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One Plate the Ceramist Doesn't Throw



Jamie Rector for The New York Times

A BIT OF UN-IRONY Adam Silverman, a ceramist of a sarcastic cast, finds down-to-earth symbolism in a limited-edition plate by Picasso.

By [DAVID COLMAN](#)
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YOU would think that ceramists like Adam Silverman would be grateful to Jonathan Adler for bridging the earnestness of pottery and the glibness of postmodern fashion. Mr. Adler's peppy aesthetic revived interest in what had become an almost embarrassingly sincere form of craft.

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Jamie Rector for The New York Times

Mr. Silverman, meanwhile, is the man, who with his architecture-school friend Eli Bonerz and Mike D of the Beastie Boys, cooked up the scathingly hip clothing line X-Large as a lark in Los Angeles in 1991. The line, ballooning into a multimillion-dollar business, came to define the 1990s indie aesthetic, bridging hip-hop and rock with its prolonged-adolescence, skateboard-culture feeling — and clothes big enough for two.

Mr. Silverman has since gotten out of X-Large and started throwing and showing a line of supercrunchy ceramics, Atwater Pottery, named after his Los Angeles neighborhood. But making the switch from being a subject for Details magazine to one for House & Garden — the current issue names him one of today's tastemakers — required a fundamental attitude

adjustment. The glibness of X-Large had to go.

“I’m such a cynical, ironic person in every aspect of my life,” he said. “It pretty much colors everything I do. My kids learned the word ‘sarcastic’ when they had, like, an eight-word vocabulary. They could barely talk and they’d say, ‘Are you being sarcastic?’ It’s pretty sad, but that’s life.”

Now, he said, “I don’t bring that here,” referring to his studio. There the word irony would be used only to refer to the reddish glazes that contain, yes, iron.

At home Mr. Silverman keeps a token of earnestness as well. A rough, almost primitive-looking ceramic platter with three fish in bas-relief, it is one of the limited-edition ceramics made by Picasso in the mid-1950s, when he was experimenting with pottery in the Provençal town of Vallauris. Unlike many of the Picasso’s ceramic works of that time — the most common are bisque plates with simple images painted on them — the platter is not terribly pretty or even particularly Picasso-esque.

“It’s not beautiful, which I like,” Mr. Silverman said. “The most exciting stuff is the kind that straddles the line between beautiful and ugly. Something you see one way and you think you should just break it, and then see another way and you think it’s fantastic.”

But the 10-by-14-inch platter is also a reminder of his beloved grandparents, a worldly pair of New Yorkers who bought it while traveling in the South of France and took him traveling when he was young. Growing up in Connecticut, he often visited them in the city. Later they paid for his architecture schooling. About five years ago, his grandfather gave him the plate, which he had admired since he was a boy.

Marrying bittersweet nostalgia and his love of the craft of ceramics, the platter, now mounted in the kitchen of the house where he lives with his wife and daughters, has become a kind of shrine to a sincerity that is otherwise in scarce supply.

“My grandfather had zero irony, and it reminds me of him,” he said. “Really, everything I’ve projected onto it — the symbolism of them buying it, Picasso, the south of France, even the three fish, because I have three daughters — are all things that attract me in an un-ironic way. And I have plenty of ironic art in the house.”

It is also a reminder of why he traded working in a field he did not care as much about, fashion, for one that he does. Appropriately, with ceramics — and with life — you can’t be afraid to get your hands dirty.