

“Ken Ferguson: The Palm at the End of the Mind; Thoughts of a Potter and Professor”
From the artist monograph, *Ken Ferguson; Talking with the Wheel*, (2007, Silver Gate, Arlington, Texas)

“After so many years, he still is my teacher. I ask him questions and sometimes just ask for reassurance. He still gives me good advice, so I listen.”

---Akio Takamura [1]

“Ferguson’s got this thing about rabbits, and when Ferguson gets something, he runs with it.”

---Peter Voulkos [2]

To get to Ken Ferguson’s pottery studio, you take the old Shawnee Mission Parkway about twenty miles West out of Kansas City, past where the mission once stood. This was farm country, but the suburbs and subdivisions have grown up around it. Turn left and then left again, and go up a steep, wooded driveway that twists around sharply; if it’s snowing, you’ll be glad you brought your four-wheel drive vehicle. At the top is the house that Ferguson built himself in 1970, after seeing Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1936 modernist masterpiece, “Fallingwater,” in Western Pennsylvania, near where he grew up. The house looks a bit like a small suburban library, red bricks, one story, with narrow plate windows and flat roof. Gertrude, Ferguson’s wife of fifty years, greets you in the drive with a bag of groceries and a kindly smile, and takes you inside.

At 76, Ferguson looks the same as ever, in a blue work shirt, open at the collar, with a barrel chest, high, domed, intelligent forehead, and large, farmer hands that are crafty, delicate and alive. Here, Ferguson sits in a pool of light at the dining room table, itself a modernist and utilitarian object cut and planed from a felled tree that had grown near his old house in Grandview, Missouri.

You can see how much of this is him -- the clean lines, the plainspoken furniture, the shelves of hand-thrown plates and casseroles up to the thick ceiling beams, the polished, unadorned concrete floor. The light around him thickens; behind is the shelf of art books, the stereo with Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton and Fats Waller, and on either side of his hands are stacks of art books and correspondence waiting for his attention.

Ferguson above all has always been a practical man. His artistry grew out of his frank blue-collar need to make a living, and beyond that, to work with his hands. As his father made things out of steel, now Ferguson makes things out of clay. "What fascinated me about ceramics was the fact that you could take glaze calculations, work them out, and there would be an answer. I didn't have any definite answers before that. Something about that appealed to me, I don't know why. The broadness of being a potter also appealed to me. You build a kiln and that includes welding and pipe-fitting. You mix glazes and clays and that includes chemistry. You do some testing. You get some surprises.

"There is the physical thing of throwing around bags of clay. There's the physical therapy of working on the wheel, and still the magic of working up a ball of clay and transforming it, quickly and easily, into something permanent, indestructible throughout the ages, and functional and beautiful. Plus, I've always been very much involved in the romance of firing a kiln, thinking of the old potters and the other countries you are introduced to when you start to study pottery: Korea, Japan, England, Greece." [3]

Ferguson has had one of the more remarkable careers in modern ceramics. As the salty, blustery chairman of the ceramics department at the Kansas City Art Institute for more than three decades, his influence on the profession has been enormous. His students have led the faculties of colleges around the country and helped to shape the cutting edge of the art form. Ferguson himself

made a bold and surprising transition from self-effacing studio potter in the mold of Warren MacKenzie, to expressive and self-revealing ceramics artist who has shown frequently at the Garth Clark Gallery and is collected by museums around the world. Many artists take on the task of teaching grudgingly, as a day job, and end up giving their students the least of themselves, and just as many art teachers inspire their students, while only feigning to keep their own gallery careers alive. Very few so adroitly and downright zestfully balance both professions as Ferguson has.

Gertrude brings two cups of Lapsang Souchong tea, and slips back into the chiaroscuro darkness. The air springs alive suddenly with the exotic, smoky fragrance. Gertrude and Ken's marriage has just such a redolent, pine-scented, aged-in-the-barrel tang. Originally a schoolteacher, Gertrude is an artist in her own right, a painter and watercolorist. A lush beauty in youth, she remained an erotic inspiration for Ferguson throughout his life, as evidenced in the thinly disguised nude self-portraits incised in his Adam and Eve plates. She is, as well, a quiet, strong, deep, fine intelligence who has been able to anticipate his needs and keep his excesses within limits – such as keeping him polite when he needed to be polite.

She does not like to speak about her role in his career – about other things, yes. Instead, she refers you to a statement she wrote for Studio Potter magazine more than a dozen years ago: “We have had the traditional marriage in which husband earns and wife cares for the home. Male and female work roles today are not so clearly defined.”

