

ISSUE
47

Gray

architecture
interiors
design
culture



DESIGN RENEGADES

JENNIFER BONNER
HACKS THE
ARCHITECTURAL
CANON

LATIN AMERICA'S
3D-PRINTED
NEIGHBORHOOD

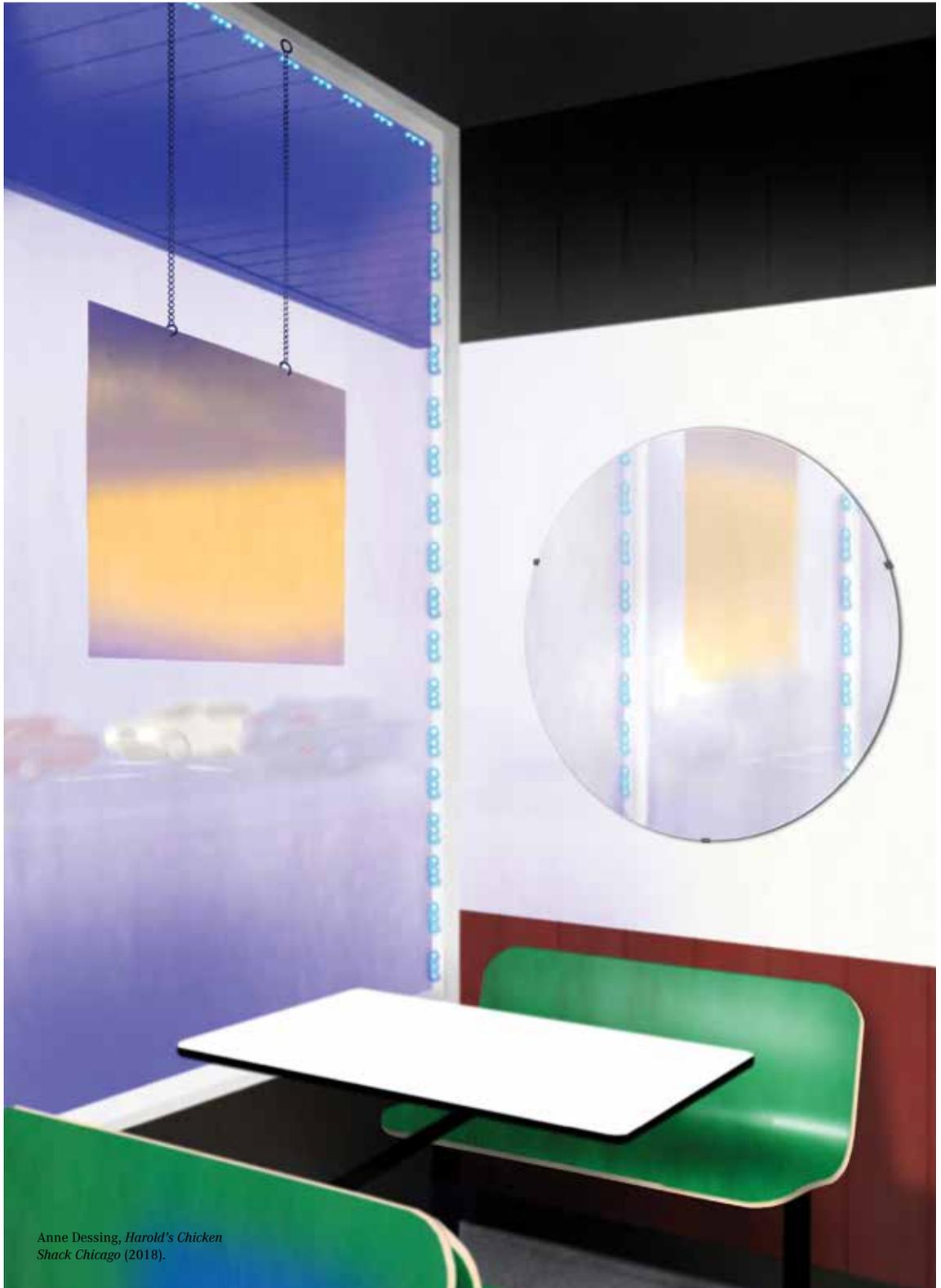
THE GOLDEN AGE
OF DESIGN CRITICISM

A GAME-CHANGING
GALLERIST

+ MORE

FIELDWORK

The people, places, and objects in our orbit.



Anne Dessing, *Harold's Chicken Shack Chicago* (2018).

COURTESY THE ARTIST



WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Long before the wheel-to-table movement was a thing, Japanese ceramist Akiko Graham was making custom pottery for Michelin-starred restaurants. Three decades onward, she shows no signs of slowing down.

Interview by TIFFANY JOW
Photographs by AMANDA RINGSTAD

OPPOSITE: Ceramist Akiko Graham.
THIS PAGE: A look into Graham's studio.



