



## Doucet-Saito: Momentum in clay

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There are many potters, but very few whose work has such seductive power as that of the Doucet-Saitos.

Louise Doucet was born in Montreal in 1938, graduated from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, School of Art and Design, where she specialized in sculpture, and almost immediately won prizes in design in Quebec and throughout Canada. Satoshi Saito was born in Tokyo in 1938 and came to McGill University in 1961 to do graduate work in economics. However, after their marriage, and with Louise receiving a grant from the Canada Council, they went to Japan to study for two years under such noted

potters as Shoji Hamada and Tatsuzo Shimaoka.

On their return to Canada they left Montreal for a farm overlooking the village of Ways Mills in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. And Satoshi abandoned economics to become a specialist in clays, glazes, firing, and the artistic apologist of the Doucet-Saito enterprise. Despite meagre resources, that enterprise has grown quietly and steadily over the past ten years to produce some striking work, which, if it hasn't earned them much money, has earned them major exhibitions in Paris and Tokyo (1976), and Nagoya, Japan (1978).

Perhaps my first real glimpse into the art of the Doucet-Saitos came one day when I brought home two of their pitchers – my wife Monique was planning a party and wanted them for the wine. Chosen from

several with a plain gray glaze and a few streaks of blue or brown ringing the neck and base, they were clearly serviceable and handsome. But when I placed them on the table beside another pitcher, it became suddenly shambling and messy. Though it poured very well, it was a distinct irritation in the room. By contrast, the Doucet-Saito pitchers were clear, sensuous, and serenely assured; by themselves they lent their vitality and order to the whole space.

It was a concrete illustration of Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," which begins:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

It was also a confirmation of several lines of

DOUCET-SAITO  
*Ceramic Relief*, 1979  
11<sup>3/4</sup>" x 8<sup>3/4</sup>"  
Photo: J-F Ozoux

my own written the year before:

I suppose only the potters  
Louise and Satoshi  
would have wholly expected it

two small cups and a teapot  
create their own gravitational field

Actually it must be a cliché of modern art that any composition of elements may create its own gravitational field. What is surprising is how seldom true it is in practice. How often can one walk through a gallery of contemporary art as through a room full of remnants, scaffoldings on some abandoned site, to be struck by a sense of weightlessness. What is surprising is that the gravity, density, contained energy one may miss in a ten-foot canvas, yards of structural steel, may be found in a slab pot by the Doucet-Saitos. And this would seem to have something to do with the way they live and conceive their work, with the way they root themselves in time. Theirs is a spatial art. Yet, they imply, if space and objects in space are to have substance, they must bear the trace of their evolution in time.

Thus, perhaps, Satoshi's excitement over some clay from James Bay that can be dated in millions of years. Thus his elitist humility when he says that a cup should not be made out of a desire to create a striking work of art but out of a sense of the materials and its place in the domestic economy, and that there, through intimate acquaintance, it will reveal whether or not it has its own warmth, severity, character, or what Satoshi calls

*yawarakasa* – whether, that is, it can take its place unobtrusively in the Chinese collection of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Thus Louise's dislike of mere "gymnastics" and her emphasis on continuity: not only of the line from base to tip of a vase, but from experience to work, from one stage to the next, so that it grows like their three children, not from theory but from a gradual growth in knowledge and skill and an evolving sense of the rhythms, tensions, balances in the life around them.

"We are not fashionable," says Louise. And it is evident they are deeply aware of the classic traditions within which they work. Yet, says Satoshi, we want our work to be contemporary, to reflect in its forms and rhythms something of our own time.

That desire has probably been achieved most dramatically in a variety of slab pots. Over the years these have grown from the size of an average vase to forms of two to nearly three feet. Compact with energy, they can be both powerful and extremely subtle.

In one series the slabs bulge towards the round, tending towards the form of a torso, some with great turtle-neck tops. Often heavily glazed and with delicate bands of color wrapping them round, it is as if some gossamer image of old bathing suits, or the mummy-wrappings of a Henry Moore, turned glowing pastel, hovered just under the skin. One is struck by their solid amplitude and by their delicate transparency, by their sensuous surface and molding and by their cool poise. One wants to run one's hands over them, perhaps to wrap one's arms around them.

Another series is more angled. The cube is skewed, as when one partly squashes a box, then tapered to become slightly pyramidal, but with the corners at the base and top rounded, the whole setting up a complex of tensions. These too may be heavily glazed and reveal unexpected lines and surfaces in different lights. With their slight vertical and horizontal asymmetries, they initiate and contain a vibrant dance.

A recent work with a richly pebbled, almost pearly glaze combines something of the two series. Full and solid as any of the more rounded forms, it is yet inescapably made of slabs, buckled, however, now towards the concave, now towards the convex, as if heavy carbunclad steel plates had been warped and tied, so that the whole sits perfectly composed amid its stresses.

Yet another, more distinctly cone-shaped, appears to spring upwards and to one side, so that one's first impression is that it should become unbalanced and fall. Yet it then appears to be so firmly seated one can almost see the line of thrust continuing into the ground, so that it rests within its own momentum.

In Calgary, as a jury member at the 1976 Canadian National Ceramics Exhibition, Louise remarked that she was disappointed not to find something of the strength of Canadian space – from the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to the Rockies – in the work of Canadian ceramists. Instead she had found a basic insecurity that stemmed from looking

elsewhere, to the U.S. or Japan, for inspiration. Though the Doucet-Saitos draw both from Japan and Canada, their work manifests precisely the kind of strength Louise was looking for, which is not a matter of nationality but of known space. The dynamics, the particular interplay of forces one perceives in their work, suggests an awareness that is both technological and geological, that is both ancient and modern. On occasion, a work may appear to fuse echoes of a slightly wedge-shaped stone battlement of mediaeval Japan and of the sheared Precambrian hills.

From certain angles the latest slab pots, made from a clay Satoshi uncovered in Nova Scotia, appear to be sliced from solid stone. Unlike many others, these are so thinly glazed that over much of the surface the glaze serves only to bring out a ruddy blush in the otherwise pale clay. While the technique is delicate, the effect may be raw, monolithic. And where the surface is scratched it may take on the air of scoured glacial rock.

Whatever Louise and Satoshi do – and in the last couple of years they have undertaken a large wall mural in glazed tile, individual tiles with highly organic designs in relief, some four-footed squarish boxes or urns, deeply carved and heavily glazed – their work continues to generate a strong presence, to be informed by a profound plastic intuition and by an assiduous concern for materials and technique.

Not just another tempest in the classic teapot, the work of the Doucet-Saitos is a pottery of great refinement, originality, and power. And, unlike many expressions of power, it is a continuous delight.



DOUCET -SAITO  
Ceramic, 1979  
10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 7" x 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"  
Photo: J-F Ozoux



DOUCET -SAITO  
Ceramic, 1979  
16" x 10" x 7"  
Coll: Mr. and Mrs. Jean Barriere  
Photo: J-F Ozoux