Recently I heard an astronaut's wife say that while men give material support, the support they receive from women is a great gift; they receive the permission and freedom to explore, to discover, to become whatever suits them best, knowing that the women are caring for homes and families. That rationale is satisfactory up to a point: the freedom to develop an occupation that sustains one's interest for forty years is a fine gift, but so also is a family. Ken Ferguson explored, and discovered that he was an artist with a talent for working with clay, and another talent for working with people. But I cannot say that it was because of permission from me or

anyone. One gives oneself permission. He had an extraordinary drive, energy and instinct. Nothing could stop him! [4]

Ferguson adds, “Gertrude has great insight into people and things that I never really had time to think about, because I was too busy with my job, teaching fifty art students at once. She would sit there never saying a thing, but later I found out she was paying attention. She knew all about the students and where they went and what happened to them and what they were thinking.”

Ferguson was born in rural Elwood, Indiana, and moved when he was ten to Clairton, Pennsylvania, a hardcore, blue collar mill town that was the model for the film, The Deerhunter. There, his father, Cecil, found a lifetime of work in a tinplate factory owned by U.S. Steel.

“My father didn’t show much interest in my work as a potter,” Ferguson recalls with regret. “To the end of his life, I don’t believe he even thought I was doing that well. My wife made me understand that you don’t change your parents. You just live with it and don’t make a fuss, because you’re on your own anyway.

“Gertrude has helped me with that stuff. She’s always understood things I didn’t understand. So that’s why you get married, because two heads are better than one.”*

[footnote: *Ferguson adds that his father encouraged him to further his education, but it was his mother who encouraged his art.]

Ferguson has always loved to build, and his first choice has always been to build with bricks: salt kilns, gas-fired kilns, wood kilns; the house that surrounds us now is made of bricks. He recalls that the mill workers in Clairton used to carry large aluminum dinner pails to work, whose oval bottoms were meant to hold soup or stew, but were also just right for smuggling a ten-dollar firebrick out of

the mill on the way home. If a worker managed to avoid the company cops, he would build a great big baking oven for mama with the stolen bricks. And Ferguson remembers his hometown dotted with these enormous baking ovens. So, one might say that the building of kilns was in his blood early on.

“The typical remark you’d hear around Clairton was, ‘I’ve been down in that mill for forty years, and what’s good enough for me is good enough for my son, soon as he’s old enough to get a job,’” Ferguson says. Barely out of high school, he worked in a tin mill, then a coke plant, and found that he disagreed. He began attending classes in painting and design at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and graduated in 1952, hoping to become newspaper artist, and perhaps illustrate the sports pages.

The Korean War came along first. Ferguson was drafted, and through the chance intervention of a high school friend, was stationed in Japan as a cartographer, rather than being sent on to battle. Japanese architecture, with its clean lines and raw wood opened his eyes to new ways of seeing. He spent his weekends touring, photographing and buying up Ukiyo-ye woodblock prints, with their frank, practical depictions of bathing woman.

On his return to Pittsburgh, he took a job designing stain-glass windows, but quit after two weeks. Convinced he would be better off teaching in the public schools, he went back to Carnegie for a year of teacher certification courses. One happened to be a class in ceramics, taught by the potter Wesley Mills, who became a lifelong friend. “Within two weeks,’ Ferguson says, “I was hooked. I never looked back, and I never looked sideways.”

Married, and soon to be a father, Ferguson began thinking seriously about a career in pottery. Under the G.I. Bill, he enrolled at The New York State College of Ceramics, at Alfred University, then directed by the legendary potter, Charles Harder.

“I came to Alfred without much preparation,” remembers Ferguson. “I could throw a pot more or less, but I didn’t know much about firing or glazes. Charlie Harder was an outstanding teacher, a strong American who didn’t see much point in studying anything that was going on in Europe. It was a tough two years, but I learned to think for myself, and what I needed to be a potter on my own.”

In 1958, with his Master’s degree in place, Ferguson took a job as director and studio potter-in-residence at the Archie Bray Foundation, an art center housed in a working brickyard in Helena, Montana. Although both the location and the foundation itself were fairly obscure, the job had a unique pedigree. Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio had each held similar jobs there in the years preceding. “I had never been west of the Mississippi,” Ferguson recalls, “and Gertrude had read all of the Zane Gray novels. It seemed a good way to get away from our families. We were excited to go.”

At the “Bray,” Ferguson was consumed with the multiplicity of tasks needed to keep body and soul--and a working pottery studio--together. Russell Ferguson, his son, remembers trawling through the alleys of Helena with his father, looking for discarded packing crates in which to ship his pots.[5] Ferguson entered a vessel in the Syracuse Pottery Exposition, and won first prize – as Voulkos had before him. He sold his wares at the Bray store, and because art supplies were scarce, began buying clay in bulk, breaking it down and selling it, along with other supplies, at the company store. Helena was isolated, but it was the state capital, and at Ferguson’s night classes he taught and befriended Montana’s version of the wealthy and powerful. They were homespun, self-educated and eclectic people with whom he could trade ideas and from whom he could learn. He began to immerse himself in Japanese culture and pottery, showing slides of his travels through Japan and once projecting a copy of the classic Kurosawa film, Rashomon, to his friends. His pottery

production was so great that Gertrude joked that he wanted to put a Ferguson in every kitchen in America.

