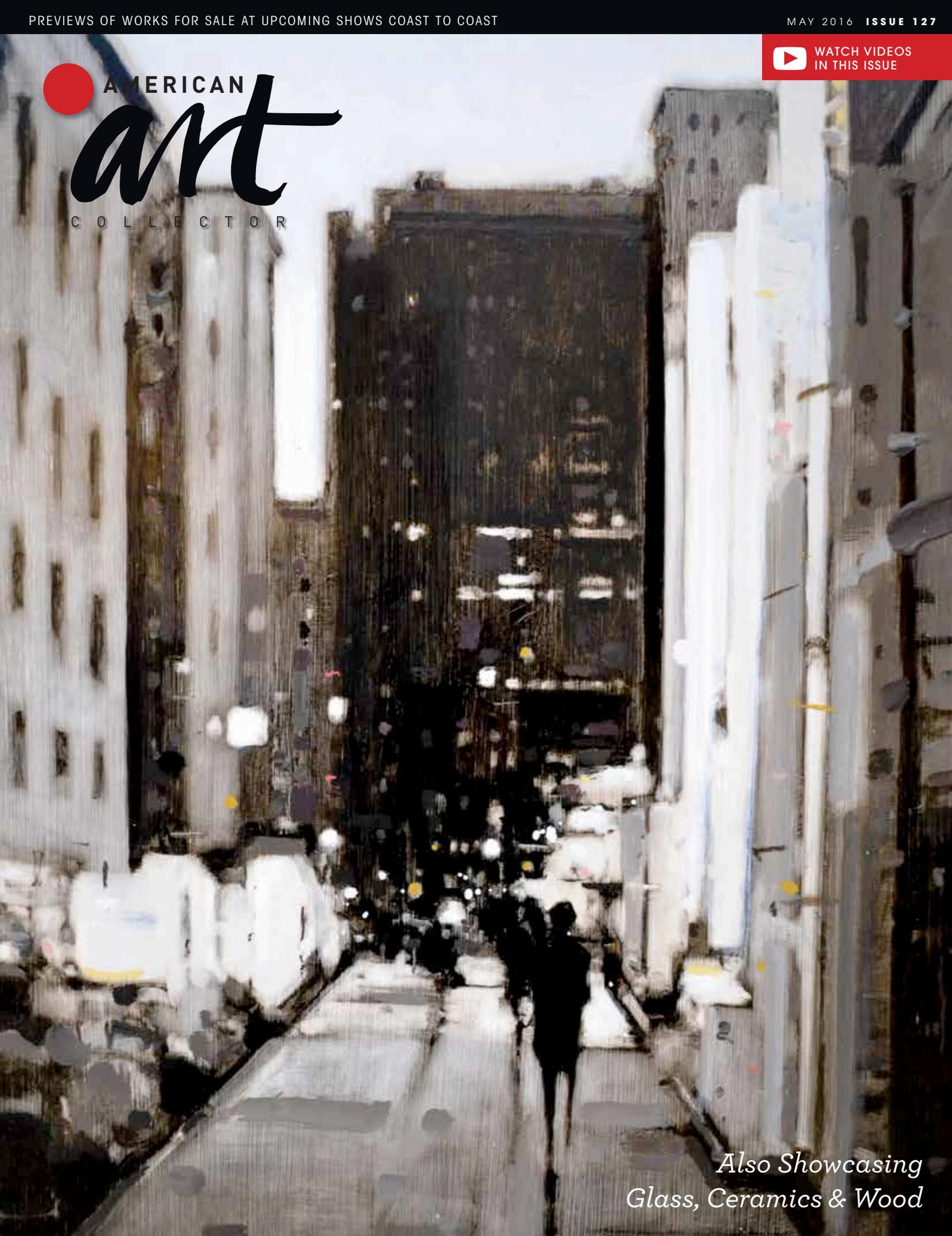


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# Seeing is *Believing*

ERIC SERRITELLA'S TROMPE  
L'OEIL CERAMICS CELEBRATE THE  
NATURAL WORLD. BY JOHN O'HERN

When I first met Eric Serritella, he was vice president of an advertising agency. We had worked together for several years when he told me he was leaving his 16-year career to start a life as a full-time artist. I didn't know much about his motivation but admired his decision. I knew that for a while he had a peripatetic life making mugs and selling them at street fairs. He then faded into pleasant memory.

Last year, I saw some extraordinary Trompe l'Oeil ceramics, teapots and other work that looked as if they had been made out of birch logs. The artist was Eric Serritella, the same Eric Serritella I had known back when he wore suits.

His work is now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., among other important collections. In April, he gave a James Renwick Alliance Distinguished Artist Series Artist Talk at the Renwick.

Serritella's path from executive to distinguished artist has been as direct as I would have expected from the detail oriented, perfectionist account executive. What it was that inspired him was a mystery to me until we reconnected and began talking.

