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Collection Focus: Don Reitz

September 20, 2023 – February 3, 2024

Making pots isn't about making pots...You can't let pots get in the way of making pots, like you can't let fishing get in the way of going fishing. Making pots is about your self [sic]; the way you think; the way your mind is; what has affected you all your life. —Don Reitz

Don (Donald) Reitz (1929–2014) holds a special place in contemporary craft, particularly in ceramics. Not only did he reinvigorate salt- and wood-firing techniques, but he was also a truly beloved figure who inspired numerous artists and collectors.

Similar—and yet different—to Toshiko Takaezu, another legendary figure who impacted the course of ceramics in the twentieth century, there was no separating art and life for Reitz. While Takaezu seemed to orient the connection on day-to-day practices, Reitz related to the material in a way that it became an extension of his body and a reflection of profound personal circumstances. He appeared to live an adventurous life, loving nature at an early age and feeling connected to the earth (or “dirt”) from the first time he played in it. Reitz’s energetic spirit is reflected in ceramic objects that have loopy handles, textural surfaces, and direct—or indirect—evidence of his hand.

This exhibition underscores RAM’s commitment to chronicling the career of Reitz, who spent 1962–88 living and working in Wisconsin when he was actively teaching as faculty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. There were already a handful of works by Reitz in RAM’s collection when a recent major gift from Leatrice S. and Melvin B. Eagle catapulted the number of his pieces to over 60. This gift established an archive for Reitz and pushed him into the top three most-collected artists working primarily in clay in the collection.

In the late 1950s, after obtaining his bachelor’s degree, Reitz taught art in public schools before attending Alfred University and pursuing his master of fine arts degree. Once he was at Alfred and focusing on ceramics fulltime, Reitz began to experiment more, especially with clays and unorthodox firing methods. His introduction to salt firing fueled his enthusiasm for visceral engagement that extended beyond manipulating the clay itself.

Both salt and wood firing magnify chemical processes of material interaction. With salt firing (or salt glazing), salt is introduced into a kiln during the firing. It reacts with materials in the clay, naturally glazing the work inside. Wood firing operates similarly in that ash from the wood interacts with the flame and the clay. There is a large degree of chance embedded in the techniques that appealed to Reitz.

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In addition, the techniques allow for surface enhancements as well as an emphasis on the clay itself. They connected the materials and firing processes to bodies—his body in particular.

Wisconsin played a big role in Reitz's career, holding his attention for almost three decades when he was actively teaching as a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Madison from 1962–88. His innovations and experimentations—and people's desire to experience these—along with his love of connecting with people through art encouraged frequent traveling for workshops across the country. Wisconsin offered him space to set up kilns and to work in the kind of environment he loved—one that would keep him active and “making pots, running a farm, training horses, salt glazing, everything.” When Reitz retired from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, he moved to a ranch in Arizona where he built a studio. He maintained a dedicated creative practice that included an active schedule of teaching workshops.

Reitz has routinely been considered a trailblazer for contemporary ceramic practice and is represented in numerous public collections beyond RAM's, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., and the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina. His career is marked with numerous awards and acknowledgments, including being named twice as one of the greatest living ceramic artists, operating as President of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), winning both a Wisconsin Governor's Award and a Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Award, being acknowledged with a citation of the Maori people of New Zealand for “distinguished leadership in the dispensing of knowledge to peoples,” and being awarded a Gold Medal from the American Craft Council.

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<https://donreitz.com>

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