

Ceramics

Art and Perception

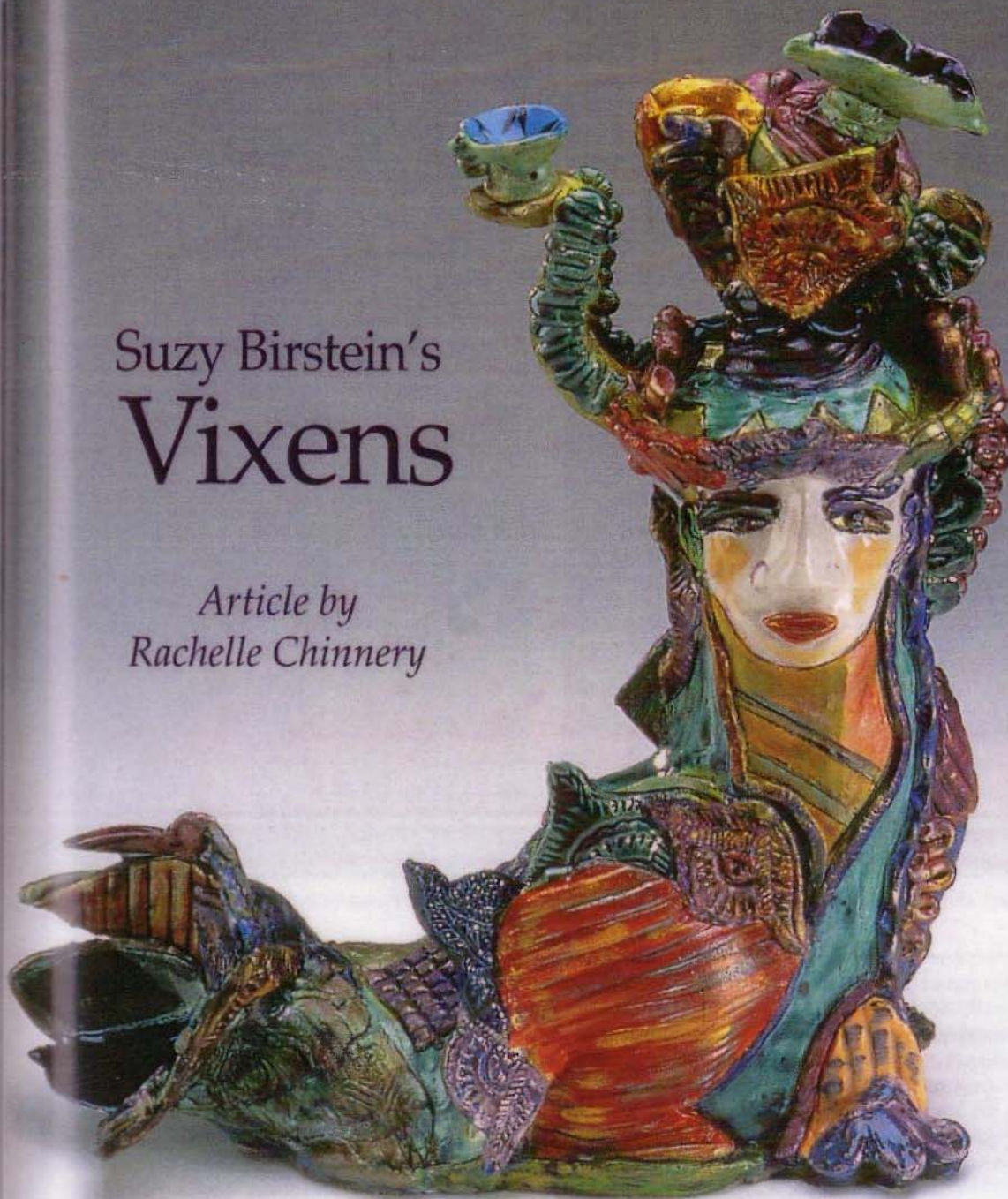
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Suzy Birstein's Vixens

