sense of repetition, of making the same thing over and over again like a machine. To distance himself from such features so characteristic of modern production methods, he makes a point of capping each jar with a different lid; each lid is shaped to fit the specific form of its jar body. By doing this, Barnard, like Stair, makes sure to communicate to the viewer that these containers are all individually made, one at a time, and by the human hand. In this way they stand as metaphors for the human.

The point of the works that comprise *Inner Lives: Cinerary jars*, something Rob Barnard and Julian Stair are at pains to emphasize beginning with the title they have chosen for this exhibition, is that being human means caring for someone and something other than oneself. Saving the ashes of a deceased is a sign of such caring and also of the sorrow of missing another. Ultimately, it is a kind of reckoning with our own sense of frailty and future departing from this world.

Covered Jar 8
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 8" x w. 9"



Covered Jar 1
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 10" x w. 9"
Collection of
Rob and Joseline Wood



Oval Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
oval lidded jar
Porcelain, clear glaze
h.20cm x w.19cm
x d.17.5cm
2020



Rectangular Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed, rectangular lidded jar
Petersen grey stoneware,
h.20cm x w.19.5cm
x d.17cm
2020

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Covered Jar 2
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 11" x w. 5.5"



Covered Jar 3
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 11" x w. 5.5"



Square Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
square lidded jar
Oxidised Etruria marl
h.23cm x w.16.5cm
x d.16.5cm
2020



Circular Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
circular lidded jar
Reduced Etruria marl
h.21cm x d.19cm
2018

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Covered Jar 5
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 12" x w. 5"
Collection of
Rob and Joseline Wood

Covered Jar 6
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 9" x w. 5.5"



Triangular Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
triangular lidded jar
Oxidised Etruria marl
h.22cm x d.18.5cm
2018



Oval Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
oval lidded jar
Oxidised Etruria marl
h.21cm x w.20.5cm
x d.19cm
2018

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Covered Jar 7
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 10.5" x w. 5.5"

Covered Jar 4
Stoneware, white slip
and limestone glaze
h. 10" x w. 6"



Rectangular Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
rectangular lidded jar
Reduced Etruria marl
h.20.5 cm x w.20 cm
x d.14 cm
2018



Circular Cinerary Jar
Thrown and constructed,
circular lidded jar
Porcelain, clear glaze
h.19.5cm x d.17.5cm
2020

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Rob Barnard is a potter and writer who resides in the Shenandoah Valley. He began studying pottery at the University of Kentucky in 1971 and was a research student at Kyoto University of Fine Arts in Kyoto, Japan from 1974 to 1977, where he studied under the late Kazuo Yagi. He returned to the U.S. in 1978. He has received two Fellowships from the National Endowments for the Arts, one in 1978, the second in 1990. He exhibits widely in the United States, Japan and Great Britain and has had solo exhibitions in New York, Washington DC, Boston, London, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Kyoto, Nagoya, and Osaka. His work is in the collections of the Smithsonian's American Art Museum, the Museum of Arts & Design, the Everson Museum, the Crocker Museum of Art, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Mint Museum. Barnard was the ceramics editor for the *New Art Examiner* from 1987 to 1993 and has written for *The Studio Potter*, *American Craft*, *Ceramics Monthly*, *Logbook*, *Ceramics—Art & Perception*, *Keramick* and *The New Art Examiner*.





Julian Stair is an English potter and historian who works in London and studied at Camberwell School of Art and the Royal College of Art. He has exhibited internationally and has work in 30 public collections including the British Museum, V & A, Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan and Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Netherlands. Recent solo exhibitions include *Equivalence* (Corvi-Mora gallery London, 2018), *Equivalenze* (ICA Milan, Italy, 2019), *Quotidian* (Corvi-Mora gallery, 2014) and *Quietus: The Vessel, Death and the Human Body* (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, National Museum of Wales Cardiff, Winchester Cathedral, Somerset House, London, 2012-2014, Manchester Cathedral, 2016). Recent group exhibitions include *Gefäß-erweiterung* (Galerie Metzger, Frankfurt, Germany, 2019), *Oxford Pioneers* (Oxford Ceramics Gallery, 2018), *Termini* (Cross MacKenzie Gallery, Washington DC, 2017). He has written extensively, completing a PhD researching the critical origins of English studio pottery at the Royal College of Art in 2002. His essays on English ceramics have been published by the Courtauld Institute, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Tate Gallery and the Yale Centre for British Art.

Sam Johnson is Professor and Art Department Chair at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University. He studied painting and ceramics at the University of Minnesota at Morris, and completed a three- and half—year apprenticeship in pottery under Richard Bresnahan. In 2000, he was invited as a guest of Denmark's Design School to study Scandinavian Ceramic design in Copenhagen; while also working at Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center. In 2001, he traveled to Japan as a studio guest of Koie Ryoji. In 2005, Johnson had earned graduate degrees in fine art from the University of Iowa. He has had numerous solo exhibitions throughout the U.S. and his work is in collections in the United States, Japan and Demark. He is currently serves on the Board of Directors of Artaxis.org.

Howard Risatti is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary Art and Critical Theory in the Department of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University where he was Chair of the Departments of Art History and of Craft/Material Studies from 2001-05.

His writings have appeared in numerous journals including the *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Woman's Art Journal*, *Art Criticism*, *The Studio Potter*, *Sculpture Magazine*, the British journal *Crafts*, *American Craft*, *Ceramic: Art & Perception*, and *Winterthur Portfolio*.

His books include *New Music Vocabulary* (University of Illinois Press, 1975); *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (Prentice Hall, 1990, 2nd edition 1998). He co-authored with Kenneth Trapp *Skilled Work: American Craft in the Renwick Gallery* (Smithsonian Press, 1998), *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (UNC Press, 2007, paperback 2013). His latest book, written with VA Tech Emeritus Professor Ray Kass, is *The Mountain Lake Symposium and Workshop: Art in Locale*, published in 2018.

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credits

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