

Intimate Immensity: Reflections on the Work of Stanley Rosen

Perkins Lecture, Alfred University, Alfred New York

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Thank you all for being here today. I'm going to confess right off that when Wayne and I first talked about my doing this, I was envisioning something more like a gallery talk, and that when I found out that it had morphed into the Perkins Lecture, I was somewhat horrified. I am a huge admirer of Louise Cort, and when I was editor of *The Studio Potter* I published both her Perkins Lecture and that of Peter Schjeldahl. So this raised the stakes a bit for me, to say the least.

But it is a privilege to be able to ponder and pay tribute to someone who had an enormous impact on me – while he is here among us – and to have the opportunity to think about his work against the backdrop of the ceramics world as I have come to understand it over the past forty-five years. And there is a particular poetry and rightness in doing this as the Perkins lecture, as I'll explain later.

About the images, I should say that this is not exactly an illustrated lecture. At some points I have a specific visual point to make, but otherwise the images serve to augment what you will see in the gallery – which I will tell you, you must see in person – and also to save me from having to be amazing with every word I utter.

And finally: thanks to Wayne Higby, director, and Caitlin Brown, program director of the museum here at Alfred; to Jamie Franklin of the Bennington Museum, who curated the show in its original venue; and most of all to Stanley Rosen and his wife Jane Sobel, for making all this possible.

Stanley Rosen was born in 1926 in Brooklyn, to parents who had emigrated from Poland. They both worked in a neighborhood grocery store, the kind of place where customers picked out a chicken and had it slaughtered on the spot. The sights, sounds, and built environment of Brooklyn remain vivid in Stanley's memory; he describes the sounds of fire engines and the structure of the Brooklyn Bridge, the insistent rhythms of the city and then, at home, the solitary play of building private worlds under the table and inside blankets.⁽¹⁾

When he was nine the family moved to Atlanta, because of his father's health. Here there was another grocery store, but not the urban Yiddish-speaking environment in which he had felt at home when the family lived in New York. Here also, Rosen remembers his father working with wood in the evenings, fixing furniture and building display shelves and storage bins for the store. His father had trained as a cabinetmaker before coming to the US, and his absorption in these tasks made a deep impression on his son. For Stanley his father provided an example of

both the unrelenting and not-very-satisfying work that filled most of his day, and of the pleasure he took in those after-hours projects.

Both as a Jew and as an indifferent student – he now suspects he actually had a learning disability, which would not then have been identified as such - Stanley felt himself to be somewhat of an outsider in Atlanta. But he finished high school and soon after his 18th birthday enlisted in the Navy for the tail end of World War II. He was in California when the atomic bomb was dropped in August of 1945, and soon left for Asia on a transport ship, tasked with overseeing the occupation of Japan. Like many American servicemen who served in the Pacific, the landscape and culture of Japan made a strong impression on him – he describes it as “overwhelmingly beautiful – a beauty you didn’t know what to do with” – though in 1945 that beauty was inextricably mixed with the dislocation, violence, and shame that accompanied Japan’s defeat and the aftermath of the war.

Stanley spent six months in Asia, then returned to Atlanta and worked for a time at his parents’ store. Like many a returning veteran, his next step was unclear, although the GI Bill enabled him to consider the prospect of college more seriously and more broadly than he might have otherwise. He enrolled at the University of Georgia with the idea of pursuing agricultural engineering, and also took art classes there and participated in a small but lively arts community. He then briefly considered moving to the new state of Israel to work on a collective farm. Things came into focus, though, when he met Beverly Schwartz, who was a student at Pembroke College, then the sister school to Brown University, and who became his first wife. Abandoning the idea of going to Israel, he moved instead to Providence and enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design, a decision that was to change the direction of his life.

