

# Peter Voulkos In LA: Time Capsule



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Front Cover:  
(clockwise)

Ken Price, Untitled, 1957  
Peter Voulkos, Vase, 1959  
John Mason, Untitled Bowl

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GALLERY

Frank Lloyd Gallery, Inc.  
2525 Michigan Avenue, B5b  
Santa Monica, CA 90404  
PH: 310 264-3866  
FX: 310 264-3868  
[www.franklloyd.com](http://www.franklloyd.com)

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Peter Voulkos was, by all accounts, one of the most influential artists in L.A. history. He crossed every boundary, and though he is best remembered for his breakthrough work in ceramics, he was also a painter, bronze sculptor, and highly influential teacher. He knew artists ranging from Ed Kienholz and Robert Irwin to Billy Al Bengston, and worked with John Mason, Ken Price, Paul Soldner, Henry Takemoto and others. In a counterpart to the Pacific Standard Time project, the Frank Lloyd Gallery presents selected works from the collection of Peter Voulkos' daughter, Pier, in an extraordinary show that encapsulates the period of time 1954-1959.

Whether made by Voulkos, or collected by the artist from his colleagues and cohorts, the works in this exhibit directly relate to the beginnings of assemblage art, abstract painting, and innovative ceramics that sparked the growth of modern art in Los Angeles. Works include a wall relief by Ed Kienholz, a very early painting and a drawing



by Billy Al Bengston, and several examples of small-scale pottery by Peter Voulkos. In contrast to the large sculpture shown at the exhibition *Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970* at the Getty Museum and *Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos, 1956-1968* at Scripps College for Pacific Standard Time, these bold, innovative works have a domestic scale.

During the middle to late 1950s, Peter Voulkos lived on Earl Street in Silverlake with his wife Peggy and his young daughter Pier. The commute to his teaching job at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (later known as Otis) was direct; he could drive straight down Glendale Boulevard to the 2401 Wilshire Boulevard classroom and kilns of the school. His reputation grew quickly, and is the stuff of legend. Ken Price recalled the powerful influence many years later in a talk:

“For anybody who doesn’t know who



[Voukos] was, he's the hero of American ceramics. He's the guy who essentially liberated the medium from the craft hierarchy that was controlling it up to that time. The way he taught was just to come into the studio, and he approached making work by a method I call "direct frontal onslaught." We were a small group of very committed students. Some people thought they were pretty good before they got there, but when we saw him, he just blew our minds. This is a short talk, and so I can't go too deeply into it, but he was so far ahead of us, it was just ridiculous. Anyway, I learned to work from watching him." Price had graduated from the program at USC, and was already a very accomplished potter by the time he joined the group of artists working with Voukos. When Ken Price and his friend Billy Al Bengston heard about Voukos, they went to see him demonstrate his work and were clearly impressed. To this day, they both regard him as "the Man."



Indeed, his reputation and influence spread among other artists in the community, as well as students at the school. Even painting students have recalled Voukos. L.A. Conceptual artist John Baldessari remembered that Voukos, who at the time was painting in the Abstract Expressionist style as well as building massive abstract clay sculptures, seemed the very embodiment of the advanced New York art world. Baldessari, who was studying painting at the time, remembers, "I soon discovered that he was more of an inspiration and a goad than any of my painting instructors, who were relatively academic. He psychically gave me permission, because the teachers I had always seemed delimiting."

Voukos worked with the surface of the clay "as a meeting ground between painting and sculpture", not only by painting glazes in an expressive manner, but also by incising line into the clay. The line quality was not delicate, but had a spontaneous



and aggressive quality, as is demonstrated in works such as *Face Pot* and the two marvelous figurative and expressive plates in this exhibition. As described by New York Times art critic Roberta Smith, Voulkos' response to the spontaneity of New York School painting was evidenced in his surfaces: "Decoration became aggressive violation—tearing, slashing and gouging—combined with brushwork that often recalled [Franz] Kline's beamlike strokes."

