Rudolf Staffel

A Restless Spirit

Article by Michael McTwigan

From an early age, Rudolf Staffel (1911–2002) was steeped in music: his mother was a professional musician, as was his aunt, and his grandfather played the phonograph continually. He vividly recalled lying under the piano as an infant, waves of thunderous music sweeping over him, while his mother practiced. It is a short distance from Staffel's immersion in music as a child to the in-the-moment improvisations that would come to define him as a mature artist.

As a nine-year-old boy, Staffel asked to take art lessons from a painter near his childhood home of San Antonio, Texas, US. Discouraged by her academic approach, however, he withdrew to the shed behind his home, where he spent long hours practicing Chinese brushwork. His boyhood encounter with Chinese and Japanese watercolours would leave an enduring imprint: Translucent watercolour became his favourite medium as a young painter, and translucency a central feature of his life's work.

A restless spirit, Staffel's early life was punctuated by a series of adventures: After graduating from high school, he headed north to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. But the role of classroom

Facing page: ***Light Gatherer****. 1985. Translucent unglazed porcelain, handbuilt. 8.5 x 6.5 in. (21.6 x 16.5 cm.)*
Below: ***Light Gatherer****. 1968–1969. Translucent unglazed porcelain, handbuilt, with copper oxide. 5.5 x 7 in. (14 x 17.8 cm.)*
Collection of Megan Staffel and Graham Marks.

student ill-suited him, and he spent his days not in art class, but roaming the city's art and natural history museums. When his father lost a considerable amount of money after the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929 and could no longer afford the tuition, Staffel abandoned the Art Institute for Mexico – to study glass – inspired by Weiner Werkstätte blown glass he had seen in Chicago. The glass workers in Mexico City, however, put him off every time he asked to join them so, once again, Staffel spent his days exploring museums. That is where he fell in love with ceramics, in Mexico's archaeological museums. If Staffel had been able to learn glass blowing in Mexico, his quest for translucency may have ended there, and the following five decades of experimentation in clay might never have begun.

After apprenticing with a village potter in Mexico, Staffel soon embarked on a long career as a teacher, notably for 38 years at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. When Staffel joined Tyler in 1940, the curriculum designed by its director, Boris Blai, was strongly influenced by the educational ideas of John Dewey. Like Dewey, Blai believed students should be open to and familiar with all disciplines (painting and sculpture, but also music, dance, ceramics and jewellery) before choosing a career; like the founders of the Bauhaus, Blai viewed all arts as equal.

Certainly, no artist has been more open to experience, more restless in pursuit of new approaches, than Staffel. Guided by the Bauhaus dictum, "know your material", he continually explored new ways to work. "I never was comfortable accepting anything as it was handed to me," Staffel recalled years later – a predilection evident in his 20s, when he mixed his own pigments as a painter.

Happenstance led the artist to the possibilities of porcelain, when a commission to produce white dinnerware went awry. Staffel brushed white slip over stoneware, but the slip sheared off in the firing. The thin skin of slip, Staffel remembered, "had a wonderful ability to transform light and to carry it through the body, very much the way a snowbank carries light." From that fortuitous accident, Staffel began nearly five decades of improvisation with porcelain.

Embracing the Accidental

Inspired by the calligraphic Chinese watercolours he encountered as a boy, Staffel described his way of making art as "contemplation. . . followed by action" with no corrections, no going back. With no fear of failure, he worked spontaneously, directly. "I prefer to simply see what the clay seems to want to do," he explained. "I often start working by just sort of doodling with the clay in a sense. Since my clays are largely man-made and not natural clay, they often

Below: ***Light Gatherer****. Translucent glazed porcelain, handbuilt, with copper oxide wash. 4.5 x 8 in. (11.4 x 20.3 cm.) Collection of Megan Staffel and Graham Marks. Facing page:* ***Light Gatherer****. Translucent glazed porcelain, handbuilt. 5.5 x 8.5 in. (14 x 21.6 cm.)*

change their behaviour, depending on temperatures and age and other factors."

