

INTRO
NOT TO BE MISSE

ctive
magazine

A black and white portrait of Beatrice Wood, an elderly woman with short, wavy hair, wearing a light-colored shawl and a dark necklace. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a textured, mottled grey.

BEATRICE
Wood

AT THE SANTA MONICA ART MUSEUM



NOT TO BE MISSED: **BEATRICE WOOD AT SMMoA**

by *Marlena Donohue*

IN THE EARLY 1900s,
THE CERAMIST
BEATRICE WOOD

left San Francisco and went off alone to study fine art and drama at the Julian Academy in Paris. She performed in the Comédie Française at 18, then settled in New York to act and to join the experimental circle around Walter Arensberg (a wealthy collector, writer and poet) and his wife Louise — the earliest American patrons of modernist artists. All this, one imagines, to the horror of Wood's tightly strung and very wealthy family.

By the time she died at age 105 in 1998, Wood's quips were legendary; it was almost universally known that she credited her longevity to good doses of chocolate and very young men.

When I last visited her hilltop home and studio in Ojai, California, not far from the Pacific, Wood was in her 90s; I had been assigned to interview her for a newspaper article on her work. Gliding into the room barefoot in a shimmering lilac sari with a long gray braid over one shoulder, Wood said: "Always, my dear, something pleasurable before something dutiful: come say hello to gorgeous Singh." With those words Wood's decades-long friend and doting assistant (an East Indian man of stunning good looks) appeared, gave a knowing smile and tended to Wood's every need for the duration of our visit and interview.

An exhibit in Santa Monica offers a new assessment of the diverse oeuvre of Beatrice Wood, best known for her shimmering lusterware. Photo by Bill Stengel. Previous page: portrait by Tony Cunha. All artwork images © Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts/Happy Valley Foundation

