



*"There is a before and an after in my career: the turning point was the year I spent at the University of California at Berkeley in Peter Voukos's studio workshop program for a Masters degree," Ruth Krauskopf, Chilean ceramist.*

*Wall piece. 2003. Stoneware, reduction fired to cone 10. 49 x 50 cm.*

# Ruth Krauskopf Revitalising Ceramics in Chile

*Article by Edward Shaw*



*Sculpture. 2000. Reduction fired , cone 5. 100 x 32 x 29 cm.*

**A**GENTLE, REFINED, UNPRESUMING INDIVIDUAL, Ruth Krauskopf is hardly the kind of person you would expect to absorb and adapt the rough-and-ready Voulkos approach to the art of producing pots. "In 1981 I was living in Venezuela with my husband, raising our three children. Miguel decided to take a year's sabbatical and offered to let me pick a place where I could advance my career as a ceramist. I was already beginning to alter symmetrical forms. I felt identified with irregularity and gestural work. I recalled an illustration of a Voulkos plate in a publication. I wrote to him at the University and received no answer."

Krauskopf continues, "Miguel decided we'd go to Berkeley anyway, certain that I'd convince Voulkos to accept me once I confronted him face to face. Amazingly, that's exactly what happened. The first day was bad for me. Voulkos, at that moment, was going through a rough period. The class was frightening. I almost quit. Then, the second day was extraordinary, and we were able to establish a rewarding non-verbal rapport based on connecting with each other's work."

That year at Berkeley gave Krauskopf the confidence and the experience she needed to dedicate herself to her vocation. She felt that she was ready to investigate materials and develop her own style. She reduced the emphasis on utilitarian ware and began to concentrate on objects with a more sculptural intent. Today she moves between functional ware and sculpture, drawing vitality by shifting from one to the other. The spirit of Voulkos impregnates her work, but what comes out of her large gas-fired kiln is totally hers. She has maintained an authentic sense of refinement without sacrificing inherent strength or the element of surprise.

When she returned to Chile in 1984, where she was born 40 years before, ceramics as a valid expression of art was the carefully-guarded secret of a chosen few. Little by little she adapted to the local circumstances. Venezuela, where she had lived 10 years in exile, had offered a stimulating environment with an enthusiastic public accustomed to seeing ceramic pieces as artworks. There was even a gallery dedicated to showing the work of local ceramists.

Back in Santiago, she took matters into her own hands and built a studio in her backyard. When local ceramists began to ask if she taught, she decided that she would. In 1984, she started Hwara Hwara, her studio-workshop project which is set in the foothills of the Andean Cordillera, in an area now incorporated into Santiago's suburban sprawl. Initially, she had three students; now, 20 years later, she has more than 70. There is virtually no turnover. Almost all of the students from the 1980s are ceramists in their own right and many continue to work at her studio.

Krauskopf stimulates them by inviting world class



*Sculpture*. 2003. Fired in anagama kiln. 29 x 10 x 62 cm.

artists and potters to Chile several times a year. Warren Mac Kenzie, bringing his contemporary interpretation of *mingei*, and Doug Casebeer, a dedicated supporter of Huara Huara, have both contributed their talent and knowledge to producing unforgettable workshops at the studio. Names like sculptor Stephen de Staebler, ceramists Paul Soldner, Linda Christianson, Yasuhisa Kohyama, Michael Simon, Randy Johnston, Takashi Nakazato, and Akio Takamori have also worked there, giving master classes and directing workshops. Several Latin Americans have also been involved; Venezuelan ceramists, Guillermo Cuéllar and Gigliola Caneschi, have participated in seminars on several occasions.

Krauskopf and her colleagues have devised an original way to market the production of the ceramists at the studio, which is called *La Mesa Larga* (The Long Table). Twice a year, for just one day in April and October, each class alternates assembling an exhibition in a well-transitted public space. A table is built out of scaffolding that runs the length of a football field – 100 m long. Thousands of utilitarian objects are displayed and sold. The program is in its fifth year, and Huara Huara has a database of 1,300 satisfied customers to ensure the success of the next *Long Table* presentation.