He had taken a pottery class when he was working in advertising and found it was "a natural click," he says. "I think it was the texture and sensuality and grounding



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nature of clay that captured me. I had tried watercolor and had done photography but I really wanted a hands-on experience and clay was the first applied arts medium that I connected with. I finished the six-week class and went back for another session.”

He lived near Cornell University, which hosted a series of workshops by Ah Leon, one of Taiwan’s most distinguished ceramic artists. Leon works in the Chinese tradition making Trompe l’Oeil teapots and objects from the purple zisha clay of Yixing. The two became friends and when Serritella asked Leon about the next steps in his career, the master replied, “Eric, you need to make better pots!” He invited him to Taiwan to work with four masters. He studied there for five months and, several years later, returned for a monthlong intensive with Leon himself. He learned in the Asian way—by copying the master. When returning home, Serritella resolved to “setmyself] free.” He experienced the 500-year-old teapot-making tradition in China and realized that his own evolution was to handle it at his own pace. He began to make teapots in the Trompe l’Oeil tradition but in 2007 chose birch trees, which figure prominently into his own life and aren’t found in China. “That started me on my own path. I was finding my niche in the Trompe l’Oeil world. I was no longer practicing a technique. I was making things,” he explains.

The choice of birch trees distinguishes

his work from the tradition and recalls his youth. “For some reason every significant home we lived in had a lot of birch trees,” he says. “My dad died when I was 10 and those birch trees remind me of him. For me, my dad is at the heart of all things birch. I think of them as the angels of the forest—these beings, almost mystical, ghostlike, with the purity of an angel.”

Serritella’s trees twist and turn and show the scars of fires and the amorous carving

1

*Charred Split Log Birch Teapot*, stoneware, 15 x 18 x 9". Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Photo by Jason Dowdle.

2

Eric Serritella in his studio.

3

*Birch Details*, stoneware. Private collections. Photo by Jason Dowdle.



3





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7

of initials. They are resilient. “There is beauty in nature despite what we do as humans,” he says. “We’re not going to defeat it. Ultimately people are going to be gone. While we live here, we need to treat nature with respect. We need to walk a little softer.”

Walking softly, Serritella experiences nature with an intimacy few have experienced. It animates who he is and appears in subtle nuances in the forming and carving of his work.

He recalls a trip to kayak among the orca whales off Vancouver, British Columbia: “I had amazing experiences and several close encounters and an incredibly strong core bond to the whales. I couldn’t get close enough. The most significant was having a female swim right under my kayak—so close I could see her saddle patch that is around the dorsal fin as she passed below. The tip of her dorsal was just below the bottom of my kayak. I had a huge male breach at about 30 to 40 yards as well. The trip was spiritually life-changing.”

In his book *Animal Speak*, Ted Andrews writes that whale energies teach one to “tap hidden levels of your own mind or even to accelerate the manifestation of goals...learn to go deep within ourselves, the creativity that we awaken can resurrect our lives.” Andrews explains that the breaching whale relates to “the magnificence and power of your own creativity. Do not hold back...It [whale energy] awakens great depths of creative inspiration....”

Serritella says, “The seed was planted for me to take

more creative risks with clay.”

A similar encounter with the raw power of nature and interspecies communication came before his decision to pursue a life in art. “After doing some soul searching I came up with personal characteristics I wanted at the core of my life,” he recalls, “peace, freedom, simplicity. Then I met the wolves...”

“I made eye contact with a wolf pup at about 20 to 30 yards in the Algonquin wilderness after paddling/portaging four to five days from what was already remote civilization. We locked eyes. No fear in either of us. Just connection. It was one of the biggest connections I’ve ever had with a sentient being. It nearly knocked me over.”

He cites a quote from Andrews: “When wolf shows up it is time to breathe new life into your rituals...Find a new path, take a new journey, take control of your life...and then you will know the true spirit of freedom.”

Serritella’s mastery of technique allows him the freedom to push the limits of his medium. As he explores the negative space that gives form to the positive space of his work, he recalls the negative space surrounding the sumi-e ink brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy. As in Asian art, Serritella’s art is of the moment. In the moment, he celebrates the profundity of nature in its imperfection and the interconnectedness of all things. His work opens a portal for others to experience nature in a richer way.

Thoreau wrote, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” ●

**4**  
*Tree of Love* (teapot),  
stoneware, 25 x 23 x 14".  
Private collection. Photo  
by Jason Dowdle.

**5**  
*Birch Burl* (teapot),  
stoneware, 26 x 24 x 10".  
Courtesy Elyse Vinitzky  
Revocable Trust. Photo  
by Andrew Gillis.

**6**  
*Roar with Pine Bark*  
*Tea Bowl*, stoneware,  
11½ x 20 x 7". Courtesy  
the artist and Jason  
Jacques Gallery,  
New York, New York.  
Photo by Jason Dowdle.

**7**  
*Pegged Paper Birch*  
*Basket*, stoneware,  
6 x 14 x 7". Private  
collection. Photo by  
Andrew Gillis.