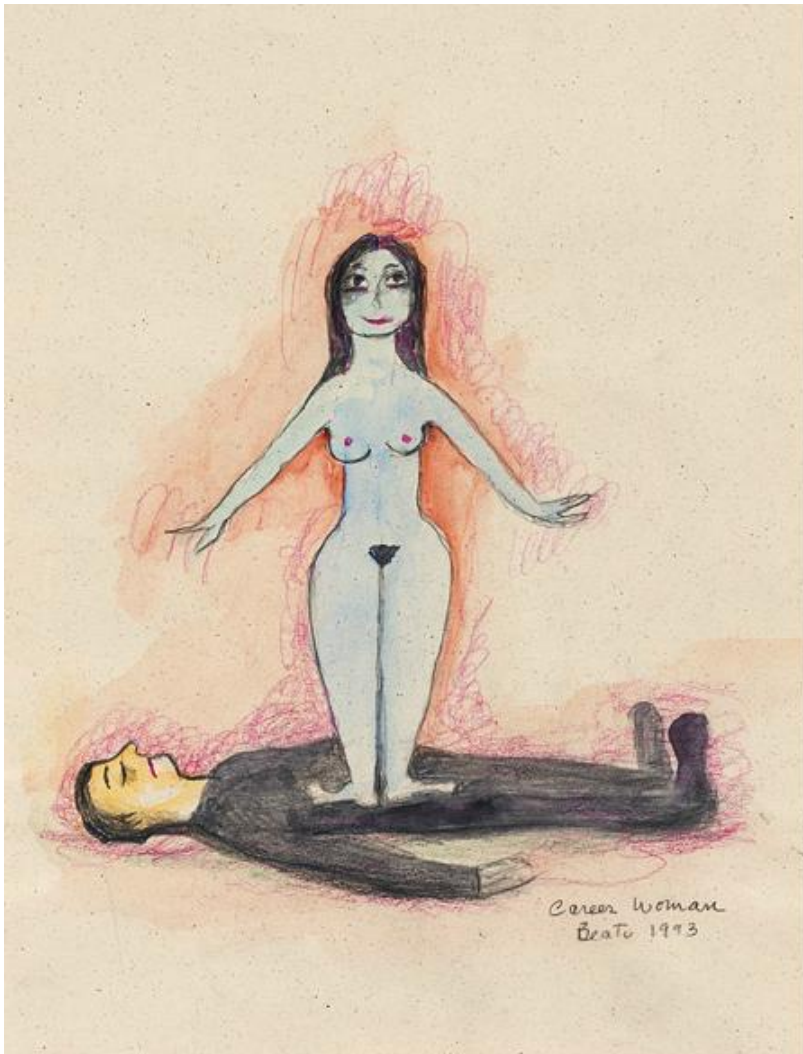


Until fairly recently Wood's popular legacy has included two rather silly myths (impishly encouraged by the artist herself). Myth 1: Beatrice Wood the heiress run wild, who loved to say she "tryst-ed" (Wood's word to me) her way through modern art history. Myth 2: the artist made famous mostly by the famed company she kept.

Nonsense.

If anything Wood was fiercely independent beyond her era's tolerance for this, and she masqueraded as a naughty libertine more as a kind of theater that laid claim to artistic and social independence. She was clever enough to keep up with the likes of Marcel Duchamp — one of the major minds of 20th-century avant-garde art — and to befriend the circle of thinkers that included not just the Arensbergs, but pre-eminent surrealists Francis Picabia and Man Ray.

"Beatrice Wood: Career Woman - Drawings, Paintings, Vessels, and Objects," is on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art through February 25. Photo by Monica Orozco



An intelligent show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, co-organized by Elsa Longhauser, Executive Director of SMMoA, and Lisa Melandri, Deputy Director, brings into focus an artist and cultural catalyst who was hardly the ditsy, come-hither ingénue she offered up for public consumption. Running through February 25 as part of the months-long Getty-funded Pacific Standard Time programming highlighting West Coast culture, “Beatrice Wood: Career Woman” was titled by Melandri precisely to re-frame Wood as a serious working professional. In addition to museum-caliber examples of the stunning lusterware through which Wood entered art history, Melandri chose to display work in all the media this artist used to express her ideas and life creatively — drawing, painting, sculpture, letters.

Whatever persona “Beato” (as her friends called her) cultivated to survive in a man’s world, this show exposes Wood as an incisive wit, more fragile than frivolous. In addition to a master of clay and firing, we encounter a talented draftsman and sculptor, someone with the technical and emotional range able to span poetic classicism and bawdy caricature. In a hysterical turnabout-is-fair-play object called *Career Woman*, 1993, a woman rendered in an intentionally childlike, lyrical style stands naked on the crotch of a supine and fully suited man.

Lisa Melandri spoke with Marlena Donohue about Wood’s life and art.

Career Woman, 1993

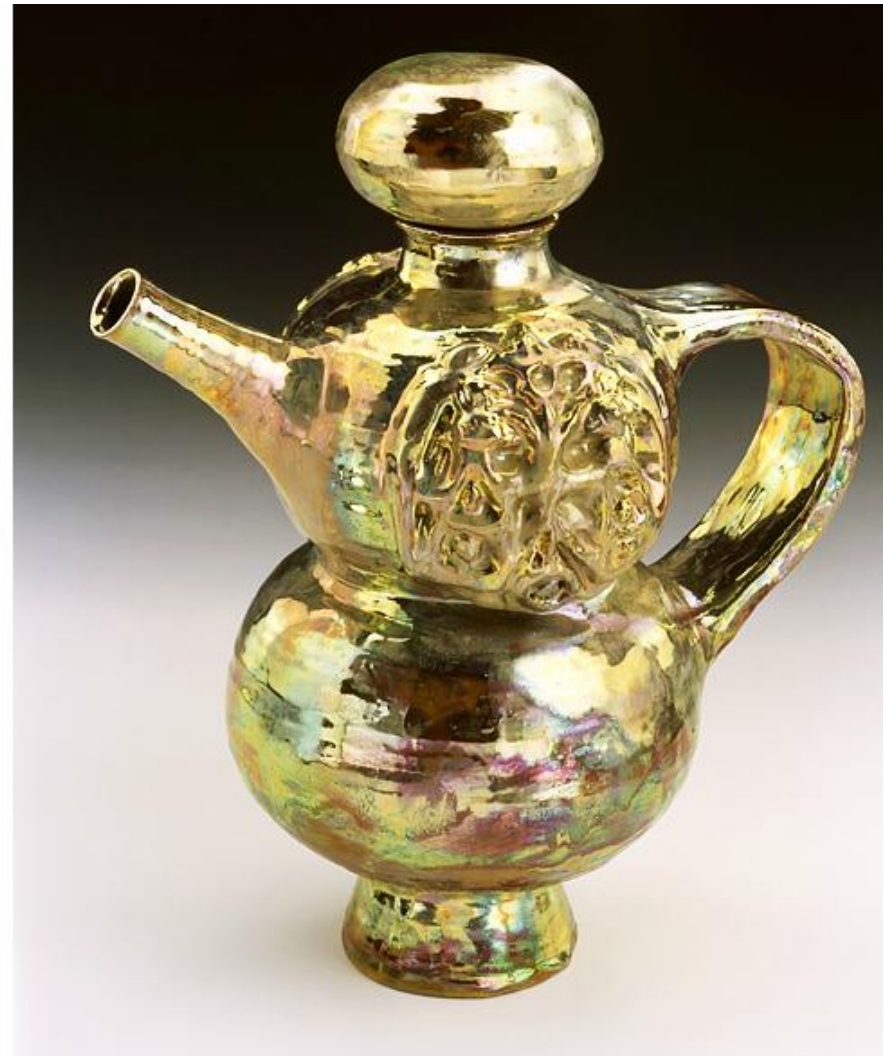
TELL ME ABOUT THE TIMING OF THIS SHOW DURING ALL THE PACIFIC STANDARD TIME PROGRAMMING.