Staffel's intimacy with his medium is revealed by his willingness to endlessly experiment with clay bodies, his improvisational working methods, his fearless embrace of the accidental. There was little distance between the artist and his clay. Like a pair of dancers, each played a role in a *pas de deux* that was fecund and fleeting. For Staffel, these moments defined spontaneity: "the same moment can never happen twice, so be aware of it as it passes." Staffel's confidence to let his art take shape naturally – "whatever happens, I accept" – is fundamental to the Buddhist notion of *tzu jan*, or 'self-so-ness'.

Staffel's philosophical embrace of Buddhism led him to value each moment as unique, as well as one in a continuum of countless moments. His outlook is a rejection of the Western notion of progress – that over time everything gets better. As if to underscore this belief, the artist chose not to individually title and date his works.

Staffel characterised his lifelong encounter with Buddhism as "trying to understand the harmony of opposites". Certainly, the tension between opposites – between Staffel and his clay, between surface and volume – is palpable in every one of his works.

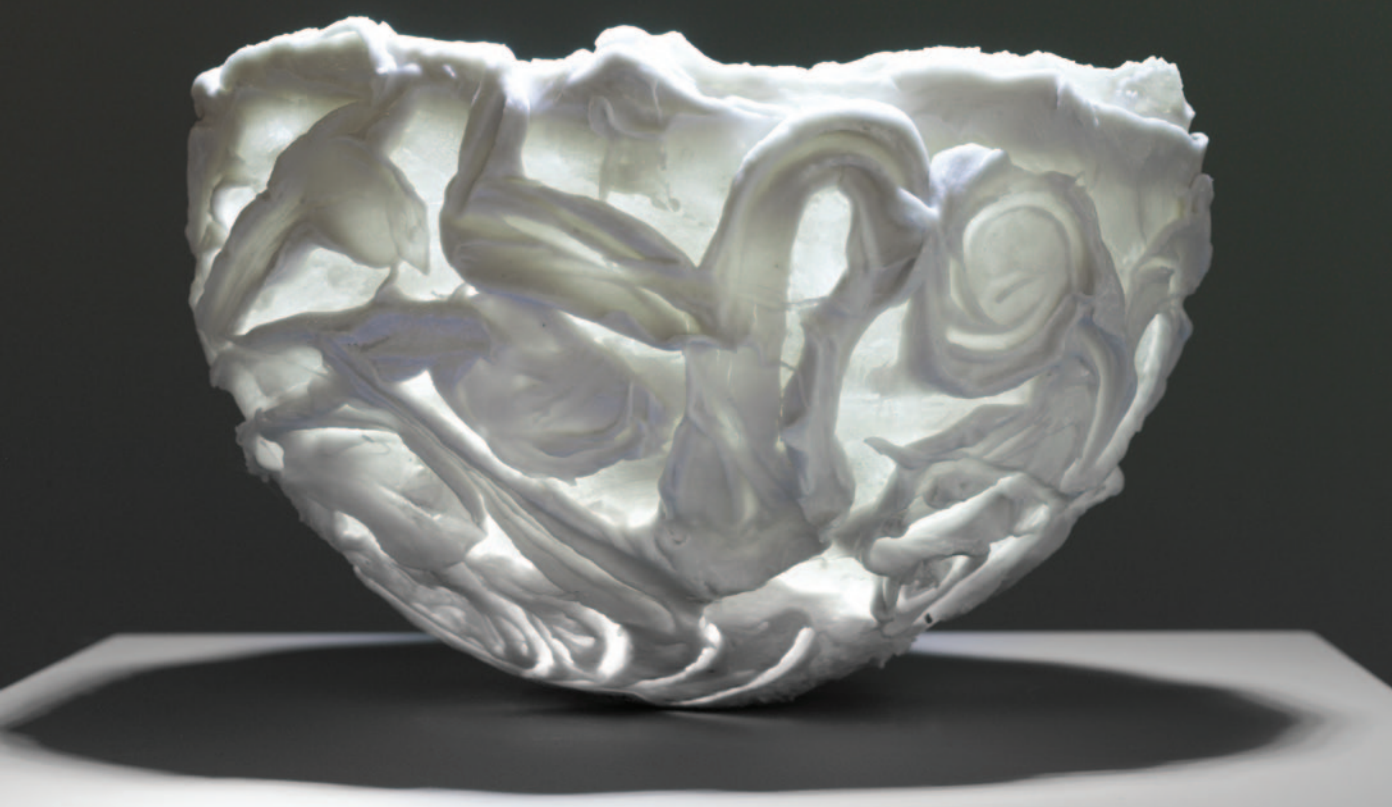
Harmony of Opposites

Staffel credits painter Hans Hoffmann, with whom he studied in New York during the early 1940s, with opening his eyes to the dynamic possibilities of the picture plane. Hoffmann urged modern painters to explore expanding and contracting planes, which he believed created opposing forces of "push and pull". Recalling his time in New York, Staffel said, "I can vividly remember Hoffmann taking one of my drawings and ripping it in half and reversing the sides. 'Now,' he said, 'you have push–pull.'" Staffel applied this lesson to his porcelain forms: "You are not aware of push until you see pull, you are not aware of dark until you see light."

Staffel's early fascination with Chinese Zen watercolours also made an impression. The Chinese painters of Song landscapes understood push–pull in their own way, nearly a thousand years before, as yin and yang: juxtaposing form and emptiness. A tree-studded mountain might occupy the bottom third of the picture plane, leaving much of the remaining paper 'empty'. But the empty space is just as dynamic, as alive, as the painted mountain.

