
THE CERAMIC CONTINUUM OF NIKOS RODIOS

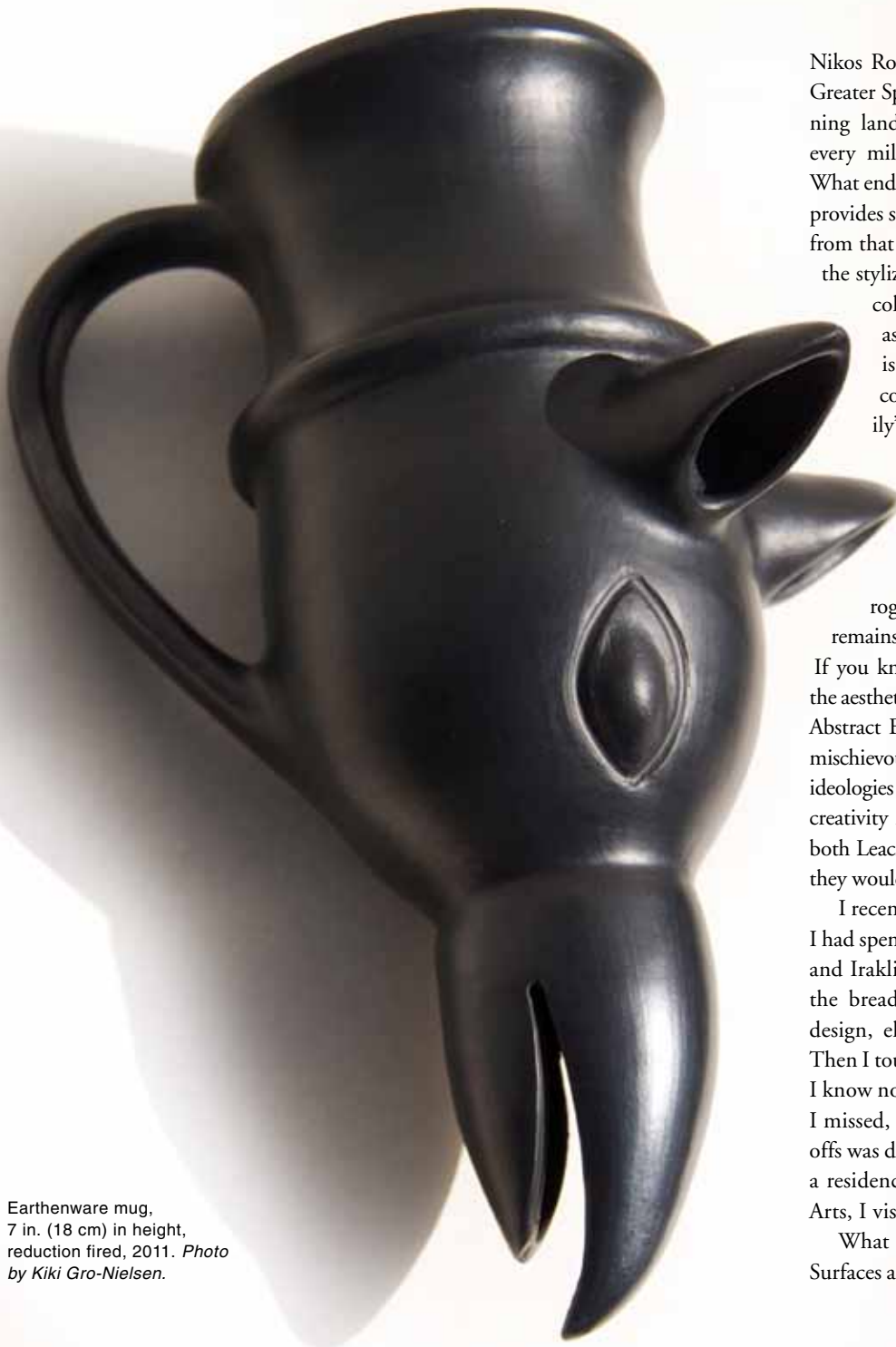
by Mark Messenger

Nikos Rodios is a Greek artist who lives in the Greater Sporades on Skopelos Island. It is a stunning landscape with a profound heritage, but every mileau has its story and social cadence. What endures is not what is conspicuous but what provides sustenance. Rodios' artwork, proceeding from that of his grandfather, father, and uncle, is the stylization of such a vital continuum. It is a collection of forms that affirm precedent, aspiration, and an emphatic present. It is an essence Rodios condenses without comment. This is a meditation on his family's legacy, because it is a shared dynamic.

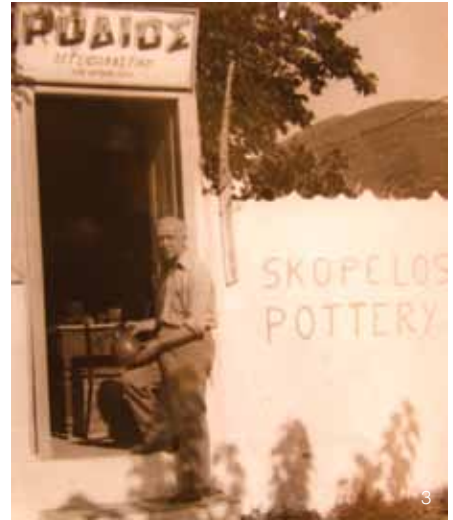
Have you ever looked through a gallery searching fruitlessly for cultural relevance? What Bernard Leach, the British formalist, referred to as a 'taproot'? If so, then you know how arrogant this feels, but the insistence of truth remains. I look for an antithesis, even if it's rash. If you know this reaction, then you understand the aesthetic anarchy of Paul Soldner, the American Abstract Expressionist. It is creatively permissive, mischievous, and prolific. Attempting to meld these ideologies poses a question, "What might authentic creativity look like in this context?" Here I think both Leach and Soldner would nod, but I suspect they would also point to a final catharsis.

I recently underwent this sequence in Greece. I had spent several days at the museums in Athens and Iraklion and witnessed, first hand, some of the breadth of Aegean ceramics; its inventive design, elegant craftsmanship, and continuity. Then I toured galleries looking for a similar verve. I know now that there is a lot of significant work I missed, but at the time the plethora of knock-offs was disheartening. A month later, attending a residency at the Skopelos Foundation for the Arts, I visited the workshop of Nikos Rodios.

