

Karen Thuesen Massaro / Pottery 1976, 1979

My ceramic sculpture was included in the 1973 exhibition, *The Plastic Earth*. During the exhibition opening, I was among the eighty-seven artists invited to the Kohler Co. factory for a tour of the Pottery and a day of casting demonstrations. The scale of the Pottery was huge to my small-studio eyes, and its fabrication goals differed from mine in the extreme.

The point of intersection between my work and that of Kohler Co. was the skilled use of ceramic materials to make fired objects. Sanitary ware was made in startling quantities. Plaster molds for small sinks were handled by one person whereas larger ones required four men. Dryers the size of a house were used to cure molds and dry greenware. Kilns and heating pipes ensured that the Pottery was a warm place to work; temperatures sometimes exceeded one hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

Each of the men assigned used measured and smooth motions to spray a goeey glaze soup that enveloped the soft-cornered green sanitary ware. One spray booth hosted two

cartoon-like robots—their quirky, flex-tube feed lines terminated in spray nozzles that danced around their turning ceramic partners, mimicking the work of the hand. Fully formed sinks and toilets dressed in matte pastel glazes were transferred onto a slow parade of kiln cars en route to the doors of the tunnel kiln. Calibrated movement continued more than one hundred feet away at the opposite end of the kiln, where sparkling wares emerged, untouchable, shimmering in heat.

My first view of the Kohler Co. Pottery, was enlightening—a game changer. It was obvious that there was a lot for me, a young university-trained ceramist, to learn and experience. In fact, every artist on the 1973 tour was awestruck by the potential of working at Kohler Co.

I came back to the Pottery to work briefly with Jack Earl and Tom LaDousa in 1974 and 1975; for four weeks in 1976 with Earl, Tom Elliott, and Joe DiStefano; and finally, for six weeks in 1979 with seven other artists. As a result of my glaze experiments in 1976 and 1979, I also was invited back in 1984–85 to create work for Kohler Co.'s Artist Editions.

Opportunities for and acceptance of women in the workplace have improved greatly during my career, and, fortunately, ceramists leave an undeniable physical trail. In the 1970s, I was the only woman among 450 or so male employees in the Pottery. Timing when to use the men's bathroom was the only gender "challenge" I recall. I would watch as to when it might be empty and remember seeing looks of surprise and unhappiness, particularly on the faces of the older men, as they walked in or as I walked out. I was sorry to impose on their private





space but taking forty-five minutes to leave the factory and return was not acceptable. What mattered most was to understand how we, as artists, could fit in and be as productive as possible.

The casters, glazers, and other Pottery associates were quietly curious about what the artists made, and they especially respected realistic, narrative work. Earl was an early favorite, and rightly so; his interests, skills, and work ethic impressed the factory associates. It was more difficult for them to appreciate DiStefano's dropped-sink series. To make them, he ordered soft cast sinks that had just been released from their molds and then dropped them onto a board on the floor. We were all aware that this was hard for the casters to watch. They were paid for flawless work. We could only hope that in time they would know that we were, in fact, in awe of their skills.

During the early residencies, we requested a few production pieces to modify each day. After they were delivered to our toasty workstation in front of the tunnel kilns, we frantically worked to complete our ideas before the clay got too dry. I explored the processes of the Pottery, glaze lab, and mold shop, and pursued a series of ideas that were

inspired by Kohler Co. forms. I even experimented briefly with the gorgeous colors and surfaces that were available in the Enamel Shop. It was an interesting setup, but I had too little heft and patience to make music with that fire. In the end, altering Kohler plumbingware was novel and fun but limited.

Earl was the first artist to bring his own molds for casting, and from that time on, we had access to slip lines and brought or made molds at the Pottery. With helpful instruction from the model makers, I used the "Kohler method" to make a three-part, rebar-enforced plaster mold of a Sunbeam iron, a mass-produced form similar to plumbingware in its sleek beauty and familiarity. I continued using the Sunbeam mold in my studio, integrating a growing set of physical possibilities into my ceramic vocabulary.

Access to the slip lines and the glaze spray booth made experiments with raw and glazed clay surfaces possible. I investigated a variety of surface possibilities, leaving some forms bare to expose the fine-grained buff personality of the clay. I also marbled many forms, those of Kohler Co. and my own, by alternately pouring black and buff slip into molds. Convinced that the sumptuous Kohler glazes had potential as a painterly medium,

Karen Thuesen Massaro working in the Pottery, 1979. (opposite)

Karen Thuesen Massaro / *Glaze Flow Blocks*, 1976; slip-cast vitreous china with glaze; 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. each. Kohler Co. Collection, gift of the artist. (above)



Karen Thuesen Massaro / *Glaze Painting #19*
(detail), 1979; slip-cast vitreous china with glaze;
19 × 22¾ × ½ in. Collection of the artist. Photo by
Paul Schraub. (above, left)

Karen Thuesen Massaro / *Soap Vessel #6*, 1976;
slip-cast vitreous china with glaze; 2⅝ × 3 × 1¼ in.
John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of
the artist. (above, right)

I expanded my marbleizing experiments into glaze over forms and flat surfaces.

Each day, I walked through the Pottery in my lace-up, steel-tip boots. There was always something interesting to see. Mornings were filled with noise and exhilaration. Shafts of daylight sculpted anything dimensional.

Glaze technicians periodically tested glaze viscosity by firing “glaze flow blocks”—small clay pyramids with glaze set in their top pockets. Seeing those lovely little glaze blocks made me think of Marcel Duchamp’s work in repurposing common objects. Here was a perfect opportunity to mix data with its negation, and the result would also be an object that was interesting in itself. I added marbled glaze over the fired glaze flow and refired the block at a lower temperature.

My last, most productive residency was in 1979, as one of eight artists-in-residence. We worked in a tent just outside the Pottery, which made for great camaraderie as well as minor annoyances over neatness and space. We often commented on the powerful atmosphere of the factory, yet each of us produced unique work.

I focused on a series of glaze paintings on nineteen-by-twenty-three-inch tiles. The Kohler Co. palette is bold and lends itself to variation; the glazes can swim over, through,

and around each other, and they behave differently depending on the amount of water used. Whether opaque or transparent, the clear oxidation colors melt seamlessly and yet remain distinct. I applied them with mustard dispensers, brushes, sticks, and fingers, and tilted the glossy fired tiles to shift the wet glazes. If there is still an area of unfinished engaging exploration for me at Kohler Co., that would be it.