In that context, Wood is a natural. She was born in San Francisco to great wealth and returned to live out her most productive years right here in the LA area. She discovered ceramics in evening classes at Hollywood High.

IT IS INTERESTING THAT THESE WEST COAST HAUNTS ARE WOOD'S POINT OF ORIGIN BECAUSE WE MOST CLOSELY ASSOCIATE HER WITH NEW YORK AND HER FRIENDSHIP WITH MARCEL DUCHAMP.

I'd say that besides her regional association, Beatrice Wood's impact, and the reason I selected her as our focus, comes from her sheer staying power and the circles she moved in.

Wood's gold luster earthenware teapot, 1988. Photo by John White





ONE HEARS THAT WAY OF PLACING HER IN HISTORY A LOT; DO YOU THINK THAT KIND OF UPSTAGES THE SERIOUSNESS OF HER ART?

Not at all. It's just a reality. She personified a good deal of what the 20th century came to mean; she was a kind of a mirror because her circle was like a who's-who of American modern art in its formative years.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT A BIT MORE?

Well, in terms of a demand for self-expression, a sexual awakening in culture, all the breaks with tradition that define the 1920s through the '40s in this country — it's all in the work she did and the people she knew.

MANY OF THE DRAWINGS LOOK ALMOST LIKE DIARY ENTRIES; THEY HAVE DATES AND DOODLES. THEY ARE LOVELY.

A great deal of Wood's work is autobiographical, either directly or by insinuation, so it does in many ways record the social and formal questions and answers posed by her era.

7:45 P.M. - *Beatrice Waiting for Marcel*, 1917-18, references Wood's friend and alleged lover Marcel Duchamp.



YOU SEE THIS LESS IN THE VERY ABSTRACT CERAMIC VESSELS, BUT EVEN THERE, THE WORKS YOU'VE INCLUDED HAVE THIS SENSUALITY, HAVE A WAY OF REFERRING TO THE CURVES AND CREVICES OF A FEMALE BODY WITHOUT EVER REALLY DEPICTING IT.

It's true. Her experiences are present in everything she does. But I have to qualify that a little. I think the playfully sexual, bohemian persona was a mask of sorts — a way for Beatrice to say "I am a woman who knows what I want and do not want."

CAN YOU TRACK HER MEETING DUCHAMP AND THE IMPACT THAT HAD ON HER ARTISTICALLY?

She came back from her studies in Paris and met Marcel Duchamp via a mutual friend; Duchamp introduced her to the Arensbergs and Beatrice became a very important part of that New York Dada circle of intellectuals, artists and writers who met almost six nights a week for dinner and bantering at the Arensbergs' West 67th Street apartment.