It was during his six years in Montana that Ferguson first began to run into potters, such as Voulkos and Toshiko Takaazu, whose work pushed at the boundaries of the simple, practical, table-to-kitchen pottery he'd learned at Alfred. He also came under the indirect influence of Kyllikki Salmenhaara, the famed Finnish Potter and educator, when, on a trip outside of Montana, he discovered her vessels scattered around the showroom of a Seattle furniture store. "She was my first hero," Ferguson admits. Salmenhaara made many of her modernist designs while employed by the Arabia factory, which would then copy her patterns and mass-produce them. The lines were classic – modernist yet functional -- with a clean beauty that Ferguson successfully tried to emulate in his work.

Under this regimen, his trademark stoneware baking dish lost its foot and became smooth like a bowl, with two worm handles and a fountain shaped lid. Practically speaking, this vessel was almost too large to be used as a casserole, and this reflects an aspect of all of Ferguson's work: a matter of exaggerated scale. Ferguson is a big man, with powerful, rawboned shoulders, big hands, and a forceful, abrupt way of moving and speaking. The baking dishes and covered storage jars gradually moved toward a dimension that reflected his greater-than-average size and his gradually-expanding confidence as a potter. His later work would expand on those proportions.

Ferguson takes you a few steps down the concrete pathway from the house to his freestanding studio, a small building crowded with the things he needs and uses to fuel his art. Ken isn't working today, so the studio seems unusually quiet, dusted with red clay. The walls and shelves flutter with postcards from all over the world, knickknacks, bottles, ceramic notes from other potters. Scribbled out, a few lines from T.S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock that he long ago inscribed on a plate:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

[Authors note: the poem contains a space between the two lines.]

I do not think that they will sing to me. [6]

“If you don’t have things you love, that help you, give you a lift and comfort you, then you should go out and find them,” Ferguson tells you. “That has worked for me all my life. I have huge postcard collection. Dan Rhodes said, ‘If you love something, embrace it.’ You can’t love someone from a distance.

“My interests have exploded. I’m looking at all kinds of things. When I look at the pots, I still love them – English, Japanese, Korean. The architecture of Gaudi. And the paintings: Hieronymus Bosch, Matisse, drawing a nude, seeing himself in a mirror, Picasso, Da Vinci’s Deluge.

“You must dig a deep well. It’s my only quote. If you don’t dig deep, it will dry up someday. You’ll be 45 years old, a flash in the pan. An artist should have interest in everything, but shouldn’t be all over the place with his work.

Ferguson’s long fingers pick open the pages of a book, “You ever seen this guy, Heinrich Kley?” and you look, and it’s a line drawing of a crocodile skating with a nude woman, and with this image – sudden and rude, surprising and smart, and so typically Ferguson, whose gallery of interests ranges far and wide – our conversation starts to unfold.

In 1964, something happened that would alter the path of Ferguson’s life forever. Dale Eldred, the recently appointed chairman of the sculpture department of the Kansas City Art Institute was looking for a ceramics teacher to replace one who’d left. Knowing very few people in the field, Eldred called Warren MacKenzie, an old friend in whose workshop he’d once worked.

MacKenzie recommended Ferguson for the job.

“I never knew why Eldred hired me, except that he was a big guy from Minnesota and was crazy about quantity and size. Archie Bray had a track spur going right into the yard, and sometimes the easiest way to ship clay there was by train. Well, when Dale heard I’d been using that much clay, he was impressed. I mean, here was a guy -- talking about myself -- who wasn’t concerned about lifting a bag or two of clay, he was hauling it in by the boxcar!”

At that time, the Kansas City Art Institute was a place in flux, searching for its own identity. A gentele island of converted Italianate mansions, cool green lawns and impressive trees, a stone’s throw from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and its collection of English and Asian ceramics, the school was not yet accredited and tuition was inexpensive. The student body consisted largely of GI’s out of Kansas and Nebraska, Native Americans from Oklahoma, guys who ran body shops and wanted to learn about art. “They were wild men with independent streaks,” remembers Irv Tepper, one of Ferguson’s first students from that time and now a nationally-exhibited ceramics artist in New York City. “I thought I was tough, but these guys were really tough.”

Ferguson was not worried. If the school was unformed he could better dig his own way into it, if the students were unruly, he could harness that energy. He quickly found a group of enthusiastic pupils and moved his operations into an unused carriage house. “It was a little three-story wooden deathtrap, with three big gas kilns on the bottom floor covered by a wooden shed, (and) a narrow winding stairway up the center,” remembers Richard Notkin, the Montana-based ceramics artist, who was one of Ferguson’s earliest students. “We’re lucky we survived.”

