The life of artist R. Michael Johns was brief but full. He pursued his ceramics studies under the late Ralph Bacerra at the Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles. While still in school, he met noted collector and philanthropist Stéphane Janssen, and the two formed a life partnership that embraced their shared passion for the arts. Over a period of approximately twelve years Johns and Janssen assembled an outstanding collection of contemporary ceramic art, utilizing Johns’ knowledge of ceramics and Janssen’s expertise in art. The collection informed Johns’ own art as well, giving an eclectic breadth to his style. Following Johns’ death Janssen donated the entire collection to the Ceramic Research Center, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, an extraordinarily generous gift which honored Johns’ wish that the collection be kept together as well as the memory of a gifted artist whose embrace of his art and its artists enabled a timeless legacy.

**ARTIST’S STATEMENT – R. MICHAEL JOHNS**

“Earlier this century and periodically throughout the years, we have seen enormous gains in ceramics: technical and aesthetic. In my mind nothing in art equals the enormous contribution that the world of clay has given us. It is this wonderfully diverse medium of ceramics that will always capture man’s imagination and enable him to express his ideas.”


**RESUME – R. MICHAEL JOHNS**

1958 | Born, Jacksonville, FL
1976 | Ceramics program, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles, CA
1981 | Met Stéphane Janssen
1985 | B.A. Otis Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, CA
1987-1988 | M.F.A., Otis Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, CA
1988 | Diagnosed HIV positive
1993 | Died

**BIOGRAPHY – R. MICHAEL JOHNS**

R. Michael Johns was born in Jacksonville, FL and grew up along the east coast. He relocated to the west coast following his graduation from high school, enrolling in the ceramics program at
Los Angeles City College. “Mr. Kelly, my first ceramics instructor, helped plant the seed of interest in me through his passion for the medium,” Johns stated. In 1981 he met noted collector and supporter of the arts Stéphane Janssen who would become his partner both in life and in assembling an astonishing collection of ceramic art. Johns continued his art studies at the Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles, studying under the late Ralph Bacerra known as “Mr. Perfection” by his students. “My first impression of Michael was a student who was sophisticated about his art and who knew what he wanted to say with clay,” Bacerra wrote.

Johns received his B.A. degree in 1985 and after a year’s break continued on at Otis, earning his M.F.A. in 1988.

Johns and Janssen embarked on their collection while Johns was still in school. “It was during my last year of my Associates degree that I bought my first ceramic artwork,” Johns said. “Collecting began with the thrill of discovery which is followed by the satisfaction of actually acquiring a work, enabling me to study and appreciate it at will. Also, this pleasure of discovery and ownership caused me to want to support ceramic artists. The longer I studied the medium, the stronger my passion became and the more interesting and varied I found the field.”

The combination of Johns’ knowledge of both ceramic techniques and artists was perfectly complemented by Janssen’s extensive knowledge of the arts. “Our collection of ceramics would not exist without Michael,” Janssen said. “He gave me the tools to love ceramics as I gave him the tools to look at paintings.”

Their passionate search over the next twelve years would result in a collection of over 600 pieces representing some of the finest contemporary work of the ceramic arts.

Collecting also infused Johns’ own art. Ralph Bacerra stated, “Michael’s home environment was an exceptional resource, as Stéphane’s and Michael’s art collection was varied and diverse in many media. He was well traveled and used his impressions of other cultures to his advantage.” Johns explored the possibilities of clay widely in his own work, both vessels and sculptural forms. His interest in architectural forms from world cultures appears often in his work. After moving to Arizona and Santa Fe his exploration of the Southwest and the desert environment influenced his work, merging art and nature. “Michael approached his projects with intellect and originality,” Bacerra remarked. “I visited him in Arizona...his work was progressing. Michael enjoyed the process of making art and appreciated the work of others.”

In 1988 Johns was diagnosed HIV positive, a victim of the disease that would take a number of gifted artists much too soon, and he died of an AIDS-related illness in 1993 at only 34.

After Johns’ death Janssen stopped collecting ceramics. “It’s not that I don’t love ceramics anymore,” Janssen said, “but I was always the one who didn’t really know. Michael had the technical knowledge that I didn’t have.” The incredible collection which the two assembled was gifted to the Ceramic Research Center at Arizona State University in homage to Johns and in honor of his wish to keep the collection intact. Janssen stated: “This collection was Michael and me, and that’s the reason I give it, because I want Michael and I to become immortal as a gay couple who did something for the community....When Michael died I felt like I lost half my soul. But to stop collecting art would be to lose the rest. Without art I don’t think it would be interesting to live.” The Stéphane Janssen and R. Michael Johns Collection forms a core for the museum and was featured in the exhibition A Ceramic Legacy: The Stéphane Janssen and R. Michael Johns Collection in 2006.

When a person dies young, the living are left to wonder what might have been had this individual lived, what might he have accomplished, what legacy left to the world – questions that must go unanswered and mixing regret for a lost future with grief for the present loss. Johns
himself understood that, writing sometime before his death: “We are not immortal, we are eternal. I guess this disease is really a gift, an opportunity to grow, to find what is important on Earth and the Universe.” While the sum of a life cut short becomes the sum of just a few years, in the case of Michael Johns that sum is very large indeed, much larger than the calendar count. That he used the short time available to him not only to maximize his artistic gifts but to ensure that the artistic gifts of others would be widely enjoyed through this extraordinary collection speaks volumes of the depth and vision of this young man. It is a legacy to be envied.

2. Ibid, 16.
3. Ibid, 14.
5. Ibid, 16.
6. Ibid.
8. Johns, op.cit, 12.
9. Ibid.

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