Up to then it seems that his education, in the broad sense of the word, had been bifurcated. On the one hand, as a child and young man he had been exposed through teachers to the world of literature – a world missing from his home – and to the humanist vision of classical and Jewish writers such as Sholom Aleichem. On the other, feeling himself unsuited to formal education in the liberal arts, and being drawn to practical, hands-on learning, he had made several attempts to find a field that might offer both a means of making a living and a direct way to understand and engage the world. RISD, which at that time put more emphasis than it does now on the “design” part of its name, enabled these two strands to come together. Although as a design school it did not focus on the liberal arts, many of its faculty members were worldly and well-educated men who brought a broad frame of cultural reference to their teaching.

Stanley intended to study sculpture at RISD, and his teacher there was Gilbert Franklin, a sculptor whose work integrated the classical traditions of Greece and Rome with a modernist sensibility. Franklin had spent a year at the American Academy in Rome and had been awarded the Prix de Rome. He was well-versed in the crafts of working in stone, clay, and bronze, but also, and perhaps more importantly, was a serious professional artist. He imparted to his student “a sense of what he could be as an artist” and Stanley has said elsewhere of his important teachers that “it’s not what they taught; it’s what it meant to them...their

enthusiasm.” Franklin, a sophisticate and humanist, was also, for Stanley, a father-figure, mentor, and embodiment of the artist’s world.

Perhaps, though, in the end it was too hard to picture himself in this world, at least in Franklin’s version of it. The distance between it and where he had begun was too great; he lacked, he says, the “talent” to be a figurative sculptor, and by this time, as a soon-to-be-married man, he also had practical matters to consider. Stanley describes what happened next as though it was a casual stroll, and perhaps it was. Across the hall from the sculpture studio was ceramics, and investigating what was going on there he found himself drawn in – a familiar story to many of us in this room. There he encountered the man who would be an even more important mentor: Lyle Perkins.

Perkins had been at Alfred as an undergraduate and held a PhD in ceramics from Ohio State. Clay turned out to be the ideal medium, and Perkins the ideal guide into it. Stanley describes himself as “not talented – but passionate and interested” and the prospect of taking on this diverse body of knowledge suited both the engineer and the dreamer in him. Perkins encouraged his students to appreciate the vastness, complexity, and historical ubiquity of the material – to familiarize themselves with geology, chemistry, the construction of kilns, and the history of ceramics. It is not an exaggeration to say that this encounter – with both the man and the material – changed Stanley’s life. Gilbert Franklin had shown him “a self he could be” but it was Lyle Perkins, crucially, who showed him “a world he could be that self in.” Many of us have known a teacher who had that galvanizing effect upon us; I am here because of one, and so it seems poetic and, to borrow Stanley’s word, wondrous, that we are here together, looking at Stanley’s work, because of the man who played that role in Stanley’s life. He was on his way.

Alfred

Stanley graduated from RISD in 1954, knowing that he wanted to be a teacher as well as to pursue his studio practice. In those days the advice of one’s professor carried an outsize weight in a student’s choice of a graduate program. Perkins urged Stanley to pursue his MFA at Alfred, and he entered the program in the fall of 1954. Val Cushing was one of his classmates, and Daniel Rhodes and Charles Harder among his teachers. The impact of his time here was far less dramatic than his experience at RISD. As a sculptor he was already somewhat at odds with the program’s focus, and Harder was in the last years of his long teaching career. Stanley remembers mostly being given the space and equipment to work on his own, but little in the way of direct mentoring. He felt more affinity with John Wood, a young member of the printmaking faculty who had come out of the Bauhaus-inspired Institute of Design in Chicago, than to the ceramics faculty, and it was Wood’s direct approach to materials, both as an artist and in his teaching, that lingered as an influence in Stanley’s own ideas about teaching.

New York

When Stanley finished at Alfred, Lyle Perkins once again played a role in his next step, recommending him for a job at Greenwich House Pottery. In 1956 he moved to New York with his young family to teach and manage the studio there. With its historical connection to the downtown settlement movement (to this day, the pottery is part of a larger social services organization) and its proximity to the vibrant art scene, Greenwich House was a fruitful home base for a young artist. Stanley describes the vibrancy of the ceramics studio there and the satisfaction he took in organizing the space and devising a system for moving the flow of students and work through the small building. He was attached, mussel-like, to the medium of clay, but immersed in a nutrient-rich sea of artistic activity of all kinds. The Village was home to many galleries and to many of the painters and sculptors who would attain prominence in the 50s and 60s. He regularly saw the work of Jacques Lipchitz, Henry Moore, Giacometti, and younger sculptors such as Noguchi and David Smith, and was part of a group of young sculptors, the Argyle Group, who exhibited together.