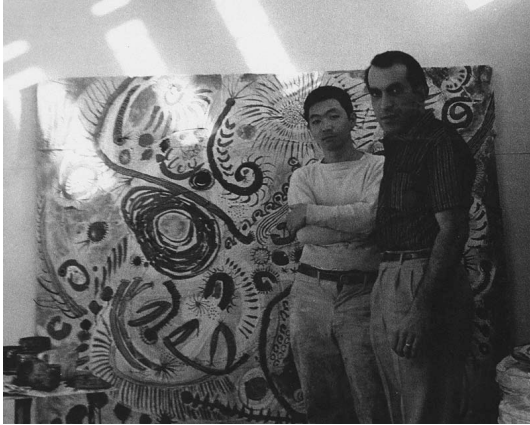
A work by Esteban Vicente demonstrates Voulkos' love of the Abstract Expressionist painters. He had come in contact with the American Avant-garde during his 1953 summer job at Black Mountain College, and had traveled to New York with David Tudor. He subsequently met many New York painters such as Franz Kline, Jack Tworkov and Philip Guston. One of the many painters he met was Esteban Vicente, and Vicente's painting, titled *Summer 1953*, was in Voulkos' collection. It is clear evidence of the



interaction between painting and ceramics. Another painting that Voulkos kept in his collection was by his friend John Altoon.

Ed Kienholz, who was organizing exhibits in Los Angeles during the mid-1950s at the All-City Art Festival and his gallery enterprise called the Now Gallery, also knew Voulkos at the time. One of Ed Kienholz's early assemblage works remained in Peter Voulkos' collection since 1959. Kienholz later recalled, in an essay for a Voulkos show that he curated at the Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery, that he read a review of Voulkos' work by Thomas Albright: "In it Albright says it's impossible to think of Voulkos without also thinking of Anthony Quinn in 'Zorba the Greek'." At the conclusion of the essay, Kienholz remarks clearly "He's quick, intuitive, direct, compulsive and generous."

Peter Voulkos had been working in this impressive manner with clay for years. But for Voulkos' ambitious sculptural works, he



began to look for a studio space outside the school. He found one, right around the corner from the Earl Street house, at 2101 Glendale Blvd. As John Mason later recalled: “But some time in ‘57, Peter says... ‘I think I found the studio.’ And it ...was this clapboard building that had been a woodworking shop, and the old man that ran it died, but it had a lot of electrical power in it because of the woodworking tools. It really looked like a derelict building.”

Peter Voulkos had, long before, established a reputation as a master of ceramic techniques, winning 29 prizes and awards from 1949 to 1955 . However, by the middle 1950s he had begun to subvert those pottery techniques, and challenge the domesticity and functionality of ceramics. Though the works in our show are domestic in scale, Voulkos began to make massive sculpture in the Glendale Blvd. studio. Spontaneity and scale were characteristics of the new large-scale work of Voulkos. Although the scale of



the work increased, Voulkos’s methods were taken from his considerable experience with making pottery. He still started by throwing a series of cylinders and vertical, closed forms on the potter’s wheel. After those had partially dried, or set up, Voulkos proceeded to construct around a central cylindrical form, as Mason recalled, “... and build up and then out. He also would make slabs by putting clay on the concrete floor, first sprinkling a little grog or maybe some clay, and smoothing it out so that the clay would release from the concrete and then stamp it out...that became then for him a slab.”

The world of music was also part of the mix of influences. Though it is often reported that jazz was a big part of his work, Peter Voulkos studied flamenco when he lived in L.A., while he was making works that would redefine ceramics. What is often overlooked is that some major works, such as *Sevillanas*, *Black Bulerias*, and *Tientos*, are named after songs and dances in the art of flamenco. The



connection between music and ceramics is evident when Voulkos makes the statement: “The minute you touch a piece of clay it responds, it’s like music—you have to know all the structure of music and how to make it, before you can come up with anything.”