What is striking in the work is its restraint. Surfaces are intentionally subdued to allow forms



Earthenware mug,
7 in. (18 cm) in height,
reduction fired, 2011. *Photo*
by Kiki Gro-Nielsen.



1 "Papous", Nikos Rodios Sr. 1911 @ age 46, Rodios Archives. 2 Vassilis Rodios, 1921 @ age 25, Rodios Archives. 3 Vassilis Rodios outside the Pottery, 1950's, Rodios Archives. 4 Nikos Rodios, 1964 @ age 12, Rodios Archives . 5 Nikos Rodios, Current, Rodios Archives .



to stand for themselves. This is often an unfortunate choice for anyone without a refined sculptural sense. An embellished surface can camouflage clumsy shapes and transitions. Rodios leaves himself nowhere to hide. In this daringly minimal format the viewer sees the object, even if familiar, as though for the first time.

According to Rodios there are about 50 Aegean vase shapes. These are the "bones" over which a multitude of variations have been created. These volumetric compositions, combined with surface treatment, express a progression of reference that sequence like episodes in a storyline. To appreciate Rodios' influences it is important to understand this undercurrent. His work draws from the same age-old well, the Aegean itself.

No place can claim a special endowment of time, but there are locations in which human drama has played more significant acts. The Aegean is such a place, and within it the Sporades are

exceptional. Punctuating the horizon northeast of Skopelos is the last island of the Major Sporades, Alonysos. During the Middle Paleolithic Period when the sea was lower, this archipelago extended from the mainland as a single mass. Dwellings far below the present sea level as well as artifacts point to this as the earliest evidence of human beings in the Aegean, dating 100,000-33,000 BC.