Fervent conversations about modernity, about abstraction, about pushing things forward, were all about the Village during this time. The old sculptural preoccupation with the figure and with the public roles of ceremony and commemoration had given way to work that could be private, abstract, or provocative – that borrowed forms and materials from the streets and the factory rather than remaining sequestered in the atelier. Sculpture locked arms with painting and with architecture, and the parameters of what a sculpture could be, and be about, widened out excitingly (though they would later narrow again, in the Greenbergian years of doctrinaire abstraction.) So many new things seemed possible, even mandatory. As the 50s flowed into the 60s the energy of New York's art world drove sculptors to work bigger, to assert a larger presence, declare their ideas in a louder voice. Instead of addressing or embodying a communal public occasion, as it had done for centuries, sculpture was becoming a public declaration of the individual artist's vision: ambitious and virile, mirroring the rise of American economic and political power on the world stage.

At clay's leading edge a similar burgeoning and enlargement was taking place. Though its center of gravity was located on the west coast, there was plenty of cross-fertilization and critical exchange between the two coasts. In "The New Ceramic Presence," ⁽²⁾ a 1961 essay widely considered to mark the moment, Rose Slivka argued for clay's place at the table of art, and heralded the artists who were breaking open the traditional structures and ambitions of ceramics. Like many manifestos from a hopeful moment in a doomed cause, the essay's strenuous bravado seems poignant now, from the distance of 50 years. As usual, petitions from the margins fall on the indifferent ears of powers that can choose to pay attention – or not – to what is going on in the outlying provinces. Still, for those within the ceramic fold, Slivka's essay recognized and celebrated the expanding and crumbling boundaries of ceramic practice. Artists such as Voukos, John Mason, and James Melchert were taking ceramics out of the house and into the white-walled gallery – emphatically *not* a domestic space – where enormous clay

sculptures defied the physical limits of the material and the conceptual limits of the vessel. Several artists who were part of Stanley's New York circle – James Crumrine and Hui Ka Kwong among them – were mentioned in Slivka's article. Up for grabs, for all of them, were the primacy of the vessel in clay's form-language, and the question of scale.

Looking at images of those works next to the pieces Stanley was making at the time, we can see the arguments about the vessel and the materiality of clay flowing around and through the work of an entire cohort of artists. But to look simply at images, as we have become so accustomed to doing, is to deny the importance of scale – and to overlook that it is one of the primary languages of sculpture. In his simple but profound insight about ceramics,⁽³⁾ Peter Schjeldahl divided the world of objects – all objects – into three scale categories relative to our bodies. Most ceramics exists in the class of things we take in within arm's length, which includes most of the objects intimately bound up with our creaturely lives. They enter our perceptions and our human frame of reference in a fundamentally different way than objects that are larger than we are – whether those are sculptures, automobiles, or bushes. Deep in our kinesthetic awareness, we make sensory, social, and emotional distinctions among things of different sizes, and Stanley's sculptures draw us into that arms-length mode of attention. In the presence of sculpture, it can be a slightly disorienting place to be: close, yet opening up to enigmatic vastness, what Gaston Bachelard called "intimate immensity."⁽⁴⁾ Bachelard's idea is that certain conditions and experiences operate, in essence, at two scales simultaneously: the physical one and the symbolic or psychological one, and that they foster a kind of dreaming state that transcends the limitations of bodily reality.

This is not just a matter of the viewer's experience, though it is important that we continue to assert the significance of physical perception in the face of the disembodied effects of photographic representation. It is also, for the artist, a matter of sensibility, and of working at a scale that can function as a feedback loop, allowing for the most fruitful interplay of time, material, intent, and mystery. Stanley has spoken of the small pieces of clay with which he works as receptacles of energy – like bricks or stones, but with the important difference that each one is formed by him and fitted to the evolving structure. It is significant, I think, that Stanley's sculptures are *built*, small piece by small piece, rather than constructed or assembled as so many of Voukos's sculptures are. The size of the gesture, in relation to the artist's body and to the finished piece, is an essential tool in articulating the artist's vision.

