Kitchen counter at Mangus/Kwong household in Kent. Photo: Rose Bouthillier.

# THINGS LOVE

by Rose Bouthillier

I first met Kirk Mangus for a studio visit in the spring of 2012. Arriving at his house in Kent, the density of the space instantly fascinated me; the overflow of objects, artworks, and ideas, all jumbled together. Mangus's work caught me off guard—so real, profuse, *out there*. When news arrived of his sudden passing in the fall of 2013, I was filled with regret that I would never get to watch him throw, or to ask the many questions I have about his art. Eva Kwong, Kirk's wife, has been a true partner in organizing this exhibition, providing insight and generously opening their home, studio, and archive. Many hours have been spent looking through hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces; over 30 years of prolific output in ceramics, sculpture, painting, and drawing. An artist's artist, Mangus seemingly made something every day—a pot, figure from a small pinch of clay, quick sketch, or poetic note. In his approach to craftsmanship, he sought to re-negotiate concepts of beauty and mastery, proposing an unguarded, impassioned way of thinking, making, living, and loving.

Though Mangus produced countless iterations of different forms and vessels, none of them feel repetitive. While partly due to his stylistic range, this is largely attributable to a particular mindset and an unbridled love of making. That fondness is palpable in the work, giving each piece an affective singularity. As potter Henry Varnum Poor reflected:

> Only love can create a living thing: knowledge is not enough. To know exactly how clay acts and what its qualities are is not the same by any means as loving it into life and nursing it through the mysteries and uncertainties of firing.[1]

This love extends to every aspect of the process. Digging for clay was a passion of Mangus's, and Ohio and Pennsylvania are renowned for their rich deposits. Kirk and Eva collected clay from construction sites, farms, and riverbeds. They also bought 40 tons of it from a local sand pit, which produced unique flashing marks in a great range of oranges, grays, blacks, and a rainbow of browns, along with a metallic maroon sheen. It behaved unlike any clay they had used before; sensitive to extreme heat, it would soften in the kiln, unfurl, rip, and collapse. This clay had to be learned through experimentation, mixing in other stabilizing clays and arriving at the ideal firing temperatures.[2] Kirk and Eva also built their own kilns, hand-making bricks and chopping wood for the fire. As Eva describes, "Kirk was interested in the elemental materials of local clays, local wood, and local ash. They came from his land and he felt it gave his work a sense of place and uniqueness. It was rooted in Western Pennsylvania, as generations of his family were."[3] This degree of dedication is conveyed in the works themselves, which hold a sense of intimacy and familiarity.[4]

When Mangus began studying ceramics in the early 70s, British potter Bernard Leach's doctrine of a simple, folk-inspired aesthetic, espoused in his influential volume *A Potter's Book* (1940), was still very much in the air. So were the work and ideas of Soetsu Yanagi, a close friend of Leach's, known as the founder of the Japanese folk craft movement, *mingei*.[5] On his time as a 19-year-old student of potters Warren MacKenzie and Byron Temple at the Penland School of Crafts, Mangus reflected:

> …I was baptized in the philosophical river that Leach had created. At the time, I had no idea about schools of thought, mingei, or even that I was becoming involved in an international debate over the direction contemporary potters should take.[6]

Mangus disagreed with Leach's negative opinions about Iga, Oribe, and other Japanese tea wares that had deliberate imperfections and overstatements.[7] Favoring these styles himself, Mangus explained:

> Their beauty is quite esoteric, as is their shameless contrivance. [. . .] They are sad and somber beyond compare, as well as silly and awkward. They have enough character to build a density in their beauty that is singular in human history.[8]

Mangus was personally influenced by other Japanese ceramicists, including Toshiko Takaezu (a family friend and mentor), Jun Kaneko[9] (his undergraduate professor at the Rhode Island School of Design), Goro Suzuki, and Katsuyuki Sakazume.[10] Watching Suzuki throw pots in 1975, Mangus was impressed that his works "remained original even when he was using Oribe, Shino and other ancient pottery styles as his model [...] They are sweet, touching, and have a sense of struggle. This makes them profound statements about simple experiences."[11]

A curious person and voracious viewer and reader, whenever Mangus came across a ceramic form or style that interested him, he set out to learn about it through practice and experimentation. He developed a remarkable versatility with all manner of clays, building techniques, glazes, and kilns. His knowledge of ceramic traditions from the United States, Japan, Korea, China, Italy, Greece, and Central America, bolstered by his travel and residencies abroad, gave Mangus an abundance of aesthetic resources.[12] Interested in the ways that artists exchange and shift cultural references, he wrote:

> Art tends to mutate. Style and influence creep in and out of objects, interiors and architecture. Foreign thought continually challenges regional taste and spawns exotic hybrid children. [. . .] The artist always gets things a little wrong and misses the original point. This doesn't matter. When something becomes incorporated, it takes on a life of its own.[13]

Mangus's expansive vocabulary shaped a body of work that is extraordinarily wide ranging: from austere, rough-hewn cups to shiny, ornate ziggurats; elegantly thrown vessels to messily pinched mugs; subtle, refined glazing to brash spatters of colored slip. Take one form within his oeuvre and you'll find endless riffs on it; his amphorae, for instance, vary from classical to whimsical to ghoulish to abject.

