

# S O K L U O V



Peter Voulkos printmaking at the Garner Tullis Workshop in Emeryville, California, 1985. Photographed by Richard Tullis, courtesy of Voulkos & Co. Catalogue Project.

Although Peter Voulkos is known as a ceramist, like most artists, he worked simultaneously in different mediums. To him, whether it was graphic design, painting, ceramics, or metal working, one informed the other, altogether advancing his understanding of his work. In 1967, Voulkos explained this concept in an interview: “So you have a form of painting, a form of sculpture, a form of pottery and these forms all feed back into each other. So the painting helped the sculpture, the sculpture helped the painting, the pottery helped the sculpture and so on, they are all interrelated, although they all demanded different disciplines and different forms of thinking.<sup>1</sup>”

In keeping with Voulkos's working philosophy, the alliance between his preferred mediums is obvious in these lithographs. A black ceramic vessel form is the focal point of each, with primary-colored lines reminiscent of his paintings and prints, and circular punctures, as seen in his sculptural works, completing the drawings. Splatters of ink communicate the speed at which Voulkos worked, a virtue he practiced across all his mediums. While at first glance these lithographs might seem extemporaneous, they convey the evolution in Voulkos's prolific journey as an artist. Their mark-making reveals decades of exploration up until their execution in 1979.

Key moments in Voulkos's life are worth revisiting in order to better understand this series of prints. In 1946, Voulkos enrolled at Montana State University with the intention of becoming a commercial artist but changed his major to fine art with an interest in painting. During his junior year, he took his first ceramics course with Frances Senska, the professor who eventually convinced him to focus on clay. Initially a professional potter in the traditional sense, Voulkos

had a few chance encounters that profoundly changed the direction of his career. The first was a visit from the English potter Bernard Leach, the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, and Soetsu Yanagi, a philosopher and the director of the National Folk Museum of Japan, at the Archie Bray Foundation in 1952, where Voulkos worked. The other meetings were over the course of the summer in 1953, when Voulkos taught at Black Mountain College and befriended the composer John Cage among others, and then made a trip to New York City, where he met the Abstract Expressionists Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Jack Tworkov and Robert Rauschenberg. Voulkos was open to experimenting with new ways of working and these artists introduced him to Zen-inspired teachings that would loosen up his approach. He eventually adopted their working style which was spontaneous, fast, and in the moment, all the while valuing irregularity, imperfection, and chance effects. Instead of focusing on the perfection of the end result, these artists revealed to him that art was in the process of making.

This, and a deep appreciation for Picasso, led Voulkos on a path that changed the field of ceramics forever, moving the medium from purely functional into the realm of abstract sculpture. Along the way, he experimented with different surface effects that expanded his decorative vocabulary and were carried over into all of his art mediums, including these lithographs.

Preferring to manipulate the surface of clay rather than regularly applying glazes, Voulkos had a penchant for scratching lines into his pots, known as sgraffito, early in his career. As the physical size of his ceramics grew to over six feet and weighed more than a ton in the late fifties, he began attacking his forms with puncture wounds, slashes, gashes, and lacerations in part to relieve the pressure that would mount when these behemoths were fired in the kiln. From 1960 on, he returned to making more regular-sized forms taking with him the broader surface vocabulary he had developed. After years of experimentation, he settled on creating clay objects shaped like ice buckets, tall vase pots that Voulkos would later call “stacks,” and plates.



*Stack: Walking Man*, 1990, wood fired stoneware, 28 x 20 x 16 inches.  
Photographer unknown, courtesy of the Ruth Braunstein Trust.

In 1968, Voulkos premiered fourteen vase pot vessels (known as “the blackwares”) at the Braunstein Quay Gallery, the likeness of which is shown in the lithographs. Austere, simplified, spare, and poignant, each of the pots was assembled by joining a cylinder, bowl, and plate and unified with an iron glaze. Their sparingly punctured surfaces were executed intuitively when the clay was still wet and after Voulkos threw each component. He jokingly called this, “putting the art on.” The punctures resemble not only the surface treatments of his earlier work, but also the art of Lucio Fontana, whom Voulkos visited in Italy the year prior. As their iron glazes gleamed like stove pipes, these works aligned closely with the large-scale metal works Voulkos was making at the time, as well as with his preoccupation with black forms in his contemporaneous canvases. The blackwares seemed to announce a new era in Voulkos’s practice; from this point on, he dedicated himself to metal and wood-fired ceramics.

Installation of *Voulkos Pottery*.  
Quay Gallery Exhibition, San Francisco,  
California, June, 1968.  
Photographer unknown, courtesy of  
the Museum of Arts and Design.



Taking this context into consideration, these prints align closely with the history of Voulkos's practice. His interdisciplinary approach is revealed, as the main subjects are ceramic vessels with painterly references in the background executed in lithograph form. They reference Voulkos's evolutionary process in clay, depicting the assembled stack form he invented and the preferred surface treatments he employed such as sgraffito, punctures, and slashes. Additionally, his allegiance to the Abstract Expressionists is undeniable in the work, with their primary color palette, unapologetic ink drips, and evident immediacy.