Akiko Graham has been making pottery for 30 years. Her work has been commissioned by Coi, a two-Michelin Star restaurant in San Francisco; Manresa, a three-Michelin Star eatery in Los Gatos, California; and dozens of premier chefs on the West Coast and beyond.

You learned how to make pottery in 1989, when you were a full-time mother of three, by attending community night classes at a Seattle high school. What prompted you to take it up?

I was a housewife, and I wanted to do something by myself, without kids. [Laughs.] Somebody brought a picture of a pottery teapot and cups to my [ex-husband]. And I thought, "Oh, maybe this is something I could do." So I took a class, and bought a wheel for the house so I could do it every day. I'd put my kids

to bed, nap with them for a few hours, then wake up around midnight and throw pottery in the kitchen until 4 a.m. That's how I started.

You could have done other things besides pottery, though. What is it about the medium that attracted you to it?

I am not good at things like sewing. If you cut and make a mistake, that's it. With pottery, you just add water. »



When did you start selling the work you were making?

The teacher of the class [I was taking] didn't force us to do anything specific; we could do whatever we wanted. One day he said to me, "What are you going to do with all your pottery? You should go to the Sunday Market [in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle]." That was 1991. Twice a month I went to sell my pottery. I did not sell much. Pottery was not popular then. People would ask things like, "What is this?" [*Points to a nearby sake cup.*] I make small things like this. It's hard to make big ones. And we use sake cups in Japan. I make square plates. "What are those?" They did not know. At the time, there were not many Asian restaurants here, so they didn't understand pottery tableware.

They didn't understand that pottery could be used for Japanese food?

Or any food. They didn't understand food with pottery. In Japan, we don't have box sets of dishware like they do in department stores here. Everybody has different rice bowls and [dishes]. It was hard for them to understand, but for me, it's very simple.

After becoming a vendor at the market, you began taking your pottery to area restaurants to sell. Your first client was the now-closed Arita, a Japanese restaurant in north-central Seattle. Is that when you realized restaurants were a market for your work?

No, I didn't think that way. It's not my thing to take pottery and make sales. Now I know how, because I've done it. Back then it was scary to meet the chefs or owners.

Why?

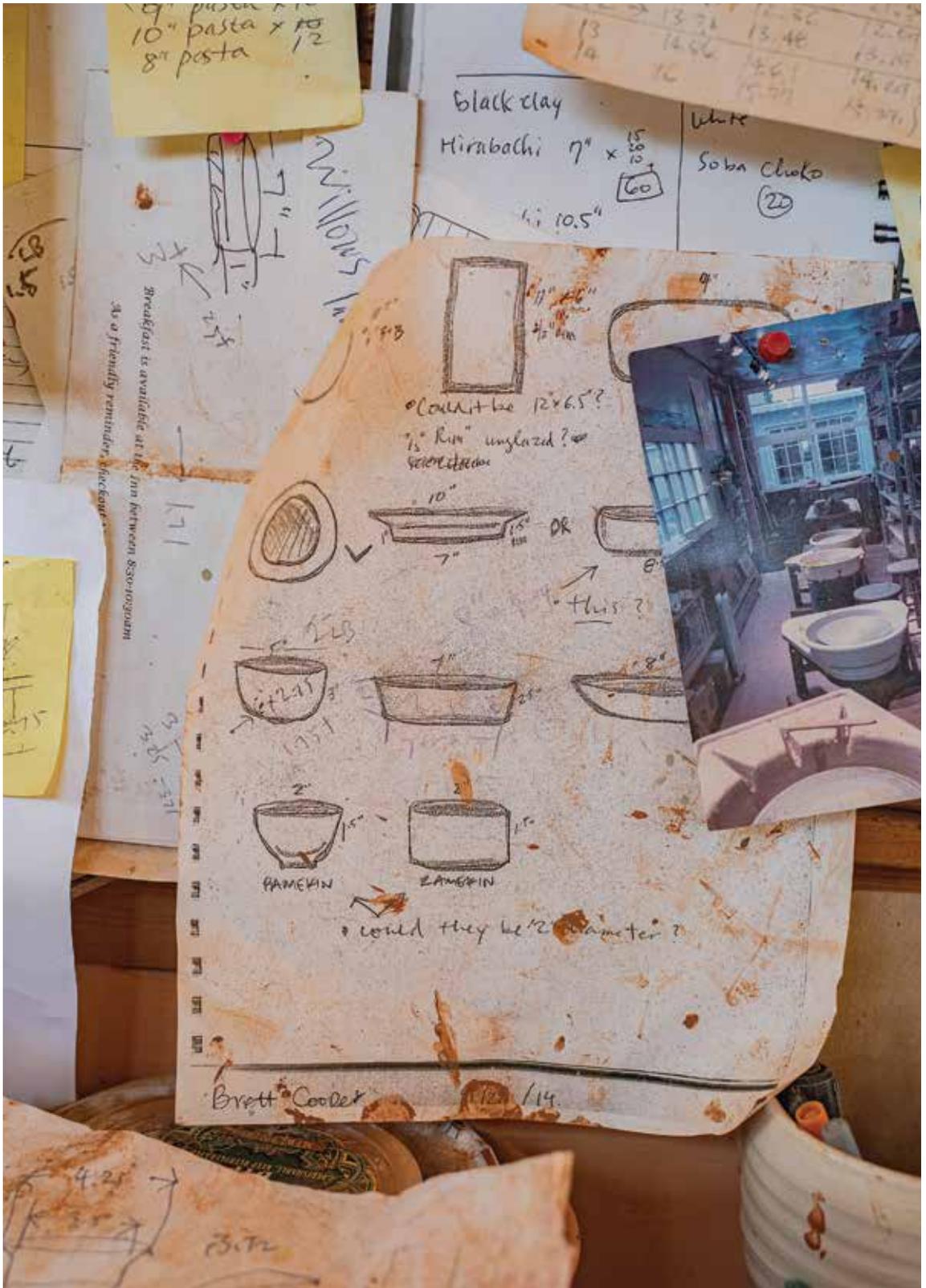
Because they could say, "No, I don't want to see your pottery." That's rejection, which I don't like. I had a [brick-and-mortar] store in Fremont for two years, 1995 to 1997. One day, [the James Beard Award-winning chef] Holly Smith, who's now at Cafe Juanita and was working at Tom Douglas's Dahlia Lounge at the time, came in and asked if I did custom pieces for restaurants. I said yes, and she left. I didn't know who she was. Later, after I closed my shop, I took my pottery to Dahlia Lounge, and they told me that Tom had come to my shop, but it was gone! Holly and Jonathan Sundstrom were the main people there. They looked

