

Matt Long's Moments of Victory

by Glen R. Brown

Emblems of optimism, the porcelain vessels of University of Florida instructor Matt Long embody a philosophy for daily living that encounters in the smallest favorable events a confirmation of personal progress. Literally stamped with the mark of victory—a monogram featuring a prominent V combined with Long's initials—his works assert both the subjectivity of success and the determination to prize it at all levels of experience. Pottery making is a practice that is clearly at the heart of his general sanguineness. Reflection on the ability to earn a living through an activity that he loves, yet readily acknowledges to be nonessential

in the modern world, has given him reason enough to feel gratified. "I'm in education and I make pots," he says. "Neither of those brings in a lot of money in our society. Nevertheless, I feel that I'm a very rich man and that I live a wonderful life."

No doubt these are sentiments that most American potters can understand. Few enter the field with expectations of extraordinary financial success. The challenge to think first and foremost about marketing that ceramist Glen Lukins put squarely to the American potter in the mid-1940s—and which has been voiced periodically ever since—has tended to raise only mild enthusiasm within the ceramics community at large. There is little question that the primary attractions of the potter's career today are quality-of-life issues and that these are, to some degree, independent of monetary concerns. Long, at least, is firm in his conviction on this point. "I have a wife, two children and a dog," he observes. "I have a studio to work in and I have friends around me. A lot of those things exist because of my choice about pots, about making pots and being a part of a particular



**"Royal Victory Flask," 6 inches (15 centimeters) in height,
thrown-and-altered porcelain, wood fired.**

kind of community."

Community is clearly one of the central themes in Long's work. The principal forms that he has developed, in particular the martini glass and the whiskey flask, are designed less with an interest in pure utility than with a concern for their potential social role. In fact, the primary reward that he seeks for his efforts is the knowledge that his work has been successfully integrated into someone's life, especially into that person's interaction with others. "To be in the front of the cupboard," he asserts, "to be on the counter top, to be set on a table where someone is having a conversation with someone they care about: that matters more

to me than making money or driving a better car. Maybe my flasks get passed around at a family gathering to celebrate the new year, an anniversary, or the birth of a child—events that really define who we are."

Establishing contact with others through the medium of a vessel is a process that one might easily characterize as expressive, as paralleling, in other words, the way in which artists are sometimes said to "speak" to the viewer through their work. Long, however, is less concerned with conveying a personal communication than with relating the general message that his vessels are produced through direct involvement of the human hand. While he professes no aversion to the products of modern technology, he believes that the handmade vessel adds an element of uniqueness to the experience of use that no mass-manufactured object can match. "I think that people sometimes confuse quality with convenience," he explains. "I'm not after convenience, and I'm not trying to compete with industry. I only want to suggest that there are aspects of experience beyond what machine-made objects like paper cups or Tupperware



"Victory Bourbon Bottle,"
10½ inches (27 centimeters)
in height, porcelain with
brushed slip, soda fired.



"Whiskey Flask," 5½ inches (14 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain.

pitchers can provide."

The triggers for enhanced experience are unquestionably the surfaces of Long's work, which are given their distinctive textures through the loose application of a heavy slip. Dipping the vessel in the slip bucket then centering it and revolving it on the wheel, Long employs his fingers to create horizontal trailings over which gravity produces additional variation in the form of thick drips. In other cases, the slip is applied with a brush in long, vertical strokes as the vessel is held inverted. In the finished pieces, the ridges and depressions of the surface are explored by the user's fingers, which seek a particular fit—an action that Long characterizes as part of bond formation between person and object. This action is facilitated, of course, by the fact that Long has left the marks of his own fingers on the work. At the same time, his intention is that the user reflect upon his or her personal act of grasping the vessel, something not ordinarily done when one holds an anonymously manufactured form.

To minimize alteration of the surface once the slip has hardened, Long confines the coloration of most of his pieces to effects achieved through soda firing. By applying very thin washes of a kaolin-based flashing slip, he encourages variations in color and enhances the tonal effects already created by the heavily textured surfaces. For an occasional departure from earth tones, he generally relies upon



Teapot, 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain.

a stain containing chrome and tin that turns a rich green during reduction firing. This cool hue is the preferred finish for his sleek martini glasses, while the warmer colors obtained through soda firing seem better suited to the more robust whiskey flasks. This propriety of color in utilitarian objects is something to which Long has given a good deal of thought. "Whiskey is a heavy brown drink," he observes. "It's earthy. It's not high dollar, not Bombay Sapphire Gin. I think about classifying things based on color, form and how they will be used. A good example is the dessert bowls that I make for ice cream. I put the slip inside and try to make it look as though, when finished, the ice cream was so good that you licked the bowl."