In photographs of the time, he looks like a young Lyndon Johnson, lanky and informal, at ease in the sun, with a sun-squint, large hands and ears, a pointed nose and lips pulled together in a discontented pout. He could spellbind his students with a throwing demonstration, his long sensitive

fingers pulling the wet clay up into a tall cylinder, and at the same time, he'd tell stories about his extended family, his sojourn in Japan in the army, Charlie Harder, Greek copper vessels and Chinese Hahn Dynasty pottery – peppering the monologue with his trademark raunchy jokes. One student remembers him as a cross between Bertrand Russell and Rodney Dangerfield. Talented young ceramics artists, like Michael Peed, Irv Tepper and Notkin, began to gravitate to the carriage house, attracted not only by Ferguson's passion for the medium and but by his unifying vision of life and art brought together in the medium of pottery. The time was ripe for this kind of message, of simplicity, of going back to simple materials and utilitarian forms, with the back-to-nature movements of the Sixties. "To me it was more about a life than about clay," recalls Silvie Granatelli, a cofounder of the ceramics collective, 16 Hands, in Virginia. "It was about investing in yourself, and finding a way to express yourself in a kind of seamless life. It was not like you had art over here and a family over there. It was all one."

"Ken was a big, gruff man, sort of in-your-face," recalls Richard Hensley, also a nationally-known potter and a part of the 16 Hands collective. "He was different than most teachers. He told so many stories, and gave so much of himself."

He had the self-confidence to know that just being around him was an education. He'd say, "Come on Rick!" and we'd pile into that beat-up truck of his and drive to pick up a pile of 2 by 4's that someone had donated. On the way, we'd stop to get a hamburger. It was just his way of teaching--that just 'making things' wasn't all there is to art, you had to understand the flow of work, how to get ideas, and how to nurture yourself. He was teaching at all times. We'd be sitting at a red light and he would throw a line to me from a review he'd read about Jasper Johns. The flow of his mind was very impressive to a 20-year-old.

Ferguson insisted all of his students call him “Mr. Ferguson,” and learn the basics of throwing. But he had the wisdom to let the exceptional ones, who were self-motivated and already working on a storehouse of ideas, have free rein.

“Nothing grows without freedom,” he asserts, recalling those years. “If you’re talking about kids at the Art Institute, most of them had talent. They just had to be inspired and get to the point where they really wanted to work hard. I mean they really had to want it bad. If they had those things, you couldn’t stop them, really.”

“I got so I could tell pretty quick. You take the sophomores, give them 35 pounds of red clay and say, “This was your idea -- You came to art school! Let’s see what you can do with it.” If a student came back to me complaining, “What am I supposed to make?” that would worry me. But if he punched the clay, threw it over his shoulder, and dropped it from the top of a ladder, I knew he’d be okay. If he touched the clay well, then he had a chance.

“If a student is too tight, I tried to loosen him up. If he was too loose, I tried to tighten. And I tried to get them to try what was really unnatural for them while they were in school. The only path I encouraged was to start with the thrown pot – start on the wheel and go from there. It doesn’t hurt. But I didn’t care if they stayed on the wheel.”

On Ferguson’s watch, the Kansas City Art Institute’s Ceramics Department became an incubator where students learned the varied skills they needed to earn their living as potters, from scrounging materials, to building kilns, to the chemistry of glazes and clay, to dealing with galleries and art fairs. Reaching deep into history, he taught on the old model of a master and his apprentices. Students were expected to help build and fire the kilns and mix glazes and clay. When Ferguson was getting ready for a sale, the students were treated to the spectacle of their teacher frantically racing to put

the necessary body of work together. It was a transparent situation, conducive to learning by osmosis, and students later were able to appreciate Ferguson's ability to let them embrace his world.

The formula was: hard work and plenty of it. In the Indiana that Ferguson remembers from his youth, each farmer relied on an inner time clock to tell him whether he'd "made his salt." That Protestant work ethic remained paramount. On hot summer nights, he took those still working out for ice cream in his beat-up carryall truck. Those who didn't put in the hours, didn't get the invitation. Ever the crafty can-do American, he relied upon the students' keen sense of competition to keep them motivated.

"Yea, he manipulated us in a way, but it was a talent that he had, and it served its purpose," remembers Kurt Weiser, an artist with the Garth Clark Gallery and a Regents Professor at Arizona State University. "He'd come over to where I was working, and say, 'Hey Weiser, you ought to see what Hensley's doing. It's unbelievable! Incredible!'"

Then he'd walk away shaking his head, saying, 'This Hensley guy is the best I ever saw.' So I'd think, 'What the Hell!' and I'd get up and sneak over to Hensley's station to have a look, and then I'd just have to work all the harder.

