

The Museum of Arts and Design's ceramics collection inspires a self-described pottery nerd.



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By Bob Morris

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At the Museum of Arts and Design at 2 Columbus Circle in New York in early June, Jonathan Adler, the potter and founder of the home furnishings company that bears his name, looked up at a blue and white ceramic apothecary jar he had designed in 2018. It had wavering stripes and the letters LSD on it. “It’s a nod to my love of Delft pottery and reimagined as if the potter was on an acid trip,” Adler said, adding that he does not partake.

Around him, an opening night party for the show he had assembled from the museum’s extensive ceramics collection and his own work raged and raved. Adler, 58, moved among family, friends and vitrines spotlighting notable ceramic art works that had inspired him since he was a pottery-obsessed “nerd” growing up in New Jersey. He often took the train to the institution then known as the American Craft Museum and located on East 53rd Street.

Many of the 300 or so objects on display — divided into categories including animals, erotica, optimism, metallica and more — offered a provocative lesson about humor and irreverence in the history of ceramics. In a section about Americana, Adler’s grenade vases and rocket decanters (inspired by euphemisms for inebriated like “bombed,” “blasted” and “tanked”) sat in dialogue with Howard Kotler’s American Supperware from the late 60s. Kotler’s plates depict flags and the White House in states of collapse. “His work spanned so many different ideas and not only mixed materials but mixed art with commerce,” Adler said.



Adler's "Americalia" collection, at the museum. OK McCausland for The New York Times

A section devoted to erotica took in Adler's porcelain breast-patterned vases and his suggestive banana versions, playing off Marvin Lipofsky's glass lips from 1967. In a section concentrating on animals, Adler admired a 1994 cast bronze "Monkey Chair" with primate faces and bodies as arms, and swirling tails as the back. "Judy Kensley McKie finds ways to toy with animal forms in an idiosyncratic and fantastic style," he said of the Boston-based sculptural furniture maker who is now in her 80s.

As he breezed past works from the museum's collection, he admired them like old friends. "Ruth Duckworth's work removes the noise of decoration to expose pure form," he said of her white cups backed with square blades.



“Luciana Vase” from Adler’s “Erotica” collection, in “The Mad MAD World of Jonathan Adler.” OK McCausland for The New York Times



“Cabana Obelisk” from Adler’s “Americalia” collection. OK McCausland for The New York Times

The section inspired by the Funk Ceramics movement that came out of San Francisco in the late 1960s (it included Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, Peter Voulkos and others) consisted almost entirely of jokes and gags. Adler’s needlepoints of “Shrooms,” his shoe-sized acrylic pills and a gilded ceramic lollipop holder vied for laughs with Arneson’s earthenware “Self-Portrait of the Artist Losing His Marbles” (1965) and David Gilhooly’s “Bread Frog as a Coffee Break” (1981), a kind of miniature glazed earthenware totem pole.

“Funk is one of my favorite genres because it was subversive and weird and crazy and silly,” Adler had said earlier in a slide presentation about the show. “One of the things funk people loved was making puns, and it kind of shows how on some level

language can stimulate creativity and how there's a dialogue between language and objects."



A selection of works from Adler's "Funkiana" collection, including "Naïvete Creamer-Black, Naïvete Mug-Black, Naïvete Mug-Black, Naïvete Sugar Bowl, Naïvete Teapot-Black." OK McCausland for The New York Times

In fact, one of the first studios where he worked throwing pots, in Hell's Kitchen, was called Mud, Sweat & Tears. His stoneware "Macho Macho Mugs" made with faces of the Village People, is here for laughs, too, among walls that could almost be mistaken for a shop display, but with curatorial panels that analyze and comment. And yes, several Adler pieces are for sale in the museum shop — nothing new in a post-Keith Haring world of crossed lines of art, design and commerce in museums.

