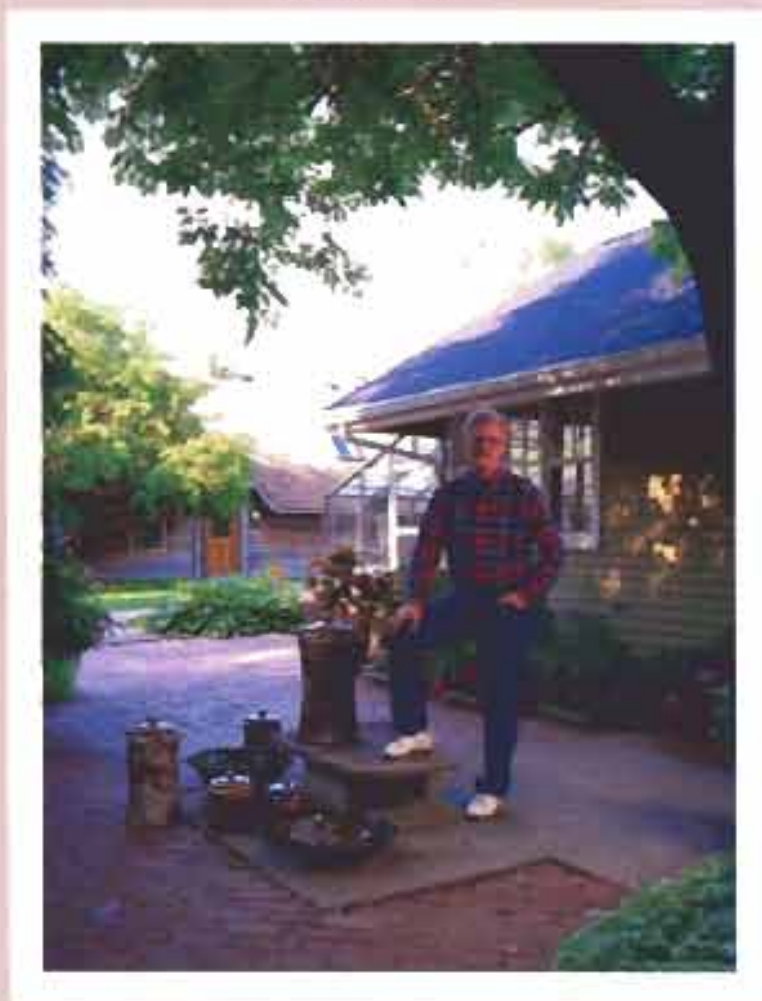


Checking the Compass

by John Glick

PHOTO: OWEN BARNER, ROBERT VOLETTI



A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio, Part II



The Showroom and Gallery

My foundation for meeting the public has been the studio showroom, consistently maintained since 1964. Philosophically, the only major change that has occurred there is that, around 1980, I began staffing with showroom managers instead of a family member or myself. My purpose in what follows is not to describe how to run a showroom, but to reflect on its influence on the way I work.

The showroom is profoundly nourishing in many meaningful ways: Income is steady. While it can vary, it is solid over the course of a year's time.

Feedback is more direct. This is invaluable. It is personal, interactive and largely under my control. I decide the when's, the how's, the look and feel of things.

Obviously, there are some less-than-perfect aspects to be considered: The showroom has to be staffed (three part-time managers). This is a separate space to maintain and to insure (so income at the full sale price isn't the financial bonanza it would seem). Naturally, I feel the obligation to be reliable and to keep regular hours for clients.

Then there's the issue of what work will be in the showroom on a regular basis. I think I've succeeded in not being driven (negatively motivated) by what people want or, to say it another way, by what is selling best. Many kinds of pots have been discontinued when I have no longer felt a spark of interest in the making. That hasn't always pleased my customers. Still, most (not all) are willing to be flexible—to recognize the need for me to move on. This has come about through wider awareness of the craft field in general on the clients' part, and certainly by a conscious effort on my part to educate customers about the evolving nature of an artist's work. I do this educating for me; no one else will or can. I want to keep options for change always available. It feels like an important gift to myself.

