



John Parker Glick The Mantel Series

REFERENCING INFORMAL COLLECTIONS HAPHAZARDLY gathered and kept by countless families, the works in John Parker Glick's *Mantel Series* are still life tableaux comprised of ordinary, yet intriguing objects that imply a history of people interacting with objects and each other over time. Imagine a letter or poem from a loved one, once read, tucked among other favourite things for safekeeping. Or a salty treasure carried in a dampened pocket and later deposited on a cottage shelf to dry, crackle and change. In essence, the mantels hold suggestive collections in which most people can find a part of themselves, a link to a personal memory and a connection to a lost moment in time.

A native of Detroit, John Parker Glick studied art at Wayne State University and nearby Cranbrook Academy of Art. Working during the past 34 years at Plum Tree Pottery, his home and studio in Farmington Hills, Michigan (about 15 miles northwest of Detroit), Glick has garnered an international reputation for excellence in ceramic sculpture and functional ware. His newest body of work, *The Mantel Series*, was partially inspired by a memory of a salt box that hung near his grandmother's kitchen wood stove. For Glick, the unassuming little box, with its

pleasing enigmatic shape and wooden lid, conjured pleasant boyhood memories, nostalgia for home and hearth, and vivid awareness of history.

Upon his wall-based mantels, the artist places a well-honed repertoire of distinct objects, all deftly crafted of clay, that become characters in his unspoken drama, each form playing off the others in the ensemble. The series includes marvellous vessel forms, teapots, vases, ewers and cups, for which the artist is well known, derived from his rich array of functional ware. The other elements are equally fertile in metaphorical associations, some nostalgic and others Freudian, such as fallen leaves, old letters, miniature photo frames, seaforms, pocket watches, and *tsubas* (the decorative guard from Japanese swords), plus voluptuous pears, phallic bananas and Eden-esque apples. Our bodies, our sexuality and our happiness, all changing as time moves forward.

Despite their generous accessibility, Glick's mantels are nevertheless personal, deriving from autobiographical sources. The letters and envelopes, many of which have actual writing scribbled in inky glaze across their pristine surfaces, relate to the many bits of correspondence he has both sent and received. Although mostly indecipherable, the notes refer to



Article by David D. J. Rau

those from family and friends as well as his memories of writing 'silly' stories and giving them as gifts as a child. The framed photographs remind him of those on his mother's dresser, filled with proud smiling happy people, many of whom Glick never knew. Pocket watches and antiquated artifacts form links to old fashioned ways of life, of generations past and memories of war and travel. Many of his ewers have graceful, elongated spouts which he likens to the forms of Chinese opium pipes, a shape he finds pleasing. The broken bits of seaforms and dried leaves are similar to those from nature that Glick would collect, drawn to their beauty and mindful of the telling touch of time upon the simplest things.

The actual shelf forms are hand-built from extruded clay – the dies for which Glick also designs and constructs. The artist then contorts, tears and presses the lengths of clay into curvaceous and undulating wall mantels with tiny nooks and playful cranies. Stage-like in their theatricality and structure, the mantels also have back walls trimmed with thick lips. The surfaces of the mantels are further detailed with added smaller bits of clay, additional markings and decorative shapes pressed directly into the form. Deliberate scoring lines, cracks and rough edges give

the mantels a subtle patina of wear, an allusion to age. Several mantels are oriented horizontally, forming boat-like shapes on the wall, whereas others are more totemic, with a vertical emphasis. In some instances, the artist has created mantel diptychs comprised of two related forms, arranged side by side.

In creating the composite elements, Glick takes his cue from nature but freely expands upon shapes and colouration, reinventing and rejuvenating ordinary things. His vessel forms are hand-built of thrown and extruded elements, his fruit is press-moulded, his leaves are extruded and individually detailed. His letters flattened, deckled and scrolled by hand. When working in his studio, Glick concentrates on a single form at a time. Without any forethought as to where a particular element will eventually be placed, he creates object after object, be it a pear or tea cup, one informing the next, each one subtly different from the last, until an array of variations on a theme emerge. Pushing, pulling, twisting and turning, Glick manipulates the clay intuitively with his fingers until a unique work of art is formed.

When glazing his forms, Glick chooses from among his 60 distinctive glazes, 30 colour washes and dozens of application combs and brushes. His apples are



Wall Mantel, with apple, pear, shell objects, letters, pocket watch. 1997. Stoneware, porcelain, soda fired, cone 10. 27.5 x 42.5 x 15 cm. Private collection.

sometimes coloured a pale green or plum, his pears might be blue or even beige and his seaforms a delicious chocolate brown. His mixing and mismatching of colours to forms is then given up to the volatile environment of his soda vapour/reduction kiln in which nature becomes an ingenious collaborator. He cherishes the element of surprise inherent in ceramics and welcomes the unexpected.

In orchestrating the final still life compositions, Glick chooses from among all his disparate elements to form a harmonic finished presentation, imbuing each mantel with a distinct character through the inclusion of particular objects. In some instances, the objects are matched in colour and form to the mantel itself whereas others are composed in jarring opposition. Each mantel is a negotiation of formal decisions, horizontals striking a balance with verticals, the spherical apples relating to the round faces of the pocket watches, the thinness

of the letters and envelopes echoing the stack of coin-like *tsubas* gathered with raffia.

Glick also rewards the curious explorer. An arduous looker will find partially hidden elements among the others, a frame holding a blurry image behind a toppled cup, the bits of a torn letter hidden within a footed vessel, or a puzzling empty space, saved perhaps for another yet undiscovered cherished souvenir. Glick's mantels allow for historic reveries of pleasant times while providing wake-up calls to the fleeting nature of life; contemporary *Memento Moris* of sorts, able to both remember and remind.

David D. J. Rau is Curator of Education at Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. John Parker Glick is represented by Shaw/Guido Gallery in Pontiac, Michigan. All photo credits: John Glick and Derek Johnson. Caption title pages: *Wall Mantel Diptych, with bananas, picture, shell forms, letters. 1997. Stoneware, soda fired, cone 10. 27.5 x 42.5 x 15 cm.*



Wall Mantel, torch shape, with ewer, pear, letters.
1997. Stoneware, porcelain, soda fired, cone 10.
42.5 x 20 x 15 cm.