Staffel's own interpretation of push–pull is found in different degrees of opacity and translucency, achieved by overlapping layers of thin porcelain. Where walls are thinnest and light glows through, we are aware of the volume contained within. Where Staffel has layered strips and nubbins of clay onto the underlying form, their opaque shapes bring us back to the tangible surface. Our eyes continually shift from push to pull, figure to ground, dark to light – from the material flesh of the white clay figures to the ethereal space they dance upon.

Staffel peoples his 'canvas' or underlying form with a variety of figures and shapes. Simple dabs of



clay pressed onto the sides of a vessel might appear to be human figures from an archaic language. When he finger painted with thick slip over a bowl form, the effect can be like swirling storm clouds on earth, viewed from space. Blue green bowls with delicate additions of porcelain resemble leaves floating down a stream. If we open our eyes and imaginations to their possibilities, Staffel offers us an anthology of fables drawn from human experience: stories of our ancestors as they fashioned rituals to grasp their places in the world; the changing face of earth over aeons, or a day; leaves and twigs and larvae caught in an eddy in a swift-flowing stream at springtime.

Hoffmann sought new ambitions and new dimensions for modern art. "It must light up from the inside," he wrote of this new art, and when it does "the painted surface breathes", causing the entire painting "to oscillate and to vibrate. A painted surface must retain the transparency of a jewel." Staffel rose to this challenge, and succeeded in ways that Hoffmann may not have anticipated. The harmony of opposites Staffel sought to understand over a lifetime, his art stirs in us. The cascading waves of his mother's piano music washing over him as an infant and the presence of music in his life as an adult (he practiced Bach on the classical guitar night after night), is visible in the contrapuntal arrangements of light and dark, thick and thin, push and pull that Rudolf Staffel composed in luminous porcelain.

Michael McTwigan, based in New York, wishes to thank Megan Staffel, Graham Marks, Helen W Drutt English and Paula and Robert Winokur for their invaluable help, providing interviews and other information for this article.

Facing page: ***Light Gatherer****. 1988. Translucent porcelain, copper oxide wash, vitreous elements, wheel-thrown and altered. 7.5 x 6 in. (19.1 x 15.2 cm.) Collection of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia. Gift of Helen W Drutt English and H Peter Stern. Below:* ***Rudolf Staffel****. Photo by Michael Nye.*