Just a year ago, I acted on a long-dreamed-about adjunct to the studio showroom, creating a gallery space that is separated physically from the showroom. The purpose of this new Upper Gallery is to give me a place to show

Editor's note: In this two-part series, Michigan potter John Glick discusses his mid-career studio approaches and philosophies. Part I appeared last month.

principal examples of my work. These are pieces that have received special or uncommon kindness from my hands and from the kiln—ones that, while not planned, certainly were allowed to happen. To explain their elusive nature, I used to say such pieces came out behind my back.

They are my best work and need to be recognized as such. They are the ones I would conceivably put into my personal collection, or show to collectors or curators for possible acquisition. And somehow, finally having a place I can be proud of in which to show them has been especially good for me. For example, I occasionally find myself going to the gallery during the day to reconnect with the thoughts and themes in those pots—to see the breakthroughs, the kiln gifts; to consider their potential. I was actually shocked the first time this happened. The only other times I could recall having such feelings of elation and insight were on seeing my work in museums or gallery presentations, and that has happened only infrequently.

So the Upper Gallery has been a revelation, a private joy, which has boosted my spirits often. The other function of this space is to reach out to collectors and curators, and certainly to those who have known the more typical side of my work through the studio showroom.

On Pricing Work

Because of my 25+ years of selling directly from my studio showroom, I've developed a whole set of pricing ideas. They have proved to be very functional because they've helped me earn a living all these years. However, with the establishment of the Upper Gallery and increasing involvement with outside galleries, I found a reexamination of pricing attitudes to be essential.

In late 1989, with the friendly counsel of people I trust (several gallery directors, fellow artists and my artist-teacher wife, Susie Symons), I substantially raised prices on pieces that I consider the best examples of my work. I've had to appraise my work more carefully and value the best for more appropriate prices in view of the profound price adjustments in our field over the last 15 years. I have struggled to honor my deeply held beliefs about prices being accessible to many people. If someone had told me a few years ago that I would sell my best work for \$1000–\$2500, I would have denied the prospect vigorously. However, I remind myself that I still offer a selection of moderately priced pots in a range from \$25–\$500. I sometimes wonder if I waited too long on this pricing decision.

I've also been expanding my marketing activities with two or three galleries because I've been too isolated for a good part of my career. So I reached out to galleries that show the work of artists I respect—places I simply feel good about having represent me. With the amended price structure for my best work, the financial relationship these galleries require (typically 50% of the price, plus at times sharing any collector's discount) seems reasonable to me for the first time.

These reflections on pricing get to the heart of a self-management issue that affects us all. We typically do not

1117 *The Upper Gallery at
John Glick's Plum Tree Pottery,
Farmington Hills, Michigan.*

1118 *Stoneware jar,
approximately 12 inches in
height, with layered glazes,
Cone 10 reduction fired, 1989.*

1119 *man "Box with Lid"
24 inches in length, stoneware,
with poured, brushed and
trailed glazes, 1989.*

1120 *Glaze-painted plate
25 inches in diameter, 1989.*



have professional managers. We follow instinct, personal reasoning, discussions with peers, observations and luck. So often a kind of modesty or humility seems to be woven into the fabric of complicated price and management issues. It is hard coping with that personality trait. I know. My wife calls me the "Abe Lincoln of ceramics." I am learning to move beyond this limiting part of myself, hopefully without losing my grounding in the process.

Shortly after I opened the Upper Gallery, an out-of-town collector dropped in unexpectedly, fell in love with and purchased a large plate. The experience certainly left me feeling reassured because it helped to affirm my lengthy and frankly painful price considerations. I also brought several long-time showroom clients up to the gallery to get their reactions. One said enthusiastically, "We're building a new house, our dream of a lifetime, next year and we'll come here to commemorate it with a special piece from you." Another said, "I didn't realize you did things of this scale and caliber." (Reacting to the fact, I think, that until then I had always reserved such pieces for shows and other special events; and had, in effect, denied my loyal showroom following the opportunity to see them.)