As a teenager, Mangus would go to the beach and, while others drew the ocean or the boardwalk, he would be attracted to "something dead like an old fish with just bones and some scales… the guts, the little pieces of seaweed, the eye socket, the leftover thing."[14] Mangus often thought about aesthetic judgment, stating: "Beauty is a figment of the imagination. It is also completely controlled by prejudices."[15] Here, Mangus aligns with Jean Dubuffet, an artist he greatly admired, who wrote: "I absolutely refuse to give in to the idea that there are ugly people and ugly objects. Such an idea strikes me as stifling and revolting."[16] While Dubuffet's position came out of a rejection of Western notions of aesthetic refinement, Yanagi expressed similar ideas born from the philosophy of Zen, writing:

> A true artist is not one who chooses beauty in order to eliminate ugliness, he is not one who dwells in a world that distinguishes between the beautiful and the ugly, but rather he is one who has entered the realm where strife between the two cannot exist.[17]

In another instance Yanagi wrote: "Beauty must have some room, must be associated with freedom. Freedom, indeed, *is* beauty. The love of the irregular is a sign of the basic quest for freedom."[18] The irregular is everywhere in Mangus's work—lumpy, lopsided, and mottled. George Ohr (AKA the "Mad Potter of Biloxi"), another artist Mangus regarded highly, also embraced irregularity. Ohr's unique, oddly morphed vessels expressed his "obsessive commitment to the theomorphic role of the potter as the giver of life," and fervent belief in individuality.[19] "I must be myself and want every pot to be itself," Ohr remarked.[20] Likewise, Mangus's works assert a certain "selfness," a presence that

comes in part through letting the clay, glaze, and fire act naturally. Their drips and droops are full of charm, integrity, and lightheartedness: this ugly beauty is jovial.

Humor is another defining element in Mangus's work. Whether a simple vase, figurative sculpture, or ink drawing, a bawdy, bemused, "devil-may-care" *joie de vivre* pervades. This wit also reflects a Zen sensibility: renowned Chinese ink painters often represented Zen Patriarchs "as abandoned lunatics, scowling, shouting, loafing around, or roaring with laughter at the drifting leaves," while making use of "happy tramps and rogues to exemplify the splendid nonsense and emptiness of Zen life."[21] Mangus's work is populated by an eccentric cast of characters: D'Artagnan and Juneau, his mischievous childhood poodles; Woozy, the wild-eyed family dog; Cyclops Girl (based on his daughter Una, who loved to stick her face so close to others' that her eyes blurred together); King Carrot, inspired by a personal collection of wonky pickled root vegetables; evocations of Chaac, the Mayan rain deity; and all variety of warriors, demons, and mutants. These entities intertwine with portrayals of Mangus, his family, and wide circle of students and friends, along with anonymous people he sketched at cafes.[22] Wayward, flawed, and powerful, these players animate the surfaces of Mangus's pots and large vessels, their bodies wrapped and voluminous.

Mangus often built pieces on a bodily scale. His iconic *Femme* sculptures from the late 80s are some of the most striking in this regard. Bulging, proto-female Venuses, they are abstractions of the body with rounded heads, knobby limbs, and oversized genitalia. Yet, despite their alien appearance and rough, blotchy surfaces, they appear friendly, with ever-open arms. Similarly benevolent, albeit slightly more menacing, are Mangus's large head jugs depicting mythical creatures, masked humans, and animal familiars. These draw from an American folk tradition of "grotesque jugs," made for humorous relief or to salvage a damaged pot.[23] Even pieces without bodies have a human presence; as critic Mary Jean Kenton describes, they "suggest a helpless, frozen corporeality in which the sparkle of life grades into the glint of bodily decay."[24] Coil-built forms and leaf and bug press-mold adornments seem to stretch and bustle. Mangus's hand is visible in the hardened clay, with impressions of fingerprints that suggest pushing, scraping, and smoothing. The body pervades Mangus's work on multiple fronts: as subject matter, physical form, implied relation, and indexical mark.