The next development, Cycladic culture (5000-2000 BC) was an isolated, self-sufficient matriarchy. A stylized goddess with an elongated neck and thin, internally folded arms typifies its ritual sculpture. This reduction is similarly expressed in its pottery. The culture morphed over several millennia to engulf the Aegean as Minoan Civilization.

The Minoans (2500-1400 BC), having inherited a resourceful stewardship of nature, were also adventurous traders and, give or take a ravenous Minotaur, diplomats. Sporades wine, for example,

was prized throughout the ancient world and exported in vases from local workshops. Far-flung shipwrecks have been identified and dated by the silhouettes of their imperishable cargo, often these conically based vessels that had been thrust upright into grain-filled hulls. One specifically stamped vase, the Ikion from Alonysos, has been found as far as the Crimean Peninsula, Alexandria, the Black Sea and the Baltic. Rodios has an elegant fragment beside his wheel, together with a small goddess.

Minoan pots fit surface to form viscerally, like tattoos contouring bodies. The motifs, usually marine abstractions, are curiously devoid of aggression, just as Minoan architecture is almost entirely without defensive consideration. These predilections may have been both innate and the result of protective alliances.

Segues between Minoan, Mycenaean and Classical Greek Culture are mysteries characterized by the advent of patriarchy. In this regard art, architecture, mythology, early historical accounts, and geology provide significant clues. We know that the first transition was punctuated with a bang, perhaps the biggest in human history, when the volcanic island of Thira exploded around 1450 BC. This sent literal waves of destruction throughout the Aegean, as well as opportunist waves of political and social change.

Following Thira's eruption Mycenaean Culture (1600-1100 BC), grasped the Aegean world with assertion. This empire, bound in legend most famously recounted by Homer, was a key player in the siege of Troy. Its preoccupations were trade rivalry, fortification and expansion. Mycenaean pottery reflects Minoan precedent with a certain distraction. Its forms are relatively stiff and its surfaces usually illustrate military prowess with tedious geometry. The Mycenaean's faded from the Aegean theatre without a definite explanation, but conjectures of subversive invasion.

Next, Classical Greek culture (750-323 BC) experienced its watershed with the cli-

max of the Persian War in 480 BC. Viewed from Skopelos, the massive invading fleet, supporting its land forces past Thermopylae, wove through the Sporades on its way to Athens and the ultimate battle of Salamis. Pottery found in the region tangles such narratives with mythic heroes, religious ritual, democratic ideals, orgiastic reveries and quiet scenes from daily life. It represents a complex crescendo, followed by incessant infighting, the uniting fist of Macedonia and Hellenic decline.

The Roman Empire in the Aegean (146 BC-330 AD) left examples of ceramics that borrowed heavily from Greece.

Skillfully rendered propaganda, this work emphasized heroic precedent with an aim to legitimize imperial power. The years in the Sporades since the Romans have involved incredible, often tragic, vicissitudes including Byzantines, Franks, Venetians, Turks, Christians, Pirates, Fascists, Communists, Capitalists and Imperialists. Within the confines of this small archipelago, the residue of these competing overlords remains an omnipresent jumble.

Nikos Rodios' paternal grandfather and namesake, remembered as 'Papous', was born in 1865. He was orphaned at 6 in Athens, together with two older sisters, when their parents died of influenza. One sister was sent to America to live with relatives. Papous and the remaining sister stayed in Athens. They were placed with a man who owned a ceramic workshop. So, Papous grew up helping in the pottery and by fourteen was considered a master thrower. At eighteen he began an obligation in the military, then traveled to experience some of the times most prolific ceramic centers in Romania, Turkey, and Egypt. This was an odyssey along the lines of George Ohr's youthful wanderings in the US during the same era.

