

Henry O.

Henry Okamoto once told me the secret key to his marathon solo drives across the American Roads; “When you drive a steady 50 miles an hour, you can drive many hours in a day and cover a lot of distance. You won’t get worn out.”

Even-tempered and uncomplaining, Henry kept on going over three decades moving the heavy loads and unloads it takes to keep everyone else’s clay art coming on out in the most practical way. During unobtrusive parentheses he turned out quality batches of practical pottery thrown and glazed with great simplicity, economy and quiet elegance. His is the pottery you can use every day for decades, never tiring of its quiet touch, iron tones and unassuming absence of anything extra added on.

Henry was elegant, graceful and sophisticated in the most understated manner. He knew art and artists, modern design and architecture and he knew the ceramic art tradition from the ancients in the Orient to the moment in America. His generosity was unstinting, totally practical, indefatigable and inaudible.

Henry was also a survivor to the core. Born in the USA, he grew up on the family farm in Lodi, California. As a young man during the Second World War, he had been interned in a camp by the U.S. Government and the farm was taken by others. Years of struggle would be consumed in trying to get part of it back. Upon release from that camp, Henry was drafted into the U.S. Army.

His strength was maintained consistently. His intense spirit exuded devotion, tenacity, sheer guts and that unwavering generosity. There was no outward show. He was an unflinching embodiment of rural Japan in urban America- a bedrock timeless natural mingei folk-art practice combined with openness and hands-on encouragement for everyone else’s approach to the material.

When the Clay Art Center was founded in the fifties, there was nowhere east of the Bray in Montana where clay artists out of school could come to work on their own and develop their skills together. The maintenance tasks, social survival and building of this place was woven together as farmers do. Henry’s husbandry produced a continuous source of space, community and materials for the practice of clay art through a period when there was no substitute in this area.

Henry was the one who was in Port Chester before the beginning of the Center, negotiating for the kilns and equipment from the owner of the Good Earth Pottery at 49 Beech and for the space from the landlord next door. Meanwhile he was living by building beautiful wood houses one after another in the Greenwich area totally on his own. The visionary Katherine Choy was in New Orleans teaching at Tulane while raising money for the venture.

It was Henry who built the basic kickwheels, the spare shelves which divided the space, the workbenches and tables and the pallets in the cells that live-in members used. When Katherine Choy passed so suddenly, Henry Okamoto kept the Center going while keeping the feeling of a leaderless cooperative. He organized class schedules, pottery sales and exhibitions that helped keep us going. Those months when the rent just wasn't there, the difference was made up from his own pocket without a word said to anyone.

In 1961(?), at a time when there was just a skeleton crew of members to help, Henry spearheaded to move to the present expanded duplex space across the street in #40. His carpentry skills braced the brittle Alpine kilns for the hundreds of further firings they would have to contain after the move. Economy was the characteristic mode of those years. We salvaged the big old bread-dough mixer for clay in 400 lb. batches, some of which could be sold. Henry hooked up and ran the Sales Division which supplied the region with pottery equipment and later to another Clay Art Center in Boston to which he commuted every week. All of Henry's works had the effect of helping hundreds of diverse learners who believed in clay to establish and maintain their own ceramic art practice.

Continuing practice which doesn't strive to call attention to itself may take on a vibrant grace in time. The strength this kind of practice transmits to others is absorbed slowly and silently. It may be difficult to sense how rare, how unusually strengthening the deep presence for this kind of exemplary teaching is until long after the source is no longer around. The transmission has been taking place geologically.

That we can meet today in a living and present Center for Clay Art in Port Chester to celebrate its history and its future is a blessing emanating from the selfless work of many contributors. The foundation direction, established practice and enduring spirit from a quiet hero, Henry Okamoto.



Jeff Schlanger
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Illustration: Henry O, 1975- Granite, stainless steel, steel,
cement and ceramic stoneware 40 x 24 x 12"