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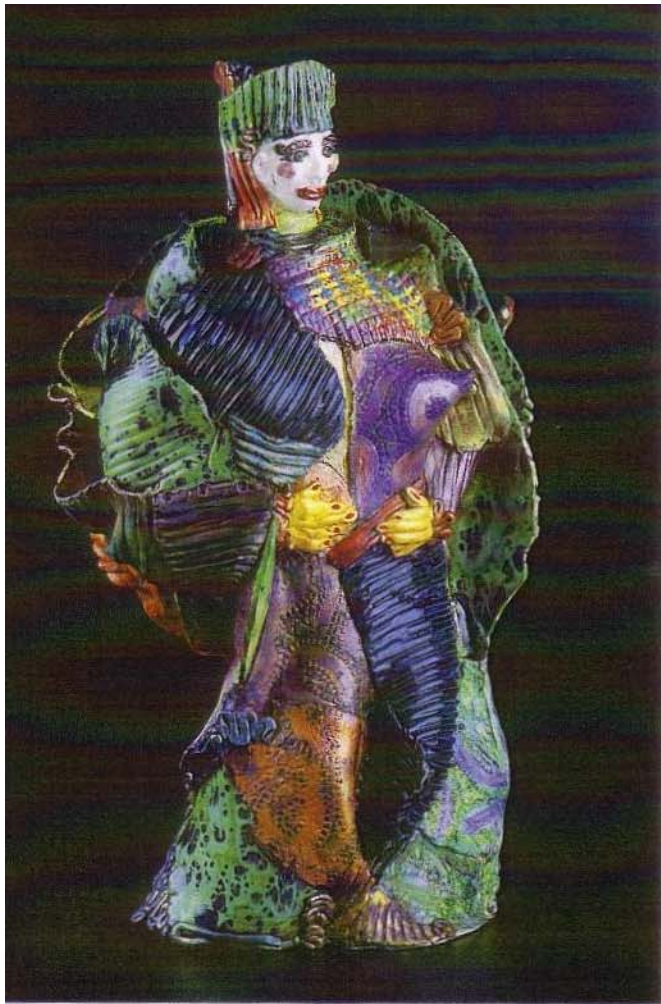


Tea For Two. Spirit Bottle. 50.5 x 43 x 15 cm.

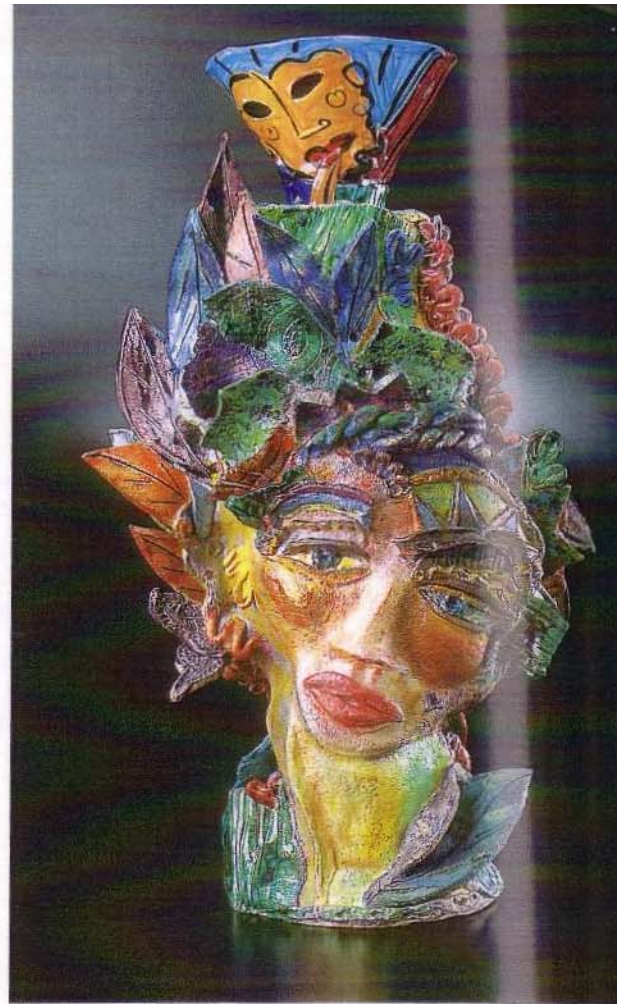
IF SUBDUED AND UNDERSTATED IS WHAT YOU ARE looking for, then Suzy Birstein's animated work is not for you. Like their creator's personal style, Birstein's pots are multi-layered, textural, polychromatic and multiethnic. In her garden studio, the sunlight reflects off the sunflower yellow walls; jazz rhythms and crooning of Cole Porter and Frank Sinatra float seductively throughout the room. The craft adage that 'we are what we make' becomes a truism when discussing this artist's sculptural objects.