Ferguson was immersed in Zen lore, which he had absorbed through the pots. Like novitiates at a Zen monastery, under Roshi Ferguson, students tried hard to instill in themselves a philosophy of non-attachment. Ferguson intentionally broke most of the pots he threw on the wheel, and he expected his students to do the same. There was a certain contemplative satisfaction and deep learning to be found in gazing down at your own vessels, smashed in the slaking barrels, along with those of all the other students, remembers John Gill, who is now chair of the ceramics department

at Alfred University in New York. “It added to your intuition. I spent hours memorizing the layers of history in the slop buckets, all that we’d tried to do and almost achieved and would try again.”

The Ceramics Department became a haven for talented kids whose skills did not fit the conventional academic mold. Gill, who was dyslexic, had arrived at the Kansas City Art Institute literally unable to read or write. Stanley Welsh, who had dropped out of Claremont High School in California because of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), began taking courses with Paul Soldner, and soon found himself a freshman in Ferguson’s ceramic department, having never earned a high school degree. Allan Winkler had been involved with street gangs north of Chicago. Akio Takamori was serving a traditional pottery apprenticeship in the tiny village of Koshiwara, Japan, when Ferguson and Gertrude chanced onto him. By the following October, Takamori was a full-time student, knowing no English except a few swear words. For all of these students, and many more, Ferguson went to bat with the administration like a big-city college coach, smoothing over missing transcripts, missed classes, and illegible papers, and making sure his students pulled the requisite credits to graduate while they spent most of their time working with clay.

While Ken Ferguson discovered his talent for finding and motivating students, his tenure at the Kansas City Art Institute also offered him stability and a time for experimentation. Working with wood-fire kilns and “garbage” firing, where the vessels were packed with bushels of leaves and other organic matter, he lost as much as a third of the vessels, but was very pleased with the survivors. “I must live with the risks,” he wrote then, “and be able to gamble with my work. At any rate, this is what my pots seem to be about—not at all that controlled; letting the clay and the fire show me something. Too much control would take the soul out of the pots.” [7]

He fell into a schedule that was to work well for him for more than twenty years. He'd work three days a week, from 8-6, at the ceramics department and spent the other four days at his studio in Shawnee, Kansas, throwing. On Friday, he'd bisque his pottery, fire on Sunday, let them cool, and take the pots out of the kiln on Tuesday. "I didn't have the nervous temperament to sit and cut and fondle clay all day," he admits. The varied routine, the student intrigues, the visits to the Nelson-Atkins Museum to gaze at English and Chinese ceramics, all made it possible for him to keep fresh, making pots and pushing things forward.

In the next two years, Ferguson built a telephone pole lodge and pottery studio on land he'd purchased for a summer home in Wyoming. It was the first place that he and Gertrude owned, and they marveled in the open land, the mountains and forests. While his children went trout fishing with their grandfather Cecil, Ferguson could find space to dream and stretch. He noticed that the pots he made in Wyoming were different than those he made in Kansas City. They were looser, with more gesture in the throwing. His kick wheel moved more slowly than the powered wheel he used in Kansas, allowing for a slower, easier dialogue with the clay. The pots had more feeling in them, were closer to Leach's ideal of "nonchalance;" of having in a strange sense given birth to themselves, with the potter on the sidelines looking on. Sometimes the potters' greatest task was to recognize and appreciate the pot.

Having achieved tenure, and feeling that he was "going to be around for a while," Ferguson also began to build his house and studio in Shawnee, Kansas. The decision was partly fueled by Ferguson's sense of competition with his friend and supporter at the school, Dale Eldred, who had just completed a modernist concrete bunker home nearby, completely underground. Improvising with little money, as he had at Archie Bray, Ferguson scrounged surplus timbers and borrowed workers from a construction site idled by a strike. Dale Watson, a local architect who had worked

with Frank Lloyd Wright, helped design the home. It would be a one-story building, large enough to raise three children in, and containing everything Ferguson felt was right about being modernist, utilitarian and sleek, like a Kyllikki Salmenhaara pot that you could live in. The hearth was the centerpiece of the building, like one of the enormous baking ovens the factory workers of Clairton made for their wives from purloined firebricks, contained in its own sunken area off the living room.

Things were changing rapidly at the Kansas City Art Institute. By 1970, the carriage house had been torn down and replaced with a factory-like building whose walls of raw concrete contained more than a nod to Philadelphia architect, Louis Kahn, whom Ferguson admired. Victor Babu, a former student at Alfred, and George Timock joined him on the faculty, two men whose two very different approaches to ceramics were a complement to Ferguson's.