For Papous, Romania proved particularly important. Here he saw all-black pottery that reminded him of pre-historic Greek ware. He never witnessed a technique, but was determined to discover one. Back in Greece he went to live near his sister,



Earthenware vessel, 17 in. (43 cm) in height, reduction fired, 2011. Photo by Kiki Gro-Nielsen.



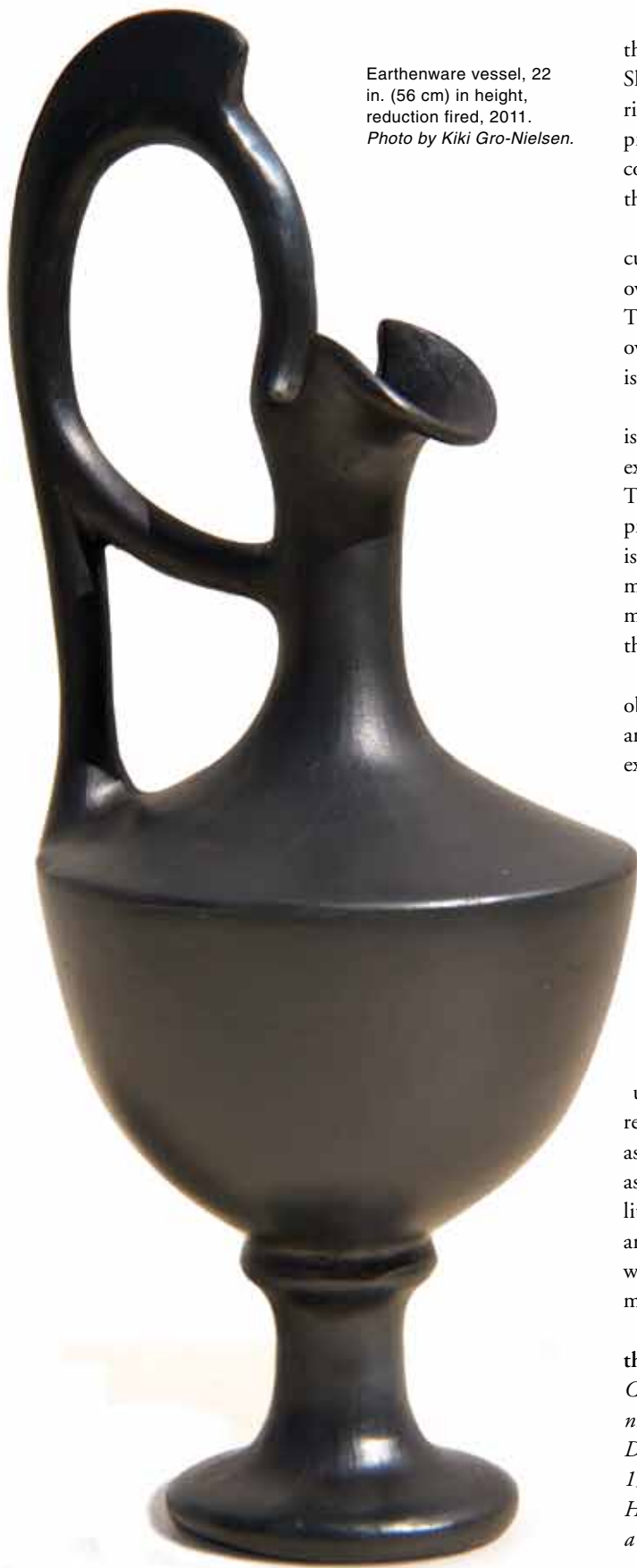
Earthenware bowl, 12 in. (30 cm) in length, reduction fired, 2011. *Photo by Kiki Gro-Nielsen.*

who had married a ceramist in Volos. Papous worked in the shop for a time, but was soon arranged to marry a young woman from Skopelos. His bride contributed a dowry of real estate and her family supported the couple's plan to build a ceramics workshop. Rodios Pottery opened in 1900 adjacent the waterfront.