Suzy Birstein is a collage of Jewish woman, wife, mother of two teenage boys, teacher and artist. As a

child, she dreamed of becoming a glamorous movie star and collected autographed photographs of movie icons. On one wall of her studio is her proud collection, which includes signed photos of a fresh-faced Rock Hudson and a leggy Ann Margaret. Now, with a grown-up love of all things enchanting, she takes tap dancing twice a week and, together with husband Hartley, ballroom dancing. Dinner guests at the Birstein household are treated with Hartley's gourmet cuisine served on her wild tableware. She is a bit of an enigma in her neighbourhood of Kitsilano, a district of Vancouver, British Columbia, where coffee is



Duet, Harlequin's Romance. 71 x 45.5 x 35.5 cm.



Duet, Dos Gardenias Para Ti. 66 x 45.5 x 30.5 cm.

decaf, beer is 'lite', fitness predominates in pastel yoga apparel and nails are definitely manicured – and then there's Birstein. Sporting a neon bindi between her eyebrows, her bright red head of hair and '50s vintage clothing, combined with platform boots and velvet leopard leggings, clearly identify her as the artist on the block and unmistakable maker of her work – bold, vivacious and complicated, just like her.

After graduating from the Emily Carr School of Art and Design in Ceramics and Primitive Art, Birstein combined her love of clay and painting resulting in a unique aesthetic. Workshops with Rudy Audio, Viola Frey and Stephen de Staebler stand out as pivotal inspiration, but no particular ceramic culture guides her hand. She draws on world history, religious iconography, all things ancient and mythological, and then filters this through her own identity. While colourful East Indian traditions of Hinduism, contemporary Mexican folk art and African cultures inform her work, gods, goddesses and contemporary cultural icons can unite in a single piece to create hybrid mythical beings draped in layers of ceramic texture. Her work is broadband cultural appropriation wrought into current expressionism: the Statue of Liberty becomes fused with the Snake Goddess of Crete,

Vishnu finds partnership with a Toby mug and mermaids abound. Her love of world music becomes anthropomorphised accordion vases and in portrait sculptures built back to back, which she calls *Duets*. These pieces are expressions of the human psyche and the inner dialogue that both plagues and blesses the questioning mind.

Multiple histories and folklore come together in Birstein's sculptural work resulting in a vital, enthusiastic melding of time and place. They are naïve exotic daydreams partially glazed and partially painted with iridescent acrylics. Having taught children's clay classes for almost 20 years, her work clearly possesses the raw energy of unbridled creativity that she encourages in her students. They are handbuilt white earthenware slabs and coils with multi-fired surfaces. Functional platters are painted with portraits of her sculptures and cups are maquettes of sculptures to be. Some pieces are large-scale decorative objects; others are functional drinking vessels or bottles.

In 2002 and 2003, the Kentucky Museum of Arts and Design invited Birstein to show her bottles in their *Bottled Spirits* exhibition, which showcases "a whimsical approach to combining two long-standing Kentucky traditions, bourbon and fine craft".



Accordion Angel. Vase. 33 x 45.5 x 15 cm

Birstein's *Spirit Bottles* are both functional and metaphorical containers – made to contain both liquid and ethereal spirits. In 2004, she teamed up with her father, a former accountant, to present a body of sculptural work reflective of their Jewish heritage and the strong bond between them. Her father worked meticulously to create whole miniature three-dimensional scenes in clay of the family sitting at the dinner table, while Suzy interpreted the spiritual bond and produced reflective portraits.

The process of handbuilding lends itself perfectly to this work, which is only potentially functional. A candle sits easily in the hat of a seated figure – but the figure could easily sit without the candle and be its own sculpture. Her bottles are vessels whose tops are caps and turbans that don't betray their 'lidness'. Even her platters contain a space that could be used for food, but the recess contains a painting of bold colours using the space for expression. Obviously functional forms like conical bowls still have sculptural components in a slab foot, and the surface decoration is an interplay of painted images in the interior space and on the external surface.

All of Birstein's work has uniform decorative excess that is reflective of her love of all things exuberant; she

looks to Beatrice Wood as an example of someone living to the fullest. She is as equally dedicated as a potter and a sculptor – a ceramic artist. Birstein combines her love of art with her love of daily ritual in functional pots, while her sculpture expresses a world where lines blur between past and present religious distinctions and traditional social constructs.

She also represents a relatively new demographic of ceramists who do not have the support of a traditional pottery village or the fully equipped ceramic studios only found in post-secondary institutes. As a result, her ceramic art has not been bound by the prescriptive confines of traditional pottery or sculpture. She uses acrylic paint on clay and mixes her media as easily as she mixes her iconography. Success has come to Suzy Birstein from an electric kiln in a garden studio in her home, and a soul brimming with imagery.

Rachelle Chinnery is a ceramist and writer living in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Suzy Birstein's work can be seen on her website at www.suzybirstein.com.