Whatever Voulkos did, it had power and authority that came from an inner strength. That strength seemed to come from an elemental understanding of the material, and the way to work with it. “Artistically, Voulkos is a builder. Whether hand-held tea bowls, plates displayed on stands made from steel rebar or monumental vessels, his sculptural objects share a visceral sense of having been constructed, torn down, rebuilt, pulled apart and put together yet again. The elemental associations of the clay medium are acknowledged and exploited, not denied, while clay’s transformative capacity under the intense heat of fire becomes a leitmotif in the building process Voulkos employs.”

Frank Lloyd



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<sup>i</sup> Ken Price, *A Talk with Slides*, Chinati Foundation Newsletter, 10, 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Breaking Ground Still Fires Him Up*, Los Angeles Times, November 14, 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> Roberta Smith, *Peter Voulkos, 78, a Master of Expressive Ceramics, Dies*, New York Times, February 21, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> John Mason, interview by Paul Smith, August 28, 2006, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>vi</sup> Peter H. Voulkos, *Chronology*, typewritten manuscript, Norton Simon Museum of Art archives, lists 29 awards and prizes in the years 1949 to 1955 for Voulkos’ pottery. This archival manuscript appears to have been submitted by the artist prior to his 1958 exhibit at Pasadena Art Museum.

<sup>vii</sup> Christopher Knight, *Peter Voulkos’ Vessels Stack Up as Monumental Gems*, Los Angeles Times, Art Review, Friday, November 26, 1999.