Then we had one of our studio open houses and a number of visitors found their way upstairs to the Upper Gallery. One neighbor, who had always bought lower-priced pots, brought her teenage daughter upstairs with her to look around. I watched them gaze intently at the seven large pieces and observed the mother give a visible start when she saw the price list. She turned, stared intently at me and asked, "Why are these so expensive?" I replied, "I'm glad you asked. Every artist has to come to terms with his best work and, as hard as it is at times, to recognize it and set it apart. This gallery space is one way for me to set these special pieces apart and the prices need to reflect their rarity in my work as a whole." Her face changed from mild bewilderment to a look of satisfaction. She said, "I understand; I just needed to know, and I'm happy for you."

These positive experiences coming so closely on the heels of the commitment to create the Upper Gallery were what I needed to continue with the process of acquainting the entire range of my clientele with these important changes in the studio. Certainly I needed the variety of responses to help clarify my own thoughts.

The showroom itself continues largely unchanged. There the broad range of work is shown in a simpler format. Shelves are more generously filled. Still, the work shown there is no more "made" for the showroom than any of the Upper Gallery pieces were "made" for that space. In fact, I never intend to differentiate when I work. Things just emerge as they will. As always, the showroom has predictable hours. I try to maintain a "by appointment" access to the Upper Gallery, but I am usually able to be flexible about seeing visitors to the gallery on a "drop in" basis as well.

Moving On

Recently, I have begun to reevaluate what I make. Though I've certainly been in a respectable number of

exhibitions and galleries over the years, I have never concentrated on making all that outside activity happen consistently. There have been many years of what I might describe as "quiet time" to work at a pace that seemed to suit my needs fairly well.

That is changing now. I've discovered an energizing power in having an exhibition goal. To conceive of a body of works specifically for a given time and place is relatively new to me. Previously, I'd always said, and believed, that pots emerged as they will and that I had only to "let it happen." Well, now I can add that intention and clarity of purpose toward a stated goal have become tremendously exciting motivators for my work as well. Whereas until recently I placed some almost mystic power in the pot that came through the glaze kiln empowered by that freshness and special rightness the first time, I now allow myself to evaluate a piece once it is out, and to do further painting and drawing prior to a second or third firing. Much good has come from this freeing up of attitude.

Although I had been thinking about this refiring aspect for years, it took interaction—a suggestion from my current studio assistant, Paul Young—to nudge me into action. One day he said, "John, why are you so hesitant about refiring? You're a painter on these large surfaces, plates and bowls. Why stop yourself after the first firing?" Now we talk eagerly about the next refire kiln.

At long last there is a willingness to let down the burden of self-imposed expectations. True, those old attitudes served well—the showroom full of many sizes, many shapes, a wide spectrum of functional and decorative pieces. Now, as the passion for painting on surfaces moves me, the work evolves to make that experience happen. Forms offer surfaces inviting contemplation, challenging me beyond my existing capacities. Some themes succeed immediately; others need very long, painfully slow building stages.

About five years ago, I gave a workshop in Manchester, England, at the end of which a man from the audience came up to me and said, "I wish my graduate students had heard you for these past two days. The concept of theme and variation has been made very clear, and they need to hear that just now." I asked him how long he had been teaching ceramics and his reply was, "Oh, I don't teach clay, I'm a music professor. I teach composition, and my students sometimes have a difficult time with the notion of theme and variation, and you have shown it so clearly in your work."

It occurs to me that checking the compass is about theme and variation more than anything. Of all the ways I know to evolve ideas, the pursuit of variation seems consistently valid. Curiosity can easily lead to places far from our beginnings. So it is with colors, surface, form and theme. I look up, check my compass, and not infrequently realize the sailing is very good.

The author *A previous contributor to Ceramics Monthly, studio potter John Glick resides in Farmington Hills, Michigan.*



ABOVE Porcelain bowl, 6 1/2 inches in diameter, wheel thrown, excised, soda vapor fired, 1975.



LEFT Tray, 26 inches in length, stoneware, with glazes poured, brushed and trailed in combination with wax resist, Cone 10 reduction fired, 1988, by John Glick.