Now the chairman of a vastly expanded ceramics department, Ferguson traveled around the country — indeed, the world: England, Spain, Finland, Japan, Alaska, Canada --recruiting new students. He'd arrive at a college, show slides of Kansas sunflowers and Hamada pottery, give a pottery demonstration that would blow them all away, then tell a few stories and make a pitch. Ferguson's raw enthusiasm was catching and his salesmanship paid off. Students transferred in from other colleges at a rapid clip, forming as much as 60% of Ferguson's students.

"Those were ripe years," Ferguson recalls – the early seventies. Students remember that he ran the new department like a "great factory", with clay going in one end and pots emerging from the other. Jets of gas flame roared through the cracks in the firebrick kilns at all hours. The floors were open, with no dividers between students. Students were so self-motivated that they stood in line for clay and for glazes, and routinely worked 12-hour days. The only way Ferguson could get some of them to go home at night was to lock the doors between midnight and eight a.m.

A large figure, growing yearly larger, Ferguson maintained an outsize interest in, and sensitivity to,

the inner lives of his students. For many, this close bond, forged of so many nights and weekends spent working side-by-side, did not diminish at graduation. In old Japan, the relationship between a master and his apprentice never ends. Ferguson's students tell of his reaching out years, even decades, later to help with a job, a contest, an application to graduate school, or just with personal advice. Many of his students received their first jobs through his intervention, in the years when a single phone call from Ferguson to a department head could make things happen. Married couples remember with a kind of awe that Ferguson pushed them together, or when the crazy fragmentation of student life pulled them apart, that he rejoiced when they got together again.

Ferguson's personal, intrusive presence, his knobby prejudices, loves and dislikes have always been out there for everyone to see. It was part of the Ferguson experience, the fecundity of knowing him. For students, he could be like the father you never knew, or the one you were desperately trying to escape. For women, the locker room jokes and Triassic-era attitudes could be harsh, could make their undergraduate years an ordeal of gritted teeth, of straining for a bar that always seemed to be set a notch out of reach. Yet, Ferguson admired many woman potters. He showed over and over he'd help a woman student, the same as a man.

During most of the seventies, Ferguson was content to view himself as a modest and self-reliant traditional potter. The idea of making simple, inexpensive, utilitarian vessels that could be used in any home, were sturdy enough for the kitchen and beautiful enough to bring to the table, still had great appeal to Ferguson's blue-collar core. "My message was, I was glad not to be an artist. I was glad to be a potter. I was proud of this new thing we'd found, of making pots and selling them, teaching classes. I could build my own kiln, mix my own clay and be my own boss."

But that role was beginning to show strains and cracks. A realist, he was not immune to the truth

that the American consumer reached for Tupperware when they wanted to store food, not a hand-thrown artifact. While temperamentally a populist, Ferguson knew his craft was not supported by the people he grew up with – the working class – but by a very small and rarified segment of the upper crust. Worse, the vessels themselves seemed to have reached a creative endpoint for him. “I started seeing that the pots weren’t going to go much further.” Ferguson recalls. “I had achieved a certain level of proficiency. My plates weren’t cracking, and so on. I’d pretty much got my glazes to where I wanted them. With each fire cycle, I’d look at the pots and say, how can I do this better, where can I go from here?”

Clay is an ancient art, and at first the changes in Ferguson's pots were evolutionary: a fold in the belly of a wheel-thrown stoneware storage jar that looked like the fallen girdle of middle-aged flesh. Barbara Okun, who ran a gallery in St. Louis, saw this and encouraged Ferguson to make more; they evolved into his “Slump” jars of the early eighties – tall and expressively turned, upon whose streaming, brown rivers of glaze, all the warts and wrinkles and sags of aging manhood could be seen on display. Large in scale, the slump pots had more than a little resemblance to, and some of the élan of, Voulkos’ stack pots.

Ferguson wanted to push further, as Voulkos had done, but wasn’t sure how much or how far. “I knew I was taking a big risk when I changed over from making pottery to art, truly,” he says.

I was walking away from selling all of my functional work, without a doubt. Going over into the unknown. But then something happened. I had a sale in 1980 at which I sold \$5,000 worth of pottery. That was a lot of money then. There were people in the back room of my studio trying to buy test pieces, and two women fighting over a cracked pot with glazes that had spilled all over, and I thought, “They’re not buying my pots, they’re buying me.”

At the wheel, Ferguson continued to wrestle with Zen ideas of “letting go-not-letting go,” allowing the spinning clay to occasionally twist under his fingers, hoping for the mistake, or blinding flash of “nonchalance,” that would propel him to the next level. Although he did not know it yet, the dam was about to burst, and all of his creative energies were about to stream forth, the way the Mississippi does every decade or so, leaping the old riverbed in a violent flood, that would soon sweep all that was familiar and safe downstream, to carve a new channel, just as deep and steady. But first, a personal crisis intervened. His father, Cecil Ferguson, was dying.