Ed Kienholz  
*Untitled*, 1959 - (view 1)  
mixed media  
43 x 25 ½ x 6 ½ inches

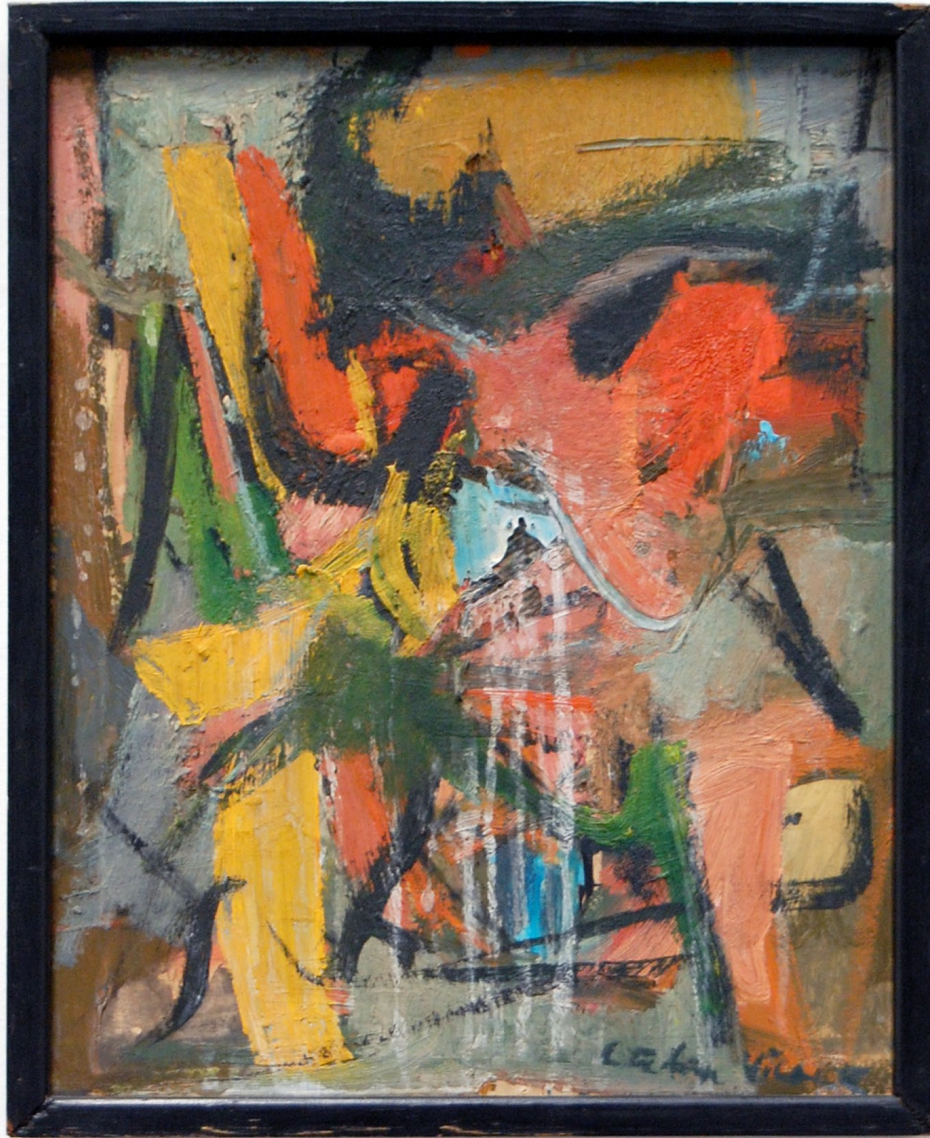




Ed Kienholz  
*Untitled*, 1959 - (view 2)  
mixed media  
43 x 25 ½ x 6 ½ inches



John Altoon  
*Untitled*  
oil on paper  
23 x 19 inches



Esteban Vicente  
*Untitled Painting, Summer, 1953*  
oil on cardboard  
14 x 11 inches



Billy Al Bengston  
*Seagull*, 1958  
oil on canvas  
25 ¼ x 27 ⅞ inches



Billy Al Bengston  
*Untitled*, 1956  
ink on paper  
11 x 8 ½ inches



Billy Al Bengston  
*Untitled Plate*, 1956  
ceramic  
10 ¼ (diameter) x 1 ⅝ inches



Billy Al Bengston  
*Horn Pot*, 1956  
ceramic  
21 ¼ x 6 x 5 ½ inches



Henry Takemoto  
*Untitled Plate*  
ceramic  
16 ½ (diameter) x 2 ¾ inches





Henry Takemoto  
*Untitled Plate*  
ceramic  
17 ¼ x 17 x 2 ½ inches



Paul Soldner  
*Untitled Vase*  
ceramic  
13 ¼ x 8 ½ x 6 ½ inches



Ken Price  
*Untitled*, 1957  
ceramic  
16 ¾ x 5 x 4 inches



John Mason  
*Untitled*, 1958  
ceramic  
7 ¼ x 10 ¼ x 1 ¼ inches



John Mason  
*Untitled*, 1958  
ceramic  
14 ½ x 18 x 3 ½ inches



John Mason  
*Untitled Vase*  
ceramic  
10 x 6 ¼ x 4 ½ inches



John Mason  
*Untitled Bowl*  
ceramic  
5 ¼ x 8 x 7 inches



Peter Voukos  
*Untitled Plate*, mid-1950s  
ceramic  
10 1/8 (diameter) x 1 1/4 inches





Peter Voulkos  
*Untitled Plate*, mid-1950s  
ceramic  
10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11 x 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Peter Voulkos  
*Untitled Tea Bowl*, 1956  
ceramic  
5 x 5 ½ x 5 ½ inches



Peter Voukos  
Vase, c. 1958  
ceramic  
12  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 7 x 6  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches



Peter Voulkos  
Vase, 1959 - (view 1)  
ceramic  
20 x 7 x 7 inches



Peter Voulkos  
Vase, 1959 - (view 2)  
ceramic  
20 x 7 x 7 inches



Peter Voulkos  
Vase, 1955-1956 - (view 1)  
ceramic  
16 ½ x 9 ½ x 9 ½ inches



Peter Voulkos  
Vase, 1955-1956 - (view 2)  
ceramic  
16 ½ x 9 ½ x 9 ½ inches







Peggy, Pier, and Peter Voulkos  
Los Angeles, circa 1956  
Photo by Kelly Wong