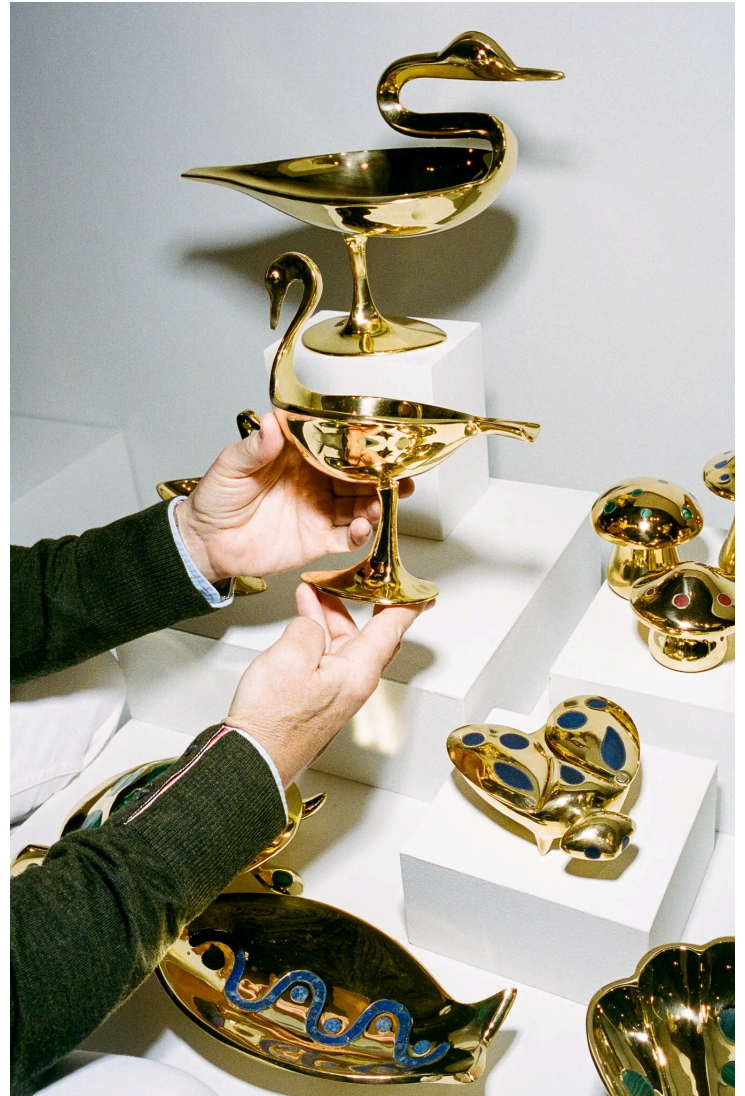
"If Kehinde Wiley or Takashi Murakami has a show, they have merchandise for sale in the shops, and a show also promotes sales in their galleries," said Ezra Shales, a professor of craft and design history at the Massachusetts College of Art

and Design, who teaches Adler to his students as an example of virtuosity in the way he makes humor look beautiful. “Jonathan’s work has historic references but without the weight,” Shales explained.

But joking aside, Adler’s affection for the often overlooked medium runs deep.



Works from Adler’s “Authentica” collection. OK McCausland for The New York Times



The “Brass Bird Bowl-Medium” from Adler’s “Animalia” collection, placed in the “Metallica” section. OK McCausland for The New York Times

“He’s extremely knowledgeable about the history of ceramics, and has a lot to say about inspiration and technique,” said Elissa Auther, the chief curator of the Museum of Arts and Design. She acknowledged that showing the work of a living designer has a commercial crossover but explained that she wanted to bring

someone in to interpret the museum's collection alongside her own curatorial observations. Adler, she pointed out, knew how he wanted to display everything, and gave explicit directions to Simon Doonan, his husband and the creative director behind the cheeky window displays of the former Barneys New York.

One corner of the show is a recreation of Adler's studio, with inspirational objects on shelves and clippings and quotes on the walls. "Make Pots Not War," one reads. Adler's company, which was acquired this year by Consortium Brand Partners with plans to expand beyond his 10 locations in the United States and London, has annual sales of \$150 million. Not bad for a Brown University undergraduate who took pottery classes down the hill at the Rhode Island School of Design (known as RISD) in the late 1980s and made, among other things, a Chanel teapot.

"But when I applied for their M.F.A. program in ceramics, they rejected me," he said.



Adler, in "Recreation of Jonathan Adler's Studio" at the Museum of Arts and Design. OK McCausland for The New York Times

By 1992 the Museum of Arts and Design (operating then as the American Craft Museum) was selling one of his first striped ceramic vases, and in 1998, he opened his first store in SoHo. His career from there spun out (pun intended) to include the interior design of the Parker Palm Springs Hotel, serving as a judge on Bravo's "Top Design" and creating a life-size dream house in Malibu for Barbie's 50th anniversary. But even with all that, his potter's soul remains. He put it simply: "I'm a grown man who gets to play with mud all day."

A couple of days after the opening, Adler was in his studio on West Broadway in SoHo, which is behind a window in the back of his kaleidoscopic store full of chandeliers, sofas, pillows, and myriad midcentury-inflected objects that he has referred to as his "prescription for antidepressive living."

Two of his associates were muddy from sculpting the Foo Dog vases that Adler, who still tries out new ideas as maquettes in clay, had imagined. On the shelves all kinds of past design ideas thrown on a wheel and often fired in the kiln on site — ashtrays, vases, busts and more — had accumulated like so many spurned lovers. "So many things I make fail," Adler sighed. "The truth is that every idea I have is ridiculous and to try to make anything when there are so many things on the planet already is preposterous, I know that, but to do what I do you have to have a bubbling sense of possibility."

He looked over a set of ashtrays he named for decidedly unglamorous towns.

"They're going to bomb," he said. "But I challenge myself to not be too rational."

The Mad, MAD World of Jonathan Adler

Through April 16, 2026, Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle, New York, madmuseum.org.

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