Cecil had been the inspiration for all that was manly in Ken. Cecil had taught Ferguson about working hard, supporting a family, bringing home the bacon -- and about not putting yourself ahead of any other man. Even in his seventies, Cecil had a bite to be reckoned with; he could give his son a thorough dressing down for not starting up a chainsaw fast enough. Cecil had never looked at Ken’s pots, never encouraged his career. In a 1993 interview, Ferguson would mention that he sometimes looked over his shoulder when working on something new in his studio, fearing in his imagination that his father might burst in, shouting “What do you think you’re doing!” [8]

At any rate, now his father was very ill. Ferguson rushed to his bedside with a newly-minted copy of the Manson Kennedy documentary film, "Ferguson, the Potter," and a projector, hoping at last to impress on his father all he’d achieved, and how well he was acknowledged. But it was too late, Cecil waved away the film wearily, had no interest. Soon after, Grandpa Cecil was gone.

Saddened by this loss, Ferguson went back to the studio and to teaching. Gradually, the changes he’d been looking for in his work came to pass, not through a flash of inspiration, but by the laborious process of trying new things and letting his curiosity follow its own path.

The new imagery “started very simply,” he remembers. “It was very straightforward and simple.” He’d begun by making high, loping handles in imitation of a ceramic basket he’d brought

back from Japan in 1973. He was attracted by the positive and negative spaces created, which reminded him of the paintings on Mimbres pottery. But the basket handles were more difficult to make than he'd anticipated. He tried braiding coils of clay and rolling them out with a rolling pin. When he attached one end of the handle to a large baking dish, the other end would always come up short, or too high, or too long. Finally he hit upon the idea of joining two lengths of soft clay overhead with a quick pinch. The joint in the center gave the handle a pleasing, organic, sinewy look, almost like a piece of bone. But when he tried two joints overhead, something astonishing happened: the handle looked like a loping rabbit.

Ferguson attached long, sensitive ears, hips and a tail; the feet pushed out the rim of the bowl, creating an elliptical and thus -- finally! -- non-functional, vessel. The first of many "Rabbit" vessels was fired black in a residual salt kiln; it was unique and simple, and seemed to express something essential about who Ken Ferguson was and what he wanted to say.

All of Ferguson's raunchy humor, as well as his historical learning, were channeled into the new vessels. A wrinkled, brown, highly sexualized, scrotal spout appeared on the front of a teapot and became another Ferguson trademark. He improvised on an ancient Chinese tripod form, to make a witchy pouring vessel, supported on three baggy udders, with a mermaid hag, or mischievous rabbit, peering over the handle. The rabbits begat more rabbits, marching around the rims of blistered, scabrous, green-patina'd vessels like the bulls on the lid of a Han dynasty bronze. The rabbits leaped in twos and fours over each other and begat small, crawling mute turtles. Although the output in numbers was less than Ferguson's earlier pottery, in terms of creativity it far exceeded what he'd done before.

As he had feared, with his first show of the "rabbit pots" at the Garth Clark Gallery in New York, he left many of his previous supporters behind. Even Warren MacKenzie, his old friend, was

dismayed at the extravagance of the new work, asking, “What are you doing? What is this crazy stuff?” – and perhaps echoing what Ferguson feared his own father might have said if he had lived.* But Ferguson’s pieces were fetching gallery prices. Something in Ferguson’s canny Protestant character told him something must be right. A workman is worthy of his hire. It couldn’t all be flim-flammery. Besides, as the famed ceramics artist Betty Woodman once joked to him, if it all went to hell, they still had the skills, they could go back to making teapots and casseroles.

[* (footnote:) In 1991, MacKenzie wrote, “When function and need are ignored in favor of technique and the ‘cult of the personality,’ I feel that it presages a decline of culture.”] [9]

What was the meaning of Ferguson’s rabbit? Throughout world history and myth, the hare is a sly trickster, who seduces, bamboozles and ensnares those who are less crafty than he is. In the pottery Ferguson admired, rabbits had an old and twining family tree, appearing in Mimbres bowls, English slipware of the 18th century, and ancient Japanese and Chinese ceramics. Without this historical pedigree, Ferguson could probably not have allowed himself to draw so deeply upon the hare’s sinuous, muscular form.

But John Gill is convinced the rabbit is best seen as a self-portrait: “If you want to understand the rabbit plates, you have to go out to where Ken’s studio is in Wyoming – it’s bigger than life,” he says.

There’s so much sky, and you see a storm crack between here and the mountains, and then these animals running all over the place. There’s something about the rabbit out there in Wyoming. It’s not a bunny; it’s this really great jackrabbit. It’s long and lean and fast. And have you seen pictures of Ferguson when he was at the Bray, or at

his wedding? He's long, he's lean, and he's fast. So, Ken's this rabbit. And he's saying, "I'm just doing my thing out here. Give me the space I need."