Possibly every artist has a "right" scale – the scale at which the energy of his or her questing is transmitted into the material without slackening, hardening, or becoming formulaic. This "right" scale might be a kind of pulse, unique to the individual's encounter with a particular material – a sympathetic vibration that draws forth something from within the artist, and returns it from the object as it evolves. The scale of investigation, if it is the right one for the artist, leads to work that demands in turn a certain scale of attention on the part of the viewer.

Bennington

Sometime at the end of the 50s, Stanley learned – possibly from one of his students at Greenwich House – of a teaching position opening up at Bennington College. Founded in 1932 under the principles of progressive education – direct, curiosity-driven, and cross-disciplinary inquiry – Bennington was a small place – at the time it had 500 students and about 60 faculty members – but with an outsize ambition and sense of itself. Its size meant that there were fewer divisions than in larger or more traditional academic institutions. Important figures in literature, dance, theater, and social science – writers Bernard Malamud and Howard Nemerov, critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, dancers Judith Dunn and Jack Moore, and experimental musician Gunnar Schonbeck – mingled at the coffee bar and at contentious faculty meetings. By the late 50s the art department consisted of a group of artists, all with active studio practices and connected with galleries in New York, bent on restructuring the program according to the new thinking about abstract art. Painters Paul Feeley and Vincent Longo, sculptor Tony Smith, and critic Eugene Goossens made up the faculty⁽⁵⁾; Anthony Caro would come in a few years. The person who taught ceramics would have to be able to earn the respect of these artists, and to make sense of it in this context. Stanley brought a single piece of sculpture for his interview, and in retrospect he says that it was this piece that signaled to them that “he was the guy” – that he could speak their language.

Yet it’s strange, in a way, that the department was looking for a ceramics teacher at all. Certainly, there was little interest in craft media in general, and the expectation that artists would push along a fairly well-defined path of avant-garde progress was widely held at Bennington, and in the New York art world with which it was aligned. Stanley both was and was not a part of this world. If making sculpture had made him an outsider at Alfred, his chosen medium was bound to marginalize him at Bennington; there was no obvious way in which his work and that of his colleagues would form a coherent narrative of avant-garde art.

Yet Bennington proved to be a compatible place for him. Its scale and its progressive-educational ideals suited his temperament and his vision of teaching. The ceramics studio – a converted chicken coop that was called, with perfect, deadpan accuracy, the Brooder – offered him a domain, a space he could fashion, nurture, and operate in. A Navy man, he must have appreciated both the self-sufficiency of the vessel under his command, and the larger ocean in which it floated, the other disciplines – painting, sculpture, printmaking, literature – anchored nearby. Beyond the studio, the art world’s arguments raged on, but here, as at Greenwich House, he could control his immediate environment, and create what he wanted for his students.

He appreciated their drive, sophistication, and energy, and they in turn responded to the atmosphere of open-ended inquiry that he fostered. As a teacher he was tuned in to an extraordinary degree to what was going on in the studio, yet he guided with the lightest of touches. Many of his former students remember his way of looking at work, which was patient and very open, and often caused him to make surprising leaps and connections. His responses

seemed to draw on a huge world of art, architectural and natural structure, literature, and geology, and yet the impression was not of encyclopedic knowledge, but of his having just the right thing to offer, the thing that would resonate both outward and inward with what he perceived in your work.

One day, Stanley brought into the studio a large pitcher from Italy. Its walls rose energetically from the foot and swelled to a high shoulder, then tightened to a straight neck whose straightness emphasized the generosity of the vessel's body. Up from the space where the shoulder met the neck rose a tall, beak-like spout, craning upwards, impatient to pour. Opposite the spout, a flat handle sprang out and down from the rim and landed smartly just below the belly, an assistant ready to hand off the acrobat in its leap.

