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Pots of irony

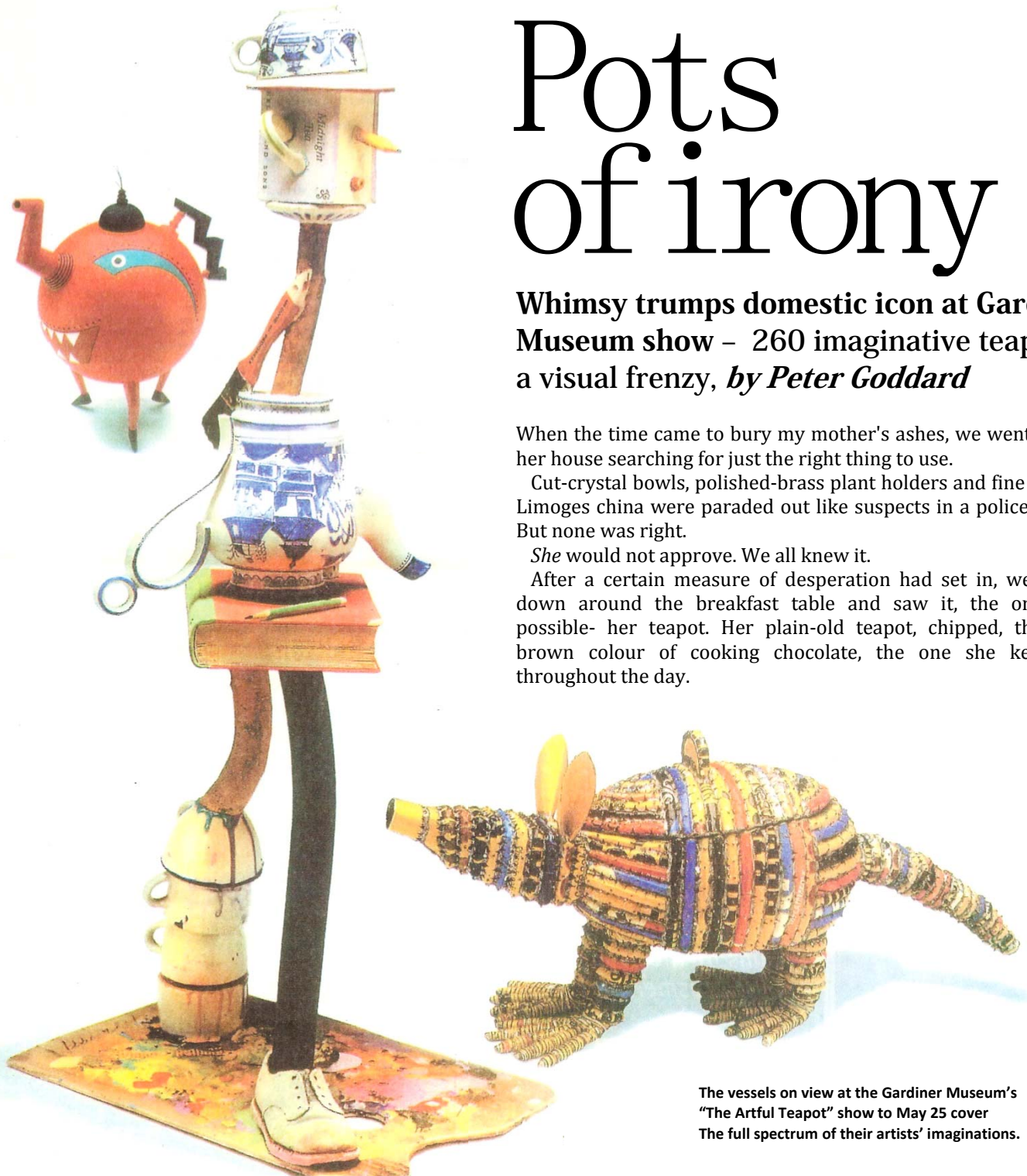
Whimsy trumps domestic icon at Gardiner Museum show – 260 imaginative teapots a visual frenzy, *by Peter Goddard*

When the time came to bury my mother's ashes, we went through her house searching for just the right thing to use.

Cut-crystal bowls, polished-brass plant holders and fine pieces of Limoges china were paraded out like suspects in a police line-up. But none was right.

She would not approve. We all knew it.

After a certain measure of desperation had set in, we flopped down around the breakfast table and saw it, the only thing possible—her teapot. Her plain-old teapot, chipped, the black-brown colour of cooking chocolate, the one she kept filled throughout the day.



The vessels on view at the Gardiner Museum's "The Artful Teapot" show to May 25 cover The full spectrum of their artists' imaginations.



JEFF RAYNER/SPLASH NEWS PHOTO

California collectors Sonny and Gloria Kamm are the force behind an exhibit of over 260 teapots by some of the biggest names in contemporary art.

Crafts big in Toronto lately

David Hockney understands this thing about teapots, how they occupy a space that goes well beyond their size or shape- a space inside the teapot maker, too.

His pen-and-ink drawing, *Untitled (Henry Geldzahler's Teapot)* is by far the homiest little teapot among the 260 or so pieces in "The Artful Teapot" show at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art.

Geldzahler was a heavy-hitter in the New York art scene, the consummate insider. So Hockney's response to the Geldzahler teapot- made by French potter Jean Carries- gives it a powerful, talismanic vibe. The teapot hovers silently in pale space, like an alien craft fuelled by orange pekoe.

No one better knows the seductive powers of the teapot than Sonny and Gloria Kamm.

Their collection of some 6,000 teapots- the basis of the Gardiner show- started off innocently enough in 1985 when they used the

few teapots they had to fill up some empty shelf space in their new home.

