

## The New York Times

### A New Look at a Groundbreaking Ceramics Artist

A gallery show in Manhattan will display works from the 1990s by Betty Woodman, one of the first ceramists "to be treated seriously."



Betty Woodman in her New York City studio in 1996. Mary Ellen Mark/The Mary Ellen Mark Foundation

By **Jane L. Levere**  
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This article is part of our Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how museums, galleries and auction houses are embracing new artists, new concepts and new traditions.

Betty Woodman was known as an artist who pushed boundaries in the art world.

The art dealer David Kordansky, in a recent interview, called her one of the first ceramists "to be treated seriously." He said she forced the point "that ceramics could contend with the greatest high art."

And Ms. Woodman's son, Charles, a video artist who lives in Oakland, Calif, said his mother "pushed the envelope for ceramics, moving it from a craft into fine art."

She "worked hard to be on a parity with men in the art world," he added. "She complained about the greater recognition they received, the prices they got for their work, a struggle that goes on today."

A 2006 exhibition of Ms. Woodman's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City marked the first time the museum had devoted a retrospective to a living female artist, and it also was the first solo show for a living maker of pottery.

Now, Ms. Woodman will have a new show at the David Kordansky Gallery in New York City from Oct. 29 through Dec. 17.

The gallery's "Betty Woodman: Conversations on the Shore, Works from the 1990s" will display 14 works from what it calls "a crucial, career-defining period



Betty Woodman's 1996 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Woodman Family Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

in Ms. Woodman's development as a genre-defying artist."

The gallery represented Ms. Woodman before her death in 2018, displaying shows of her work in 2015 and 2019. It recently began representing Ms. Woodman's estate in collaboration with the Woodman Family Foundation, which stewards the artistic legacies of Ms. Woodman; her husband, George, a painter who died in 2017; and her daughter, Francesca, a photographer who died in 1981.

In a release, the gallery said that "as a snapshot of Woodman's work during the 1990s, this exhibition synthesizes many kinds of conversations, and gives viewers a sense of the ongoing conversation that Woodman had with herself about the ability of ceramic-based art to synthesize modernist and postmodernist ideas about painting and sculpture."

The centerpiece of the show is "Conversations on the Shore," a 1994 installation that has not been exhibited since the late 1990s, when it appeared in a solo 1996 exhibition that was first displayed at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and later traveled to museums in Portugal, France and Belgium.

Other objects from the 1990s on display, such as the "Still Life Vases #15," a diptych of vases, and the wall-based "Balustrade Relief Vase" sculptures, entail "increasingly complex juxtapositions of sculptural form and painterly glazing," the gallery said.



Betty Woodman's "Balustrade Relief Vase #52" (1992). Woodman Family Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via David Kordansky Gallery

Lissa McClure, executive director of the Woodman Family Foundation, which is based in the Woodmans' former home and studio in Manhattan, said the foundation felt strongly that "Conversations on the Shore" should anchor the gallery show. She also said Mr. Kordansky decided to focus the show on works from the 1990s and selected the rest of the art on display, some for sale.

She called "Conversations on the Shore" a seminal piece. It embodied her ambition and inventiveness and foreshadowed her later work.

Ms. Woodman, she added, was a functional potter who made usable items like cups, saucers and bowls, and who "began to push the boundaries of domestic objects" in the 1970s and 1980s.



Betty Woodman in her studio in Antella, Italy, in 1996. Woodman Family Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The artist's legacy, Ms. McClure said, is that "she broke through the confines of her medium. She wanted clay, ceramics, to go further than it had in millennia, to make it acceptable, to hybridize it, to combine ceramics with sculpture and painting."

Ms. Woodman, she said, "epitomizes a woman who would not accept restrictions or take no for an answer."

She predicted that the art in the Kordansky show would provide "throughlines to the later work, a continuum between her earlier work, its origins, and the later work, and also an understanding of the radical steps she took along the way."

"It will be a surprise for people to see pivotal works from the 1990s," she said. "I hope the Stedelijk installation, which hasn't been seen for 25 years, will knock people's socks off. It is a tour de force."