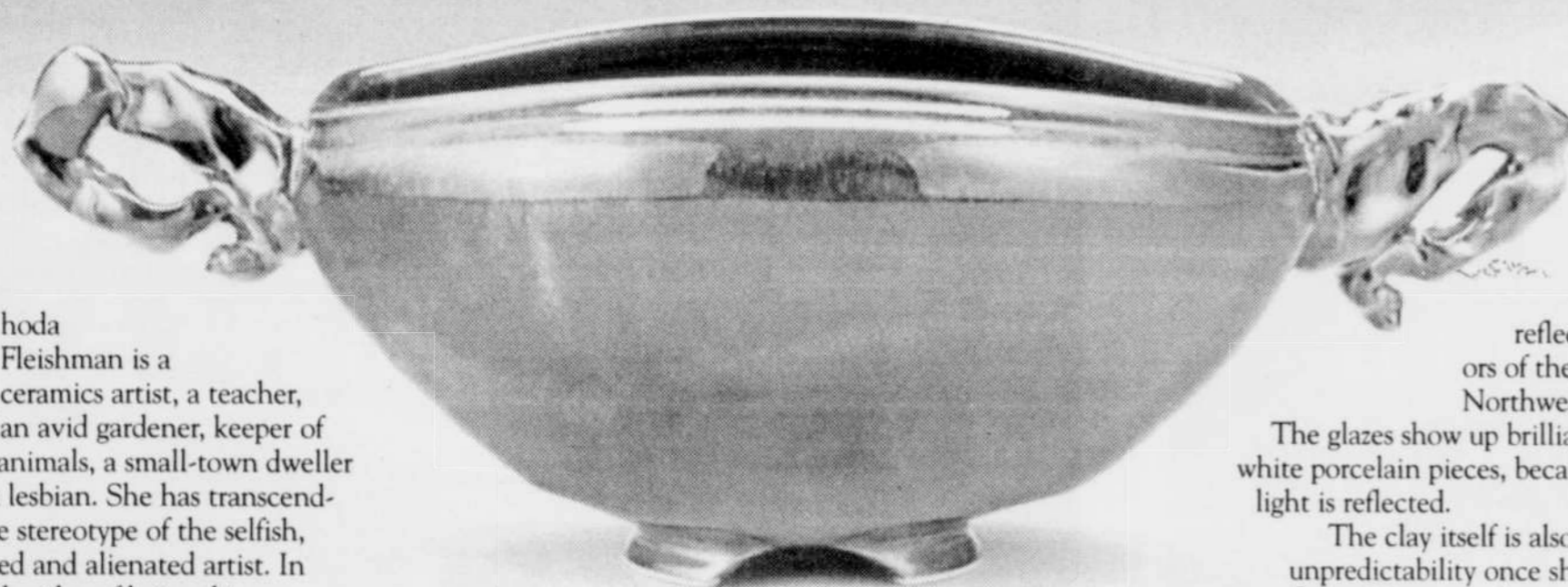


ART

Shaping her world

Hardworking potter Rhoda Fleishman creates a beautiful life for herself in the country

BY MUFFIE WHITE



Rhoda Fleishman is a ceramics artist, a teacher, an avid gardener, keeper of farm animals, a small-town dweller and a lesbian. She has transcended the stereotype of the selfish, isolated and alienated artist. In fact, the idea of being this way has probably never occurred to her.

Fleishman's promotional materials state that she makes "vibrant art" which "transforms form and function." Her work is not the least bit self-conscious—it is quite expressive and dramatic. She is not one to use minimal form. Yet the work is not completely flamboyant. (In my opinion, this is a good thing.) She creates reflective surfaces that enhance surrounding spaces. The pieces hold their own ground, yet are not intrusive.

The same could be said of Fleishman's personal life in Brownsville, Ore., a town way off the beaten highway north of Eugene. In perhaps the most conservative county in the state, it has a population of 1,400. She and her partner moved to the farming community years ago to live a peaceful, productive existence.

Fleishman grew up on a farm, and she has gravitated toward a farmer's way of life throughout her own. She is the owner of some 40 chickens and 15 goats, plus a few cats and dogs. In the early morning, she gets up while most of us are still hours away from waking, feeds the animals, works in the garden, then takes care of herself.

From the start, she and her partner didn't want to hide their life together, and they invited anyone from the town to come to the farm for a visit. Fleishman was interested in opening up her home to her neighbors and wanted them to feel comfortable. This honesty led to neighbors' acceptance of the couple, though the word *lesbians* was left unsaid.

