

# Curtis Benzel

## A VISIT WITH *Beauty*

by Robert Piepenburg

There are many examples of aesthetic beauty in ceramics, but few hand-made vessels possess the ability to touch the innermost sensations of the heart as those made by Curtis Benzel.

There are limitless ways to make ceramics into art just as, in our lives, there are unlimited opportunities to make day-to-day activities more meaningful. Regrettably, there is a seeming lack of beauty in both. Often the true nature of beauty's elegance is missing or ignored. Instead of embracing its gifts of enchantment, we are often blinded by mediocrity and naively view them as distractions. But nothing should be this far from the truth. Beauty is a genuine energizer, both in art and in life. When its realities are recognized and engaged, we are swiftly availed of wave-like possibilities. It is a force that empowers us to openly walk into our dreams. For example, take a look at the majestic beauty of just one of Benzel's porcelain pieces. Check your immediate reactions, your thoughts, passions, and your feelings. Are they holistic, truthful, refreshing, and do they take you by surprise to a more wholehearted level of self-knowing? Benzel's artwork coaxes us to see and feel the beauty in our selves and in our world, but it also inspires nobility within us to live beautifully.

### Converting light

Benzel makes works that are translucent, letting light shine through. By doing so, they reveal glimpses of past delights and experiences that have brought strength and harmony to our living and changed the way we saw life. For me, this includes my memories of mid-day walks to the shores of Lake Michigan through covered canopies of tall oak trees, where, in the serenity of nature, beaming rays of utopian sunlight not only warmed patches of the sandy forest floor but a part of my soul as well. Beauty—like love, art, or nature—is full of hidden treasures that are elemental to our wellbeing. They are elusive and almost indefinable, yet we are lucky whenever they fleetingly reveal themselves to us. I can see one of Benzel's luminous forms and immediately be reminded of that golden warm light just before sunset when all that is around me and within me is in a momentary state of tranquility.





2

1 *Alhambra Luz*, 16 in. (41 cm) in width, colored porcelain, fired to cone 8, 2017. 2 *Lavender Seas*, 16 in. (41 cm) in length, colored porcelain, fired to cone 8, 2017.

If I owned one of his vessels, it would not be kept in the kitchen with the ceramic mug that holds my morning tea or the ceramic bowl that I use to whip eggs in for a breakfast omelet. No, its function—in my world—would not be culinary in nature. It would have been placed along with those works of art that feed the soul and brighten my spirit in times of need. It is forever amazing how the beauty of an object of art can shine with a presence beyond itself and, like sunlight, illuminate one's life without warning. Such occurrences induce a tone of wonder, delight, and playful optimism while subverting our darker clouds of judgment.

In the same way this article is a pathway of words, Benzle's vessels are pathways of light that take our spirits to new destinations. Made from layers of porcelain that have been meticulously taken to the limits of thinness, they become translucent harvesters of light revealing, at different times and in different degrees, a color spectrum that is alive with a blend of luminous possibilities such as the emergence of a divine, radiant, and pure light.

#### Elements Flowing Together

In the early 1970s, Benzle had a passion for the refractory capabilities and color dynamics of glass, but soon realized that it wasn't a malleable enough medium. He then turned to porcelain and the advice of ceramicist Rudy Staffel who recommended, "leave the feldspars and flint but remove the majority of clay from the recipe and replace it with an organic plasticizer." After a year of experimentation, he had his translucent porcelain clay body. Unlike the clear transparency of glass, he now had the means

to filter light, to soften and transform its atmospheric presence. And with the addition of a palette of colored porcelain slips made from a rainbow of commercial stains, he had an additional—but formidable—resource with which to both obscure and enhance the visual/emotional content of his vessels.

Unsurprisingly, the position of the viewer and the angle of the light source are critical to the aesthetic offerings of refracted light. To utilize the saturation of light to its fullest potential, it must be absorbed and altered by an object, so that the depths of its dimensionality are transformed and the observer's perceptions heightened. When this happens, it could be said that beauty is living in the threshold of that experience. Beauty can emerge in a moment and, between the illumination of light and the silence of shadows, envelop the heart. With Benzle's work, all of this happens, and gentle colors befriend subdued light to create a reflective loveliness beyond expectations.

Light and color are powerful elements of three-dimensional designs and—as if these dynamic forces weren't already enough to visually empower his work with artistic integrity—he also masterfully uses the elements of pattern and form to further enrich the personality of each piece. In art, pattern generally refers to the repetition of something. In Benzle's work, that something is often the syncopated recurrence of a shape, a fish shape.

A single fish is a shape, but a school of fish is a pattern. And according to the light source, you may or may not notice them swimming within the translucency of the clay walls. If you do see them (not everyone does), you'll have the added sensation of



3



4



5

**3** *Roil Below*, 12 in. (30 cm) in width, colored porcelain, fired to cone 7, 2017. **4** *Mundo Dorado*, 12 in. (30 cm) in width, colored porcelain, fired to cone 7, 2017. **5** *Dificilisimo*, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, colored porcelain, fired to cone 7, 2017.

witnessing a visually pleasing, rhythmic gracefulness and flow. To create these pattern motifs (occasionally they are flower shapes), he uses a technique that he learned during his graduate studies in glass called nerikomi (nerikomi). It involves segmenting layers (cutting cross-sections) of a specific image made within a log and using the individual wafer-like sections repeatedly to assemble patterns—design configurations that seem to have some unique instinctive and primordial basis.

We all know what form is; it has dimensions that define it. But do we really know its importance as a design element in an art context? Benzle does, which is why his forms are so personally and physically compelling. Not only do they morph the physical space they occupy, but they also psychologically inhabit it. Converting form into a translation of our feelings or our greater sense of being is what gives it a symbolic and meaningful framework. Even without his abilities to visually address the mystical influences of light, the aesthetic resolutions of his open vessel forms express an elegant, physically striking treatment of structural refinements.

Some ceramic forms come straight from technical efficiencies. However, the forms we find most stimulating and beautiful are the ones that come from the intricacies of human emotion, thought, and feeling. As personalized creations, they are fabricated expressions of what one has love and passion for. Ceramic works that exert strong emotive reactions and possess an aura of beauty beyond their physical dimensions lend strength to our sense of self and to our spirit.

None of us truly knows what beauty is. Yet as it is found everywhere and in everything, we seem to know when it presents itself. To encounter this sacrament of feeling—if only for a grace-like moment—is to be blessed, for every sensory experience of beauty confirms our humanness. And even if the source of this confirmation (in this case, a ceramic object) remains physically distant from us, the feelings it inspires remain. Needed as much as love, beauty resides in the invisible awareness of existence, waiting to bring enchantment into our living. By embracing beauty as an element of meaning, Benzle has given us objects where light and life coalesce. Now perhaps with his help, it is for us to find the meaning in our own life, and let the light within us shine a little brighter.

**the author** Robert Piepenburg is a studio artist in Ann Arbor, Michigan and the author of the multi-award-winning book: *The Spirit of Ceramic Design*. For more information, see [www.piepenburgstudios.com](http://www.piepenburgstudios.com).