Although less obtrusive than color or texture in his work, the overall vessel form is a design element to which Long has perhaps devoted his greatest consideration. Since his graduate-school days at Ohio University, he has admired the clean contours and elegant air of Japanese lacquerware. "It's functionally oriented," he explains, "but the pieces are pristinely beautiful. They made me think about form and purpose in my pots. I began making containers with teapots that would sit on top, and cups and saucers that could be stored inside. Together, they created a beautiful sculptural form." Eventually, Long began referencing the vertical orientation of stacked lacquerware boxes in less direct fashion, incorporating the quality of elevation into a single tall-and-trim lidded container, a form that he prefers to call a "cap jar." Generally finished with broad slip trails running up one side and down the other, the cap jars emphasize a sweeping verticality through an economy of means.

A circular, as opposed to ovoid, cross-section, and an obvious shift in proportion between lid and vessel, are all that visually distinguish the cap jar from the whiskey flask, a distinctive form with which Long has experimented continually over the past five years. Utilitarian vessels of a type more commonly produced in metal than ceramics, the whiskey flasks have obviously become Long's signature pieces. "They began with a friendship," he remembers. "I made the first one to enhance the implement that we were using and to signify the relationship that was forming. Eventually, they were tied to historical pottery as well—things like the German salt-glazed Belarmino jug and the ancient Greek kylix. It was enlightening to find drinking vessels in a historical context that were being integrated into religious, political and ceremonial cultural practices." The whiskey flask, consequently, became for Long a historical symbol of communal experience as well as a utilitarian object that could be used to facilitate contemporary social bonding.

In its metaphorical role as a container of cultural history, the whiskey flask seemed to Long to be the drinking vessel most appropriate to his own social context as an American. "My education as a potter was based on the ceramics history of Europe and Asia," he says, "but it was inspiring to me to look in my own backyard and find a strong tradition of drinking vessels there as well. Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina—people in all those states made moonshine. Families were raised on corn liquor, and they produced distinctive drinking vessels like the famous face jugs of the South." For Long, the whiskey flask commemorates this past



"Cap Jar," 13 inches (33 centimeters) in height, porcelain with brushed slip, soda fired.



"Whiskey Cups," 3½ inches (9 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain.



"Flask, Victory Series" and **"Cup,"** to 7½ inches (19 centimeters) in height, soda-fired porcelain, by Matt Long, Gainesville, Florida.

even as it serves as an instrument for social ceremony in the present. It functions, in other words, as a reminder of the long tradition behind certain contemporary actions and events, a crucial element for maintaining the credibility of ritual.

The most recent development in Long's whiskey vessels is the Victory Series, a group of flasks that incorporates a personal variation on the relief trademarks often molded onto glass liquor bottles. In some ways the equivalent of a potter's chop mark, the victory motif embodies, for Long, a much more profound symbolism. "The marks have less to do with myself or with whiskey than with what I hope the pieces will accomplish when they go into people's hands," he explains. "Every day can be a kind of victory; there are victories all around us. A victory could be something as simple as enjoying a good cup of coffee or having a meaningful conversation with somebody when you start the day. Or, it could be at the end of the day, when you come home and all the kids are happy." Long's concept of victory is not, in other words, one of spectacular triumph—the conquest of a powerful adversary, the overcoming of daunting obstacles, or any other kind of extraordinary accomplishment—but rather of the quiet experience of a moment of pure contentment.

We are conditioned today to acknowledge the relativity of values, personal as well as cultural, and consequently Long's assertion of victory is for the most part likely to be respected, even by many of those whose concept of personal success is markedly different from his. There is even greater reason for Long to feel optimistic about the comprehensibility of his values among those of the ceramics community, many of whom have made precisely the kind of choices that have brought him the kind of life that he prizes. His ideas cannot fail to appeal to anyone who has recognized that those who have devoted themselves to ceramics as a field, and in particular to the making of pottery, constitute a subculture in many parts of the modern world. The sense of a shared perspective among ceramists—not only regarding creativity in clay, but many more general issues of lifestyle as well—is one of the principle factors that drew Long to a potter's life in the first place. "I'm a very family oriented person," he explains. "I mean that about my immediate family, but also about the people I'm involved with. In an educational context, during a workshop for example, I try to establish a sense of shared experience. There's value in that. It may be the most valuable thing that we can achieve—that humanness, community. Potters produce that, and I love being a part of it."