I don't remember what he said about the pitcher, but I have a clear memory of the way it drew us into a circle around it in the dim light of the studio. Until then I had mostly felt the teacher-student relationship as a polarity: all of us young and unskilled, looking to him for answers, for knowledge, for a key to who we might become. We were intimidated by him – not because he was intimidating, but because we were so unformed. And, because he was enigmatic: allowing long silences to spool out before he would utter a few words, which we would seize upon and ponder once we had scurried back to our work areas. We all had a crush on him (it was a women's college then, remember) and we noticed everything about him: what he wore, when he took up smoking a pipe, the way he held his hands, the air vibrating between his thumb and his middle finger as he made a point. We were a regular little cult, down there in the studio. The windows were small and the air dusty, and he was a big presence in that intimate space. But the day he brought in that pitcher, something shifted. A third entity joined the conversation, and Stanley somehow redirected our gaze from *him* to the thing he was looking at – to a simple pitcher, made for daily use and splendid in its energetic fitness for a long-honed purpose. Subtly, he made us understand that he was in awe of this object – of the skill and human life it embodied, and the sheer joy of its form. He invited us to join him in the deep, wide ocean of ceramic endeavor that it represented, and to find our own place there. Like Lyle Perkins, but in his own, very different, way, he gave us a world in which we could seek our selves and live our lives.

So now Stanley is back at Alfred, a place that, more than any other institution, has represented and shaped the narrative of postwar ceramics as it is taught and disseminated in the US. Many of the names we identify with that narrative have come through Alfred, and you are here, faculty and students alike, because someone recognized your talent, your commitment and, I think it is fair to say, your potential to play a role in the unfolding story of contemporary ceramics. When he was here, Stanley felt himself to be an outlier, and where he fit into the narrative has never been clear, either to himself or to others. To put it succinctly, he has followed his own path. Which, in the end, is why he belongs here. Among his many gifts to us, his students, one I value most highly was the lesson that the margins could be a place of

freedom and possibility, and that, really, we have no choice but to do the work that is in us to do.

Coda

The artist is at work: not in his studio, but at his kitchen table, with the door open behind him, the soup on the stove, and, unseen, the dogs at his feet. He is an old man, in the tenth decade of his life, bent and frail now. But he is still working: not “keeping busy”, not “keeping his hand in,” but picking his way resolutely along the vein he has been mining for 60 years. To see him at work in this context illuminates a fundamental aspect of the world of ceramics, as distinct from the world of sculpture: its humanness and embeddedness in ordinary life. But the gentleness of the setting belies the ferocity of the maker and the urgency of the task in which he is engaged. We should not make the mistake of feeling sentimental about what is going on here. The poet Adrienne Rich, speaking of Emily Dickinson, called her “Vesuvius at home,” and the description seems to me apt for Stanley Rosen. His great teaching days are long behind him, and he is free now to build his powerful and mysterious structures – to take morsels of clay between his fingers and imbue them with energy and meaning.

Thank you, Stanley, for holding the line, and for finally sharing your extraordinary work with us.

Notes

1. All of the quotes and most of the biographical information about Stanley Rosen’s life were taken from a series of interviews conducted in the summer of 2016. These talks took place at his home in North Bennington, VT, with Kenji Fujita, Tom Fels, Pamela Skewes-Cox, and Peter Crabtree.
2. First published in *Craft Horizons*, No. 4, 1961, and reprinted in *Ceramic Art: Comment and Review*, edited by Garth Clark, 1978.
3. From *The Poetics of Space*, first published in French in 1958, and by Beacon Press in 1969.
4. See, for instance, Schjeldahl’s 2003 Perkins Lecture, reprinted in *The Studio Potter*, Vol. 34, no. 1.
5. See the exhibition catalogue *Artists at Bennington: Visual Arts Faculty 1932-1976*, with an introduction by Eugene Goossens. Bennington College Archives, Crossett Library

The images of Stanley Rosen’s work accompanying the lecture were taken by Peter Crabtree, and are used with permission.