



**Standing
Room
Only
2004
Scripps
60th
Ceramic
Annual**

W I L L I A M S O N G A L L E R Y S C R I P P S C O L L E G E

Bill Gilbert

1972–73, B.A., Pitzer College

WE CAME FROM ALL OVER: the Northwest, the Midwest, the East Coast; there may even have been someone from the South whom I don't remember! In part, it was the time. Art seemed to matter more to our culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s and ceramics had a certain cachet associated with the back-to-the-earth, hippie, tune-in/turn-on/drop-out paradigm. And then there was the place. For those of us misguided enough to be born and raised on the East Coast or in the heartland, California was it. It may have been an illusion promulgated by the rock-and-roll subculture, but California was *our* place. We just had to get there.

Whatever else was motivating us, Paul was the catalyst for those who found their voice in ceramics. In his workshops around the country, Paul projected this incredible, positive, independent, and physical energy that drew us one and all. When he hit the campus at Swarthmore one gloomy winter day in February 1970, we were saturated in the deep-fried angst of the Vietnam war insanity. He arrived like a blast of sunlight. He not only made his audience feel like he was on to something powerful for himself but also that there was space in his world for young people who were willing to go for it.

For those of us who came, that's about all we needed. The moment each of us arrived and walked into that little subground studio at Scripps, we felt the energy. This was a place in which art was being made, and lots of it, by passionate people led by an inferno.

The context was academic, but Paul was not. The studio was not so much a classroom as a workshop. Class per se didn't matter all that much. It was 24/7. You lived there. The other people in the studio were your world. You worked together, ate together, slept together. It was claustrophobic from the get-go, and that added to the energy.

The studio, laid out to maximize the use of the tiny space, also expressed a clear hierarchy of power with Paul's wheel in the center. Out in the floor space around him sat the grad student wheels, occupied by the big guns, Jim Romberg and Tom Collins, the major planets in orbit around the sun. Up against the wall, on the periphery facing toward the center of the universe, were the kick wheels for us neophytes. The wackos and less machos worked upstairs where pot-making was not assumed.

Paul taught by doing. His doing became the ethic, and you maintained your place in the studio by doing. Any stone not rolling was swept aside or buried. He worked in front of us, with us. It wasn't the lectures that mattered, though he certainly knew his stuff. The demonstrations were great. Paul is above all else a performer. The rope-in-the-pot trick was a good one and who will ever forget throwing-as-striptease, but the real deal was that he made his work right there in the same studio with all of us. He put himself—his method, his body, his knowledge—right out there in front of you. We learned by watching, not listening.

And it wasn't just about making pots. Paul brought the same can-do ethic to the entire ceramic process. Seems like we were always tearing some kiln down and building another one, only to tear it down and build something else. There was this incredible sense of possibility. There wasn't a safety shut-off in the entire place and no one got hurt. It was all about taking your art practice and your life into your own hands. For a young artist, the opportunity to fashion a life with your own intelligence and physical force was empowering and intoxicating.

And it wasn't just about ceramics. Being an artist with Paul was a lifestyle, a way of seeing the world and operating in it. Whether you were in the studio making pots, making omelets for fifty people in someone's borrowed restaurant, or cramming way too many people into a hot tub, it was all part of the same thing. Art was not merely a career, it was a way to live.

We took that with us. After Claremont we drifted off into our own lives, some continuing to make pots, some moving completely away from ceramics, some even giving up making art. No matter, there's not one of us whose life wasn't altered inexorably by the experience of all that creative energy in the little subground studio at Scripps.