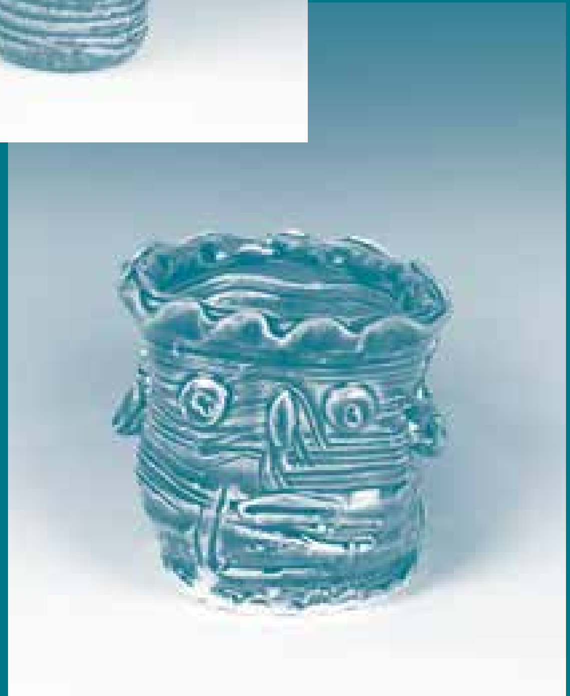
Mangus's artwork is straightforward (in that it doesn't put on airs), but complicated in the ways that human lives and minds and hearts are. His experiences, thoughts, and deep knowledge of ceramic history all come together in a body of work that bursts with the rhythms of his life (at times calm, at others erratic), and deeper tempos of cultural change. Clay is a medium that holds the past and present; ancient deposits settled in the ground, moveable and receptive, are recast. As Poor described, "It is the mysterious quality of plasticity that makes clay so alive, so responsive. Plasticity is like a life force in itself, an extension of every impulse, every touch."[25] Of his own work, Mangus wrote that the pieces he liked best "have a reserved or unfinished quality. By this I mean that they reflect the fact that the making process is a series of stopped events—you stop forming a piece at a particular point, you stop painting it, you stop kiln firing at a certain temperature."[26] This suggestion of incompleteness, of being transitory, casts the work in a state of perpetual becoming.

Although there have been fluctuations and inroads over the course of Mangus's career, ceramic art is not frequently shown in the context of the contemporary art museum. This is tied to many aspects of the medium: an association with function and tradition, lower market values, and an often technically focused, medium-specific discourse. While Mangus made many non-functional sculptures, most of his pieces have utility, or gesture towards it. Utility is humbling; it implies something lower than an object created solely for aesthetic and/or conceptual appreciation. But

3

4

5



6

1. Water Jar with Grasses Design: Shino ware, 1500s. Japan, Gifu Prefecture, Mino kilns, Momoyama period (1573–1615). Glazed stoneware with underglaze iron slip decoration; diameter 7 3/4 inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1972.9.

2. Kirk's straw hat at the barn studio in PA. Photo: Rose Bouthillier.

3. George E. Ohr, *Face Vase*, c. 1895, glazed ceramic, 7 1/2 x 6 inches. Collection of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art. Gift of Don and Norma Cottingham. 2014.2.3.

4. George E. Ohr, *Pitcher*, c. 1900, stoneware, 4 1/8 x 4 7/8 x 3 9/16 inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Henry H. Hawley, 1997.274.

5. Kirk Mangus, *Untitled (Vase)*, 1973–74, stoneware with salt glaze, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of Kirk Mangus.

6. Kirk Mangus, *Green Face Vase*, 2011, porcelain with oribe glaze, 3 1/2 x 3 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of Kirk Mangus.

this lessness can actually be moreness, a complicating and enlivening factor. Philip Rawson wrote that pots "*are* far more than they can ever appear to be," and further that a self-contained useable object, "upon which a man projects his experience of himself, may show itself to him as a separate vehicle of individual being."[27] Such *thingness* makes ceramic pieces all the more persistent to contemplate.

In considering the distinction between the functional and non-functional, Mangus once described his works as "useful to look at."[28] This is a particularly elegant statement on art in general, and one to keep in mind when looking at objects meant to be touched. Use can go beyond holding water or food or plants, be more than simply communicating an artist's ideas or intentions. An artwork that is useful to look at provides for something more, something difficult to define. Jean Paul Sartre's concept of aesthetic joy comes to mind, which he described as the "consciousness of being essential in relation to an object perceived as essential."[29] This applies to artworks and the act of looking, and this feeling of essentiality, a kind of being together, is exactly the "presentness" that permeates Mangus's work. And in it, a freeness—a love.

Essay Footnotes

1. Henry Varnum Poor, *A Book of Pottery*: *From Mud to Immortality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1958), 36. Mangus used this quote in his speech at *20 + 1 Years of the Tozan Kilns: An International Wood Fire Conference* at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, in 2006 (transcript courtesy of Eva Kwong).