Sonny was hooked. Since then, Gloria has tried to crack down on his collecting ways.

"For me these days, cheating on my wife is acquiring things she doesn't know about," he admits on the phone from their Encino, Calif. home.

But teapots are like that. They get up close and personal very quickly. They're signifying objects that demand particularly close attention.

I've never met a coffee maker about which that claim could be made, and toasters only get attention when they flick burnt crusts your way.

But when my mother's teapot was piping hot, we all knew to watch out. Something was brewing in her mind, too.

Our lives swirled constantly around our awareness of that teapot.

This was Walt Disney's take on teapots as well.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, a Disney teapot would assert itself in wonderfully strange ways, like flipping its lid in *Alice In Wonderland* or morphing into Mrs Potts, a role ready-made for Angela Lansbury in *Beauty And The Beast*. Like the piano, the teapot is also a social convener, a notion Toronto artist Linda Duvall explores in her video installation, "Tea And Gossip," at the Red Head Gallery starting next Thursday.

There are those, I know, who see the teapot as the very symbol of domestic peace, the provider and focus of the afternoon tea when the world seems to stop. And "The Artful Teapot" has its Zen-like moments. Some objects- the best is Ah Leon's stoneware *Hanging Heart Teapot* (1991), where the handle sprouts up and around the pot itself like a sinuous vine- are in themselves so calm that you're reminded "there are few hours in life more agreeable" than the ritual of afternoon tea, as Henry James said.

But "The Artful Teapot" is more in the Disney rather than Henry Jamesian mode of teapot awareness. With pots from a range of kick-butt artists from Keith Haring to Roy Lichtenstein to Cindy Sherman, the show gets the eyes working and the imagination spinning.

So it's a vodka martini not a cuppa Twinings, the exhibit's sponsor, that seems to be a more appropriate response to Gregory Roberts's *Yellow Teapot No. One*, a cute rotund figure blown up to Jabba the Hutt proportions on the Gardiner room as a beacon created by marketer Scott Thornley to attract the teapot curious.

But some context is needed here.

This has been crafts-with-attitude week in Toronto as the 15th Annual International Creators series of crafts demos and workshops wrapped up Tuesday at Harbourfront.

"Irony" or the "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs" was the theme for Harbourfront's crafts stars, although I think organizers were pushing it with the session called "Why we like Iranian films: Notes on irony."

The message here was basic: Listen up; crafts aren't just about tree-hugging vegans. Crafts can be crafty. New materials, techniques, technologies and processes allow crafts-makers to go pretty much where they want to go.

One of the big draws at Harbourfront, master glass-maker Richard Marquis, also has work showing at "The Artful Teapot." Along with *Retro Stuff: Stars And Stripes* (1997) and *Lumpyware Teapot* (1998) there's Marquis's wonderful *Teapot Sample Box #3* (1993) consisting of 12 tiny blown-glass teapots arranged in four neat rows like bonbons in a plate-glass box. The work manages the impossible, to be bubbly buoyant and fragile at once.

Something of a '60s rebel, Marquis- also showing currently at the Sandra Ainsley Gallery- wanted to do a teapot "because it doesn't have a tradition in glass," he told me over the weekend. "Most teapots are made from ceramics. But there's the teapot shape. It has a body, and lid and a handle. You can play with those elements."

He's not the only one playing around in "The

Pots of irony - *continued*

Artful Teapot." You have your naughty teapots like Akio Takamori's *Man On Giant Beast* (1990) creation, where a figure riding the lid of a chicken-shaped pot is sporting an erection that's just about as noticeable as the turgid-looking spout of Jack Earl's *Dog* (1993).

Just when you start to think that it's almost impossible not to be pornographic when it comes to humanizing the teapot form- that darn spout- you come across Rose Misanchuk's *Blue Boy* and *Pinkie*, a pair of male and female ceramic figures the Manitoba-born sculptor made in 1998.

It's hard to figure whether Misanchuk is a realist or an optimist. It's *Pinky* who has the perky spout. *Blue Boy's* spout droops noticeably and- at least when it comes to tea- uselessly.

But teapot naughty is as close the exhibition gets to teapot funny.

Constance Roberts chips in with *Var-I-E-Tea* (1997), a pot, cup and saucer made of wood- very few items in "The Artful Teapot" will ever brew tea- surrounded by stylized tea bags advertising "SereniTea," or "Loyal Tea" or "Penaltea."

The tri-part teapot form can lead to extraordinary sculptural gestures like George Walker's John Heartfield-like *Arms Dealer* (1995), where the tubby belly of the weapons monger is the pot, a Union Jack-waving general is on the handle and the spout is a cannon.

But the very idea of teapot-making seems to strike something soulful in the teapot maker as if they're dealing with a home truth or something.

Sonny Kamm, an estate tax specialist, says he got into collecting "because I love to organize and I love to search." He says he's got a handle on it, though, and is now looking for a medium-sized city to house his collection, along the lines of Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum.

But as he tells me this, he's suddenly distracted by a noise outside. It's nothing he says. He's just turning his mailbox into the shape of a giant teapot, that's all.

About my mother's teapot. It's still around. Such are its powers we couldn't lose it after all. Instead, we used her second-best. She'd understand *that*, too.

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Just the Facts

What: The Artful Teapot

Where: Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, 111 Queen's Park

When: Runs to May 25. Mon., Wed. & Fri.: 10 a.m to 6 p.m.; Tue. & Thu.: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m; Sat. & Sun.: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: \$10 adults/ \$6 seniors & students/ \$24 family of five. Free first Tue. of every month

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