at my pottery and placed orders. I met a lot of chefs through that restaurant.

I read you later drove with your pottery to San Francisco to try to get chefs to buy it. Is that true?

I had a friend in Seattle who used to be a chef in San Francisco. He said I should go there and told me how to do it: go between lunch and dinner. I looked at a 2002 issue of *Wine Spectator* that had an article about San Francisco restaurants in it. [*Disappears into another room and returns with the magazine, flipping it open to a feature on Daniel Patterson.*] I met Daniel Patterson, Wolfgang Puck, and Ron Siegel—he was the first American chef who won *Iron Chef*. He is well respected by all chefs. [*Points at magazine.*] This is the restaurant issue. I went to Elizabeth Daniel, Daniel Patterson's restaurant. [*Flips to article about Masa's*] I went to Masa's, [*flips to article about Rubicon*] I went to Rubicon. »

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: A close-up of one of Graham's creations. Graham's 1978 Mercedes, which she used to drive to San Francisco.
 THIS PAGE: Notes and inspiration on a wall in the studio.





You just walked into all these important restaurants and said, “Hi, want to buy my pottery?”

I took my suitcases, a small one and a big one, and I would go in and say, “My name is Akiko and I make pottery in Seattle. Could I speak to the chef?” If the chef is interested, he would come out. Or they would say the chef was not there. Meaning he was there and wasn’t interested!

That was in 2002, a time when, for the most part, fine dining meant white tablecloths and white china. There

weren’t a lot of restaurants using handmade dishes like they do now.

My chef friend from San Francisco said chefs see the [white] plates as a canvas. Most of them didn’t understand pottery. They’d ask questions like, “Oh, do they break?” I said they did. Some places I had to go back to a few times. One restaurant I went back to three times.

How would you convince them to use your pottery?

I didn’t really convince anybody. [I approached] chefs I thought were

interested in using pottery. I knew because I checked their restaurants to see what their food was, what their interior was. Like Ron Siegel; I knew he won *Iron Chef* and was interested in Japanese [cuisine].

Do you still find clients this way today?

No. Now I don’t have to go anywhere. They come to me.

You make everything out of stoneware clay in the studio behind your home.

How long does it take to make a bowl?



OPPOSITE: Fired plates and bowls in the studio. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Graham at work on the wheel. The fateful issue of *Wine Spectator*. A detail of the ceramist's tools.

It depends. To make just one on the wheel takes about three minutes. Bigger takes longer, maybe 10 to 15 minutes. Sometimes I mess up. Then I trim, so you have to dry; then when it's not completely dry, trim again. Then I put it in the kiln, fire it, add glaze, and fire again. Sometimes I make plates using molds I made; I learned how to do that from a book. That way I can rest my arms.

Your pottery is a business, but it's also a work of art. How do you think it affects people?

I think they should just use my pottery. Use it to eat off.

Do you think it's better than a box set?
I think so.

Why?
Because it has soul. It has something in it. And dishes are something you use every day.

Do you have any advice for people interested in taking up pottery?
Take any class, from anyone. You should

like your teacher, but you are not going to make the same pottery as your teacher. When I [taught] students, we all used the same wheel, the same glaze, the same kiln. I knew whose pottery was whose, because everybody's different. It comes out, like, this is me. So don't copy [anyone]. A class will teach you how to make pottery, and then you will learn yourself. ✱