"What truly distinguishes Wood is the light she creates with her colors and glazing," says Lisa Melandri, the SMMoA's deputy director and the exhibition's co-curator.
Photo by Monica Orozco



Visit, 1930. Photo by
Dana Martin



SHE GOT A CLASSICAL ART EDUCATION IN PARIS, CORRECT? BUT SHE WAS NOT ACTIVELY MAKING ART WHEN SHE CAME BACK TO NEW YORK.

She was concentrating on acting, but I think that Duchamp and the whole Dada way of approaching art encouraged Wood to loosen up, to doodle, to draw and invent.

OK, I AM GOING TO GO GOSSIP COLUMN ON YOU NOW FOR A SECOND BECAUSE I DO THINK IT BEARS ON HER ART AND ON THE CONTENT OF THE SHOW: WERE THEY OR WERE THEY NOT LOVERS, SHE AND DUCHAMP?

To hear Beatrice tell it — ha! — yes, they consummated a friendship, as she liked to phrase it. But by that I think she meant that theirs was a deep friendship, not more. I just cannot answer that with certainty. Wood meets Tiny, Duchamp's wife at his retrospective in 1963, and everyone is friends. But in the excellent candid video interview we have running in the gallery, Beatrice indicates she had one real love of her life, the writer Henri-Pierre Roché.

A luster vessel, 1986. Photo by John White

THERE ARE SOME STUNNING IMAGES
HERE THAT REFERENCE TRIADS,
TRIANGLES OF TWO MEN AND ONE
FEMALE FACE MADE INTO THIS MATRIX
OF LOCKED SHAPES. DUCHAMP WAS
PRETTY TAME BUT HISTORY TELLS US
ROCHÉ WAS A SERIAL PHILANDERER.

Wood herself tells us this, and from what we can gather a young, inexperienced Wood was hurt deeply by this; she was pretty open about it.

SHE FOLLOWED THE ARENSBERGS TO
LA IN 1926 AND THEY STAYED CLOSE
FRIENDS UNTIL THE COUPLE DIED.

That's right; she remained part of their inner circle until they died in the 1950s. And in 1933 she took a pottery course in the Adult Education program at Hollywood High School. That was that. She was hooked.

Clockwise from upper left: luster urn, 1987 (photo by John White);
chalice, 1987; gold luster glazed vase; undated earthenware bowl
(photo by Blair Clark).



Wood's drawings and watercolors are being seen for the first time alongside her lusterware. Photo by Monica Orozco



I RECALL THOSE REALLY EARLY EXPERIMENTS WERE DINNERWARE AND FUNCTIONAL VESSELS AT FIRST.

They were always inventive. I mean you look even at the early work and you know that she has a very unique approach to the medium. But, yes, she made quite wonderful vases and platters and always expressed this delighted wonder that she could actually get money for making things she loved to look at. By the mid-'50s, Beatrice was able to support herself through her art and she opened her own studio.

TO VISIT HER STUDIO WAS TO GO INTO AN ALCHEMIST'S DEN — SHELVES AND SHELVES OF TINY BOTTLES FILLED WITH FEATHERY POWERS, NATURAL AND SYNTHETIC PIGMENTS IN COLORS I DID NOT KNOW EXISTED.

To me what truly distinguishes Wood is the light she creates with her colors and glazing. That is really unparalleled; it is not just reflected light, the light is actually locked in these ultra-luxurious translucent pigments. And you are right about how hard and subtle it was to achieve these — they took her decades of work.

THESE ARE OFTEN COMPARED TO THE LUMINOUS COLOR FIELDS OF, SAY, MARK ROTHKO IN THEIR VISUAL DEPTH AND POETIC ELEGANCE.

I feel Beatrice was influenced by fabrics, by her travels, by her love of sensual color and emotive textures. In a Wood work, the power comes from the actuality of light, the shapes, the suggestion of function where there might not be one, and from the fact that Beatrice was able to bring that particular voice of hers — sexy, delicate, fragile, sturdy, rich and accidental all at once. And she does this in an essentially abstract object as opposed to on canvas. I think a Beatrice Wood work in any medium comes from her own personal self and formal discovery, not from some quotation of painting.

A detail of Wood's double-handled bowl, 1987. Photo by Tony Cunha

