

AMERICANANA

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LANCE
HENRIKSEN

Gone Are The Days

Spirit of the West

Pottery of the Lance Tribe

A Small Measure of Justice

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ART IN AMERICA

LANCE HENRIKSEN

“It’s all about the search”

Story and photography by Margaret Malandrucolo

On a warm, sunny morning in Agua Dulce, CA, sitting on a café patio sipping coffee and looking thoughtfully out to the street, Lance Henriksen sums it all up in one easy concept, “It’s all about the search.”

This philosophy holds true for him whether he is portraying a character in one of his hundreds of films, or whether he is spending endless hours in his pottery studio. The potter’s craft is multi-layered: experimenting with clays and formulas for glazes, introducing foreign objects, finding inspiration in nature, history, longevity. Point in fact, Lance experimented

with a particular clay for an entire year, “to the bitter end,” before he finally decided it wasn’t the right clay, and threw away all the platters he had created with it.

In the 1960s, when he saw one of his paintings being carried out of his studio by its new owner, he noted the flimsy nature of the canvas and decided he wanted to work in a medium that would last forever. Indeed we have learned so much about early civilizations from their pottery that has survived, only to be unearthed millennia later to tell its story. Lance has buried “bad firings” at every studio he ever had, all



over the United States. He speculates comically, “One day people will dig it up and ask, ‘What is this Lance tribe? That tribe moved all over the place, all the way to Wisconsin!’”

Most important now in his journey with pottery, Lance wants to stay true to the nature of the clay, and believes he should act only as a mediator. While inspired by so many art forms, both those of human intervention (including Peter Beard and Francis Bacon, to name a few) and those created in nature over thousands of years, he humbly resigns himself to the natural grace and movement of the clay itself within the processes slicing, tinting, pressing firing, instead of imposing his will upon it.

“I’m an alchemist. I never studied it. I learned as I went along. You look at it and you make all the mistakes you’re going to make. Every clay and raw material has something it likes to do. If you can see that, then follow it. I want it to be an event. Sometimes I choose very mundane shapes so I can really focus on what it [the clay] wants to do. I’m looking to be an intermediary between the clay and what it likes to do. I’m just a facilitator.”

Our conversation is filled with eloquent journeys. “I picked up this rock in Pahrump, [Nevada] and I had never seen anything like it – the strata – dried burnt earthenware, layers of grey clay. It was lake bottom that had stacked and layered.

Nature did that – the heat of the desert sun. If I could do that I would be happy. I don't want to copy a rock, but I see what nature did, I'm fascinated by it, and that is where my heart lies. How far can I go? It's not an intellectual trip. It's just a response."

Lance has never shown his work in galleries, and has been giving away most of his pottery to date. But he does want to start selling pieces in order to donate proceeds to charities, namely, "Children of the Night."

"When I was a kid, I ran away a lot, starting when I was 5, and left home for good at 12. I know what happens on the streets. I got by because I'm from New York and I have a great shit detector. A lot of kids don't. This place, "Children of the Night," they reunite kids with their parents and try to turn them around, get them off drugs.

"I think I was 30 before I stopped running. I travelled all over Europe doing murals. I went to sea. When I was a kid, I ran *from*. Poverty determines where you land. When I became an adult, I started running *to*, and searching."

When asked what pottery can contribute to our culture, Lance explicates with utter clarity, "People would delight in their lives much more if they allowed themselves to. If you're inviting someone to dinner, it's a very intimate thing. If you set a dinnerware setting around a table and if you support it with this kind of life, this brings it into another place where people can be celebrating their communal gathering. You can't ignore circumstance. If people would only understand the gift of culture. What happened to the days of curiosity?"

And curiosity is definitely at the forefront of Lance's search. Showing me something that looks like an ancient artifact, he explains, "This is something I found in Arizona. When a bird digs into a cactus, pecks a hole into the Saguaro to build its nest, the cactus allows the bird to live there, but protects itself by building this. It allows the bird to stay, but makes this with it's own juices, to protect itself. This is everything I'm talking about. That could be clay. So, I'm creating different ways of working and mold-making so that the clay has its own vitality. This is just like a faint quivering print showing that man was involved."

The Lance tribe is endlessly fascinating. ★



Top: Inspiration: Lance demonstrating where the bird dug into the saguaro cactus, and the wall the saguaro built to allow the bird to live there. Middle: Lance's rendering of a skeleton running from a tiger. "There's humor in it." Bottom: Lance holding up a platter in which he incorporated a plaster cast and his custom glazes. "I make all my own glazes, all formulas."





Lance in his studio. "Everything in here is an experiment. It took me 4 months to fill every shelf. In 6 months time they will all be full again."