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John and Susanne Stephenson

John Stephenson (b. 1929) taught for 35 years at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (retiring in 1994) and has created sculptural forms in a variety of idioms. He is best known for sculptures combining metal (usually aluminum) and clay. He studied at the University of Northern Iowa and earned an MFA at Cranbrook (1958). His early work was functional, sometimes with a rustic quality that may have been magnified by his study of glaze and woodfiring in Japan in 1963-64. In the mid-'60s he drew attention with vases and bowls imprinted with fragments of newspaper text that alluded to issues of the day. These works were press-molded but manipulated into individuality. *Vietnam Floor Vase* of 1965 is a mottled earth tone with patches of text either rising from that earth or being ground into it.

Other works showed formal innovations, such as a series of frame-and-object pieces painted with acrylic, shown on the floor or the wall. Seeking larger scale, Stephenson left clay for metal. But his dislike of welding and grinding led him to combine the materials, exploiting qualities of both and carrying a subtext of ecological concern, of natural versus manmade. His "Champion" series of the early '70s was named for the combination of porcelain and aluminum in spark plugs (a nod to the local automotive industry). It consisted of freestanding aluminum cubes with cutout corners into which slightly rounded cubes of clay were set; the metal was thus reduced to an X or + sign, both of which became characteristic motifs. The wall-hung *Ligature* (1978) is an aluminum frame with pit-fired clay wired on. It opposes rectilinear/organic, positive/negative, hard/soft as the clay seems to seep around the metal grid. The whole resembles a blend of crossword and jigsaw puzzles. Other combination-material works were suspended

from the ceiling or took more curvilinear forms. The organic-industrial mix continued to be a recurrent theme in his later works.

Susanne Stephenson (b. 1935) went to Carnegie-Mellon University from 1953 to '57. She was interested in color, discovered clay in an art-education class, and developed glazes with the help of an instructor and throwing skills following the model of fellow student Ken Ferguson. At Cranbrook (MFA 1959) she developed forms to carry color; her thesis was on inlaid color and oxides. She took a one-year position at the University of Michigan, where she met and married John Stephenson and then went with him to Japan; upon their return, she began teaching at Eastern Michigan University.

After Japan, she became more receptive to accident. In the late '60s her pots were energetic to the point of distortion (words such as "crushed," "violent," "squashed" and "mashed" were used in reviews), and finger-gashes might be filled with brilliant blues; she was particularly interested in iridescence. In 1973 she spent a sabbatical in Spain investigating Hispano-Moresque lusters, but back in Michigan she gave them up. In 1977 she and John purchased an extruder and she began combining wheel-thrown and extruded forms and to play refined parts against crude. She rubbed-in oxides so that color was part of the texture. The result was powerful contemporary versions of traditional vessel forms, and she had finally found her direction. Tall, cone-shaped vessels were stabilized by extruded shapes; the visual activity was in the base. Stephenson's landscapes and seascapes are expressionistic rather than representational. She thinks of the vessel volume as a metaphor for the vastness of sky or sea and the extruded masses at the base as rocks or beaches, thus expressing a large spatial concept in vessel scale. The works combine painterly effects with sculptural manipulation of what seems to be solidified color.