Now in his eighth year of retirement, Ferguson stalks the pathway between his house and studio with a walker. Pain and a relentless procession of plans and thoughts keep him up half the night and he often is not ready to work until the middle of the afternoon. He works with the help of a studio assistant, gleaned from the current crop of students from the Kansas City Art Institute ceramics department, now under the direction of Cary Esser, who studied under Ferguson in the 1970s. The rabbit has given way to the bull, another symbol of male power and sexual authority whose pedigree reaches back into ancient times and forward into ours – think of Picasso's bulls, or the Cretan Minotaur. His bull with golden horns – Freud would have a field day with this one! – on a wheeled bronze cart, is not thrown.

Ferguson keeps a voluminous correspondence with his former students, who still look to him for praise and support. If he doesn't hear from a student after a while, he will come looking for him. "Young people today are too cool to let on something meant anything to them," he says. But you may get a letter ten years from now saying, "You were right when you said that to me."

In his studio, Ferguson works on his calendar and sketches pots for his next show: twenty or thirty small drawings to a page, the sketches so tiny and gestural that they look like Chinese calligraphy. He broods about many things: the fact that the human hand still curves as though we were still walking on them, as the first men did. "I tell my students that they should think about this, because they are going to use their hands," he says. Or the Wallace Stevens poem that reads:

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought rises
In the bronze décor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands at the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down. [10]

Is that palm an exotic tree? Or the hand, which is the furthest limit and border of the mind's reach,
and the limit to our tactile senses?

“Ceramics has always been the low man on the totem pole,” he says, in a voice as direct, flat and
vigorous as the Indiana farm country from which he originally sprang. “We may have seen our best
day – what do you think? Voulkos gone, Arneson gone, Duckworth inactive. A Hamada teapot and
a Matisse drawing are not the same thing.” And you look twice, because you know that Ferguson
loves Hamada, and he's saying something modest and direct about himself and his place in the
pantheon of art history when he says that.

He broods too, on the question of how much of a role chance played in his career. Charlie Harder
died of leukemia soon after Ferguson came to Alfred – what if he'd arrived a year later than he did?
What if James McKinnel hadn't convinced him to try Archie Bray? “I have a feeling I came along at
the right time. I'm not going to say there's divine intervention, but I've just been lucky.”

Notes:

1. Attributed to Peter Voukos by Ken Ferguson. The author interviewed Ferguson at his home and studio in Shawnee, Kansas, on February 3 and 4, 2004. Several subsequent telephone calls helped me to clarify specific points or add new insights. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Ferguson come from these conversations.

[2] Interview with Akio Takamura by the author, February 12, 2004. The author wishes to use this opportunity to thank Ken Ferguson's many former students who generously allowed me to interview them by telephone and in person during the months of February, March and April, 2004. They are (roughly in the order I interviewed them): Cary Esser, Allan Winkler, Stan Welsh, Irvin Tepper, Richard Notkin, Kurt Weiser, Akio Takamura, Sarah Jaeger, Silvie Granatelli, Josh Deweese, Richard Hensley, Donna Polseno, John Gill and James Watkins. In addition, I'd like to thank Victor Babu, Ferguson's former colleague in the Ceramics Department of the Kansas City Art Institute. Without all of their clear insights and sharp recollections of Ken Ferguson's teaching years -- fueled by their obviously still strong affection for and awe of their former instructor -- this article would have been impossible to write. All quotations of Ferguson's former students stem from these conversations and are attributed in the text.

[3] Peter von Ziegesar, "The Pot is the Man: Kenneth Ferguson," American Ceramics, 10 (Winter, 1993), p. 20.

[4] "Conjugal Relationships; Ann Shaner and Gertrude Ferguson, Wives," Studio Potter, Dec. 1991.

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[5] Interview with Russell Ferguson by the author, February 5, 2004. Russell's insights and recollections concerning Helena, and the early years in Kansas City were invaluable.

[6] **T. S. Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1919)** Excerpted from *Reading About the World, Volume 2*, edited by Paul Brians, Mary Gallwey, Douglas Hughes, Azfar Hussain, Richard Law, Michael Myers, Michael Neville, Roger Schlesinger, Alice Spitzer, and Susan Swan; Harcourt Brace Custom Books, 1999.

[7] Kenneth Ferguson, "A High Altitude Wood-Burning Kiln," Studio Potter, Volume 1, Number 1, December, 1982, page 36.

[8] Peter von Ziegesar, "The Pot is the Man: Kenneth Ferguson," American Ceramics, 10 (Winter, 1993), p. 24.

[9] Warren MacKenzie: An American Potter, P. 31, by David Lewis, Kodansha International, Tokyo/New York/London, 1991.

[10] "Of Mere Being," by Wallace Stevens. Quoted from the Modern American Poetry Web page.

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The Palm at the End of the Mind

Thoughts of a Potter and Professor