Today Krauskopf divides her own time between coordinating the studio program, teaching, and making her own work. She has an assistant who teaches three of the five courses and reserves Thursdays for her alone. All the work made at the studio is in stoneware, the hallmark of Krauskopf's own pieces.

In her own work, she has recently made a modular mural, which she exhibited in a group show, where it was acquired by a local corporation for installation at their headquarters. The untitled mural, which measures 223 x 100 x 24 cm, is composed of 11 irregular slabs of reduction-fired stoneware. The background colour of the flat surface is a dark earthy brown on which a thin layer in relief of a yellow tone outlines the interrupted form of an abstracted human body. The effect caused by the disintegration of the figure into 11 fragments of different sizes, each basically rectangular, can be appreciated as pure form in space, or as a metaphor for man's disconnected persona in today's complex world. The artist wrote: "I am afraid of the intrusion of words and I yearn for the liberty that only poetry can give. I tried to formulate the mystery in which we live with the language of the earth."

Krauskopf began modelling in her childhood; her father had a marzipan almond paste factory, which



*Sculpture. 2003. Fired in anagama kiln. 37 x 10 x 63 cm.*

provided her with unlimited raw material.. When she finished high school in 1961, she enrolled in the School of Applied Arts at the University of Chile. Following the principles of the Bauhaus, art was divided between the 'pure' and the 'applied', which included ceramics, textiles and metal-working. The wheel was considered an industrial tool, so Krauskopf became proficient at modelling clay. She interrupted her studies to accompany her husband Miguel, whose career as a research physicist took him to the U.S. She returned to Chile in 1968 and finally graduated from the University of Chile in 1972.

Her career as a ceramist began a year later when the family went into exile in Venezuela. There she acquired a wheel and built a downdraft gas kiln and set up shop in the family home. She became active in the local art community and felt at home there: then came Miguel's sabbatical and a radical change of pace. After that year at Berkeley, and a brief stay in Caracas, the family returned to Chile where, after a difficult period of re-adaptation, she began to find her own 'voice' as a ceramist.

"I'd fallen in love with the material. I was able to prepare my own clay in Chile and I wanted clay to be the protagonist. I wanted to avoid being pretentious, and by nature I was still not expressive. Little by little I realised that I had to incorporate more of myself into the pieces, and was able to express that realisation in the work. I went on growing as my life changed; there was no conscious effort on my part to provoke change."

Krauskopf has always respected the inherent honesty of the material and avoided adding anything artificial. Any use of glazes must reflect the inner reality of the clay and not just be a superficial imposition.

The final texture of a piece must emanate from within, but once again, the result is more an existential process than a cerebral one.

"I realised I was an artist when I discovered that it was more important to impregnate the work with sentiment than just to produce it in quantity. Even so, I still feel that I am principally a ceramist. In any case, I'd gone beyond just repeating objects and forms. Voulkos had awakened the capacity in me to take risks. Now I depend on my gut feeling; I've learnt and continue to learn to listen to my inner voice. I shy away from any dependence on glazes, on pure technique, or an academic formalities. I have always felt that it was more important to produce work that was unsettling. My motto has been: beware of an excess of balance, symmetry and perfection."

Ruth Krauskopf presented a selection of her work at the Instituto Cultural de Las Condes in Santiago in May 2004. The show was her first in over a decade. In the catalogue, she wrote, "I fear complacency more than a lack of harmony... I prefer to tackle what I don't know, even though it leads me to unpredictable results." The results of the show were glowing reviews and enthusiastic praise: success when it finally does come, usually leads to bigger and better achievements. Krauskopf most challenging project at the moment is preparing the material for a book on Taller de Cerámica Huara Huara, her studio, and her own work that Random House will publish in 2005.

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Edward Shaw is an American curator, art critic, art collector, and photographer who called Buenos Aires his home from 1960 to 1999, when he settled in Chile.