

## In Her Studio

A student once asked Betty if "her art was about her life?" After a moment Betty replied, "my art is my life," and I could add that it is a life which has been lived much in her studio.

For many artists the studio is a sanctuary carefully secluded from daily living. This is not possible working as Betty does with clay. Processes of drying, stiffening to the perfect condition for shaping parts and assembling them are continuously watched for the work to be done at the right moment and in the proper sequence. The firing of kilns proceeds round the clock and may require attention in the midst of meals, late night outdoors in Colorado blizzards, or under the glare of the mid-day Mediterranean sun. Accordingly, Betty's studio has always been within yards of her home and she in continuous motion in and out of both. In the 1950s a child's playpen was in a corner of the studio and she made glazes in the kitchen. Her studio has always been open to a stream of family, friends, students and colleagues. At times of routine work such as wedging clay or preparing colors, an hour of gossip with a friend is welcome. At other times less so, but Betty is remarkably tolerant of interruption thanks to gifts of courtesy and concentration. The telephone rings often and is seldom unanswered.

Moving between studios in New York, Italy and for many prior years also in Colorado has given an air of the temporary to her work spaces. There are chairs that seem to have arrived on their own, propped up tables, shelves casually installed, trailing extension cords, brooms without bristles, boxes without contents, and everywhere pictures tacked or taped from yesteryear and before fading under a thin haze of clay dust. The few essentials are clearly defined. An identical Soldner potter's wheel is in

each studio. A large bundle of brushes travels with her along with a portfolio of paper templates (her repertory of shapes), plus whatever picture books of Japanese fabrics, baroque architecture, or Roman painting feed her imagination at the time. A collection of compact discs focused on opera and chamber music spiced up with the latest hits from Mexico, an engagement calendar, and her international telephone directory complete the artist's impedimenta.

Speed, strength, adroitness, and precision characterize her working with clay. Thrown, cut and constructed pieces grow and in a fortnight the studio is filled with dark, mute forms in various stages of development, some draped in plastic to stay moist, others left uncovered to dry. In New York a large black cat dozes in the center of a cluttered table. The work is done very directly, occasionally a sketch or paper model of a part helps clarify an idea. There are occasional revisions. The most careful judgments may be made by holding one part in various conjunctions with another to see which will work the best.

Painting on the pieces is executed with careful deliberation. Since each stroke is final and the dozens of colors she uses only appear in their true character after being fired, tremendous concentration is required to think through and achieve what she has in mind. Brush in hand, time is suspended as she considers the next move, then makes it quickly. The casual visitor is confused as she explains how a certain buff color will be violet, a bright pink will be dark blue.

Kilns are carefully fired with a log book recording each one. It is a day of mingled hope and anxiety; the artist is moody. Still very hot, the kiln is opened after 20 hours of cooling. Betty's judgments of the new pieces are quick and remorseless, usually

tinged with a mixture of jubilation and disappointment. Much is committed to each firing, the stakes are high, it is never a routine occurrence. There is a prompt review and study of the pieces. Some may need additional glazing and firing, others require some reconsideration of how elements are configured. The best are celebrated and welcomed.

After morning coffee she moves, a sort of slow lateral sliding, toward the studio life, plucked at on one side by cares, business calls, required courtesies and domestic dramas, encouraged on the other by small pleasures, the cat, bouquets in vases, the view from the window in New York; or by her flower garden and the smell of morning in Italy. Once in the studio it may be all seamless flowing or be punctuated by eddies, cataracts, maelstroms or catastrophes. No day is predictable in this life never wholly in the world or out of it.

On warm sunny days in Italy she works out of doors on an ample covered terrace giving a splendid panorama of hill after hill across Tuscany. At the worst she is tormented by the wind blowing away drawings, knocking over vases. At the best she seems transfixed by and drawn into the golden afternoon haze, the endless well of beauty that she craves.

It has been no small privilege to have been witness to nearly every day of Betty's life in the studio as an artist. What has struck me most in it is the unflinching comprehension and intelligence of her vision and the unvarying purity of her heart.

George Woodman