Willem de Kooning, *Untitled XXIX*, 1983, oil on canvas, 77 x 88".

period during which the artist's late style is said to have crystallized. Perhaps, after four decades, the familiar strategies bored the great man. Perhaps angst has a different valence after a certain age. These spare paintings, with their reduced and spatially ambiguous—can I call them ambivalent?—curving lines hovering over white and off-white expanses, are sometimes characterized as "difficult."

As an attempt to take stock of current thinking, I perused a range of online sources during the first weeks of the exhibition, perhaps not the wisest choice, as critiques of the show's ostensibly "market-driven" character and references to aging and illness figured rather prominently. Does the sparseness of the later work prefigure de Kooning's struggle with Alzheimer's? Titian survived into his late eighties, accepting commissions up until the end; the plague took his life. But de Kooning's (dubiously received) 1997 show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, curated by Robert Storr and Gary Garrels, which focused on this late style, may have raised the terrifying specter of an artist in the throes of a horrific disease, and not a rare one. More troubling is the idea that people writing on the Internet include recent college graduates, who have a distant relationship to the notion of aging.

The ten paintings selected by Elderfield for this show do more than dispel vulgar misconceptions. "Volume switching to void, and vice versa, had long been a preoccupation of de Kooning's," Elderfield writes, here with respect to *Untitled XXIX*, 1983. Hinge-corporeality, which he sees in an adjacent painting from the same year, *Untitled XVIII*, gives way to further openness, airiness, clarity, and spectralization. Three über-dematerialized figures—perhaps the witting descendants, Elderfield suggests, of the Nereids in Rubens's *Disembarkation at Marseilles*, 1621–25—recede into the flatness of the ground, seemingly pure outline, "cutouts" à la late Matisse, save for the exquisite vagaries of the application of pigment, as red fades to pink, through which we see white. A couple of limber rushes of blue course below: Call it the sea.

—David Rimanelli

Peter Voulkos

FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY

This concise exhibition of ten ceramic pieces formed a rare survey of the work of Peter Voulkos, an artist whose production merits far broader examination. This signal potter/sculptor drastically ruptured the tropes that assign craftworks to a lesser status than art. There are, of course, many preconceptions that play into this conventional demotion—mostly, the association of clay-based crafts with utilitarian vessels and the belief that clay itself is of lesser status than paint (or wood or marble or bronze). Of course, other notables aspired to break this prejudice, but few did so as credibly as Voulkos, first among peers who include Ken Price (once his student) and Andrew Lord.

Following a wartime stint in the Pacific Theater, Voulkos (1924–2002) earned an MFA in ceramics from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1952. The following summer, while teaching ceramics at Black Mountain College, he fell in with Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham; these encounters convinced him to come to New York, thus occasioning fateful meetings with Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Voulkos swallowed whole the Abstract Expressionist dispensation—at least the Harold Rosenberg side of it, which viewed artmaking as a theater of the unconscious. In 1954 in Los Angeles, Voulkos founded the ceramics department at what became the Otis College of Art and Design. The rest—the Californian ceramic renaissance—is history.

In Voulkos's classroom, the mantra was "No rules." At the turn of the 1960s, this carried the force of sacred decree. Voulkos taught his students to forgo—to overthrow, really—the traditions of the centered vessel, either coil-built or turned on the wheel, encouraging such counterintuitive moves as puncturing a receptacle's walls. Take, for instance, his parasculptural *Iron Head*, 1990, a simple vase with violent slices rupturing its rust-colored surface. Ceramics majors took Voulkos not solely at his word but as the beau ideal.

A Cubist scaffolding lies behind Voulkos's structures, as it does behind so much Abstract Expressionist practice. *Vase/Jar*, 1956, for example, is a stoneware work built of muscular, planar slabs. Think Hans Hofmann, if you will, but sans the untrammeled color. In a similar mode, *Blue and Gray*, 1959—also notably constructivist—features outcroppings of triangles and flange-like spines. Voulkos's choice of a dark-blue salt glaze in this work is connotative of old New England crockery.

With near-bardic force, Voulkos became anew our Shoji Hamada, our Bernard Leach. Both Hamada and Leach were long-acknowledged master potters who, in teaching at Black Mountain College, also contributed to that school's undying legend. "The minute you begin to feel you understand what you are doing, it loses that searching quality," Voulkos maintained. "You finally reach a point where you're no longer concerned about keeping the blob of clay centered on the wheel and up in the air. Your emotions take over and what happens just happens. Usually you don't know it's happened until after it's done."

Voulkos's work, thrown or built of rough, thick walls, comprised plates, platters, and vessels of virtually phallic virility, especially his distorted spherical bottles with thick necks. *Untitled Pot (Black)*, 1969–70, is typical. The artist achieved burst effects, as seen, for example, in *Untitled Plate*, 1973, by placing combustible material in the clay and burning it away in the kiln. This process often yielded aggressive discontinuities and craterish breaks. Now and then, he introduced stones, pebbles, or—as was the case in many works here—small pieces of porcelain into the work's body, producing surfaces cut, scored, or punctured as if by a violent thumb. Voulkos obdurately rejected extensive painted or sgraffito decoration, at times allowing no more than a wide band of nondescript glaze around a bulbous body, as evidenced by *Untitled Vase*, 1957.

The puncturing and scoring one often encounters in Voulkos's plates and platters leads one to associate his work, rather unexpectedly, with the supremely antithetical, reductivist elegances of Lucio Fontana. The Italian artist began his career as a ceramic sculptor of Catholic iconography, but, like Voulkos, he evolved into an abstractionist of the first water. His paintings, mostly early on, were also perforated by pebbles pressed into their surfaces.

—Robert Pincus-Witten

Peter Voulkos, *Iron Head*, 1990, ceramic, 35½ x 19 x 19".