Fleishman gives back to her community by teaching ceramics classes in her studio, and her life as an artist is intrinsically tied to her life on the farm.

Her work is also intrinsically female—she says, "I would have a hard time making something that is not soft and rounded."

Yet she claims her forms are not consciously contrived to be representations of the female body. It just sort of "happens."

Right now, she is working in two media: porcelain and stoneware clay. Porcelain is a very delicate, soft material and before it is fired has the consistency of cream cheese. The stoneware clay is hard and gritty.

Fleishman describes porcelain as a "seductive, sensual clay." The particles that make up the material are very tiny—the reason the material is so smooth. It lends itself well to smaller forms.

As for the stoneware clay, its grit gives a

reflect the colors of the Pacific Northwest so well.

The glazes show up brilliantly on the white porcelain pieces, because more light is reflected.

The clay itself is also subject to unpredictability once shaped into forms. The artist does not always get what she expects out of the kiln, which is why flexibility and persistence are keys to success and satisfaction.

Fleishman uses very basic tools to shape her pieces but favors handwork. A lot of her pieces are thrown on a pottery wheel, then taken off for manual alteration.

Her work has a natural freedom—not a quality that she has achieved effortlessly. Throughout her career, she has found that maintaining a separation between herself and her work allows for heightened expression and lets her feel unrestrained.

■ RHODA FLEISHMAN's newest show will open June 17 at the Graystone Gallery, 3279 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd. in Portland. For more information, call (503) 238-0651.

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structural strength that makes it excellent for larger forms. Fleishman has made a series of large threshold vessels that are intended for outdoor display and will be included in her next show. Their chemistry is such that they will, if necessary, survive wet, cold winters.

In both media, Fleishman has achieved synthesis of form and function, and her work has been widely exhibited in galleries, shows and festivals. Her new show will feature various vessels in both stoneware and porcelain.

"I look at a piece and think it looks dead until it goes outside," Fleishman says.

How does she feel about having her work displayed in galleries, which tend to be sterile and not so alive? Her solution is to bring natural elements, such as bamboo, into the gallery, and she tries to pick galleries that are lit naturally.

Ceramics is a technically demanding art, and Fleishman's degree in chemistry has come in handy throughout her life.

The glazes applied to forms to give them color and shine are very temperamental, so knowledge of high-temperature chemistry is more than helpful.

Her favorite glaze colors are green and blue, because they

"I would have a hard time making something that is not soft and rounded."

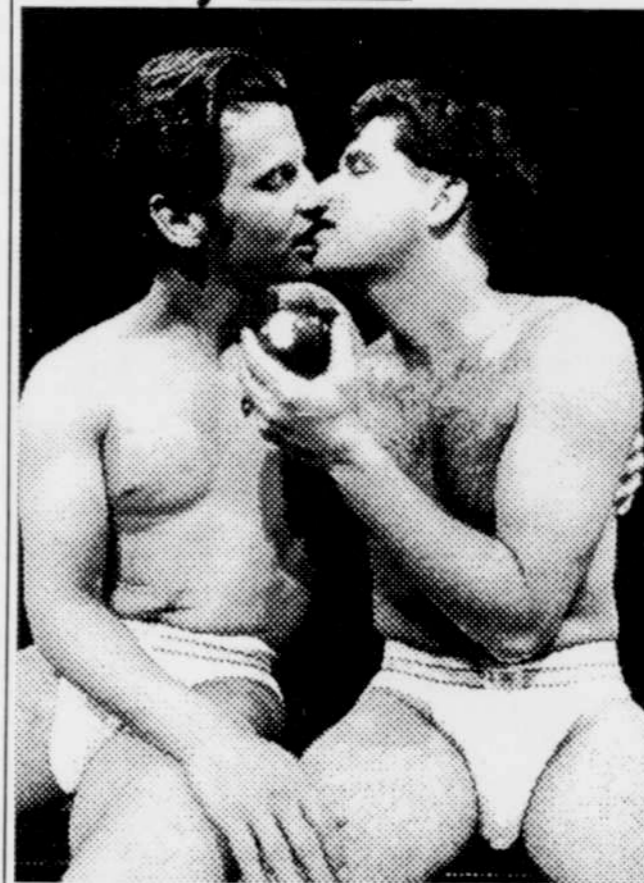
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