Papous had no desire to make utilitarian pots. Rather, he set out to produce "one-of-a-kind" ceramic art. Skopelos, at the time, was a shipbuilding community with few collectors. Nevertheless, Papous prospected clay, developed an all-black firing process and refined his forms. He also set a goal to participate in the Paris World Fair. For a young, unknown artist in the early 20th century, informally trained and living on a working-class island (where to this day village trash pick-up involves city-owned mules), this was incredibly ambitious. But steadily, he won recognition in international exhibitions, notably Bordeaux in 1907, Alexandria in 1912, San Francisco in 1915, Paris in 1925 and Thessaloniki in 1929.

Papous had two sons, Yiorgios and Vassilis. In time their predilections were obvious and the three became a team. Yiorgios (Nikos' father) prepared clay, maintained the kiln, oversaw firings and kept the books. Vassilis designed and built the work with Papous. In 1932 the Rodios' received a letter of accommodation from Prime Minister Elftherios Venizelos acknowledging their advancement of Greek culture. In 1937 they won a gold medal at the World Fair in Paris. They maintained contacts with galleries in Athens and were widely noted throughout Europe.

Nikos was born in 1952, six years after Papous' death. Neither Yiorgios nor Vassilis pressured him as a boy, but a small wheel was set up where he could play and, in time, he was throwing complex shapes. Nikos remembers that something interesting was always going on in the shop. In the 1960's, university students from Athens visited routinely. The Rodioses provided traditional forms and the students' applied contemporary designs. This openness made a strong impression.



Earthenware vessel, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, reduction fired, 2011. Photo by Kiki Gro-Nielsen.

Following high school, Nikos studied in Athens and worked there as an engineer. When Vassilis died in 1977 he returned to Skopelos to work with his father. That same year he married Maria Lemonis, who now plays an integral roll in the shops creative production. Since Yiorgios' death in 1991 the Rodios' legacy has continued through the combined efforts of Nikos and Maria, with the support of their children, Vassilis and Magda.

It's not difficult to get Nikos talking about his family or his culture, local intrigues or sweeping politics. But regarding his own artistic intents the most he offers is a gesture behind him. This is not to be evasive or rude, I think he is simply reluctant to over-simplify. The best he offers is the work he makes, and that is about right.

The aesthetic synthesis to which Leach and Soldner directed is not an intellectual puzzle, but an experiential posture. The experience is the work of art, and the posture is abandonment. The efficacy of this interaction involves a willing free-fall that presupposes something to trust. Instilling confidence for this act is the artist's task. The act itself (the art experience) is a kind of mystic dance we all seem to know, but can't explain or teach any more than we can a romance. If there is an artistic equivalent to the religious impulse, it is this.

If we participate honestly we contribute a certain desire, the object of which is transcendence. This is an aspiration for what the ancients called the sublime, or a broad cliché describes as universal experience. This might sound vague but the evidence is really very simple: It is why we tell anyone in earnest, aside from an agenda, to read the poem, the story, or the novel, to listen to the song, to watch the performance or the movie, to experience the object, to vibe on the image or the concept. It is why something from which we will receive no material benefit, moves us profoundly.

The artwork of Nikos Rodios provides this kind of opportunity through the condensation of resonate forms. The continuum of Aegean Pottery is segmented by diverse surfaces. Rodios creates a format in which these are minimized and their underlying anatomy is discerned. This brings nuance forward, revealing symmetry, balance, proportion, and grace as shared aspirations to beauty. This is a core often overlooked. Rodios asks us to look again. If he offered only replicas, there would be little relevance. What he presents are re-interpretations of ideals; amalgams of particular shape, volume, space and light through which individuals have expressed movement and growth for many millenniums, and in which we continue to move and grow.

the author *Mark Messenger received a BA in History from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, a Teaching Credential in Art from California State University, Fullerton and a Masters of Fine Arts from San Diego State University. He moved to the San Francisco East Bay in 1996 to begin a teaching position at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill. He exhibits his artwork extensively and recently returned from a one-year sabbatical.*