2. Eva Kwong, email to the author, September 2014.

3. Eva Kwong, email to the author, July 2014.

4. Poor described digging for clay as a way to "subject yourself to the experience of knowing," 22.

5. Yanagi himself was in turn influenced by the West; as a young man, he immersed himself in Christian mysticism, and when outside culture started flowing into Japan, he studied Post-Impressionism, Impressionism, the Renaissance, and primitive art. Shōji Hamada, "Yanagi and Leach," *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, Sōetsu Yanagi, adapted by Bernard Leach (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1972), 9–10.

6. Kirk Mangus, "Permission to be an Individual," *Ceramics Monthly*, September 2000, vol. 48, no. 7: 114–120.

7. Ibid. In the same text, Mangus also wrote that by vehemently rejecting factory production, "Much of Leach's rants read like the Unabomber's manifesto."

8. Ibid.

9. In 1987, Mangus showed alongside Kaneko in *Contemporary American Ceramics* at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea. This was the first major exhibition of American ceramics in Korea, and also featured Rudy Autio, William Daley, Tony Hepburn, Michael Lucero, Peter Voulkos, and Betty Woodman.

10. Mangus also admired, in books and exhibitions, the work of Japanese ceramicists Miwa Kazuhiko, Kaneshige Toyo, Toyozo Arakawa, Shōji Hamada, and Kitaōji Rosanjin.

11. Kirk Mangus, "Goro Suzuki: Exploration of the Senses," *Ceramics = Art + Perception*, Issue 27, 1997: 33–38. Mangus admired that "Suzuki's work is a result of decades of research into the natural clays and glazes that were the basis for the classic Momoyama wares. It is also the result of being a thoroughly modern man trying to instill a sense of humor into these compulsions." Much the same could be said of Mangus's own work.

12. Mangus also drew from a remarkable range of contemporary references that are covered elsewhere in this volume, but it would be remiss not to list them here: ceramicists Peter Voulkos and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein; painters Gaylen Hansen and Patrick Siler (Mangus's graduate professors at Washington State University, Pullman), Francisco Goya, Francis Bacon, George Grosz, Philip Guston, James Ensor; graphic novels, comics, and Japanese ink painting.

13. Kirk Mangus, "Going for Baroque," unpublished manuscript.

14. Interview with Dr. Koon Hwee Kan, February 7, 2013, unpublished transcript. This recollection encapsulates an element of Zen aesthetics: "When the artist is feeling depressed or sad, and in this peculiar emptiness of feeling catches a glimpse of something rather ordinary and unpretentious in its incredible "suchness," the mood is called *wabi*." Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 181.

15. Interview with Dr. Koon Hwee Kan.

16. Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions," *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality*, Ed. Marc Glimcher (New York: Pace Publications, Inc., 1987), 129.

17. Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, adapted by Bernard Leach, (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1972), 137. Non-duality in Zen also applies to the method of creation, where there is "no conflict between the natural element of chance and the human element of control." Watts, 174.

18. Yanagi, 120–121.

19. Garth Clark, "Clay Prophet: A Present Day Appraisal," *The Mad Potter of Biloxi: The Art & Life of George E. Ohr*, Ed. Constance Herndon (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 122.

20. Ohr quoted in Clark, 133, cited from Ohr quoted in Della Campbell McLeod, "Ohr Pottery...," *Commercial Appeal*, 27 June 1909.

21. Watts, 130–131; referring specifically to painters Mu-ci'I and Liang-k'ai.

22. Eva was an ever-present muse, and the inspiration for many of Mangus's female representations, including iterations of Cat Girl, Girl with Ponytail, and pregnant Femmes.

23. Harold F. Guillard, *Early American Folk Pottery* (New York: Chilton Book Company, 1971), 133.

24. Mary Jean Kenton, "Kirk Mangus, The Clay Place, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania," *American Ceramics*, vol. 9, no. 2, Summer 1991: 50. Here Kenton refers specifically to the luster glazed amphorae, such as *Two Snakes & Asparagus Vessel*, bottom image on page 82.

25. Poor, 19. He further elaborates that, "Of all inorganic substances, clay most approaches the organic; it seems almost to contain in itself the breath of life," 18.

26. Kirk Mangus, "Goddesses and Ants," *The Studio Potter*, vol. 16, no. 1, December 1987: 14.

27. Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 7.

28. Martha Keller, "Kirk Mangus," *American Ceramics*, vol. 3, no. 4: 66.

29. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 64. Originally published as "Qu'est-ce que la literature?" in *Situations II* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948). Sartre refers specifically to literature and the act of reading.

9

10

11

12