Voulkos continued to prefer his art fast, spontaneous, and imperfect, just as the counter-culturists had taught him in the fifties. More Beat than Hippie, these series of lithographs attest to Voulkos's brand of the avant-garde ethos of his generation.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Voulkos interviewed by B. Horiuchi, "Four Bay Area Potters," [c. 1967], Box 18, Folder 8-20, Printed Material Undated – Peter Voulkos, Rose Slivka Papers, c. 1947-2006. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

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Essay by **Barbara Paris Gifford**, Assistant Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), New York. Along with Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute, and Guest Curator Glenn Adamson, she co-curated *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*, MAD, October 18, 2016 – March 15, 2017.





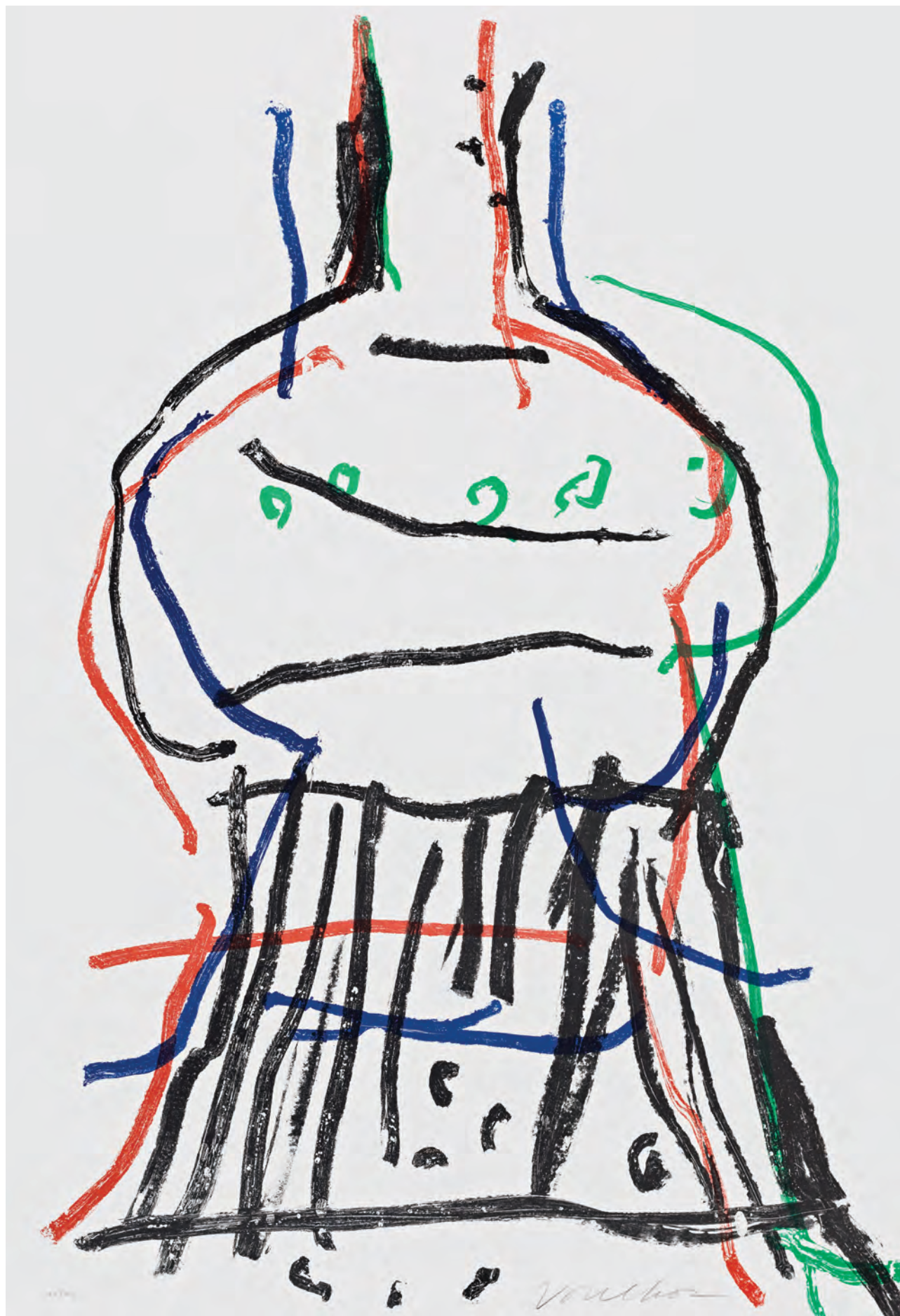
*Abstract II: Ironhead*, 1979, color lithograph, edition of 200, signed and dated, 33 x 22.75 inches, CR176.0-Pr





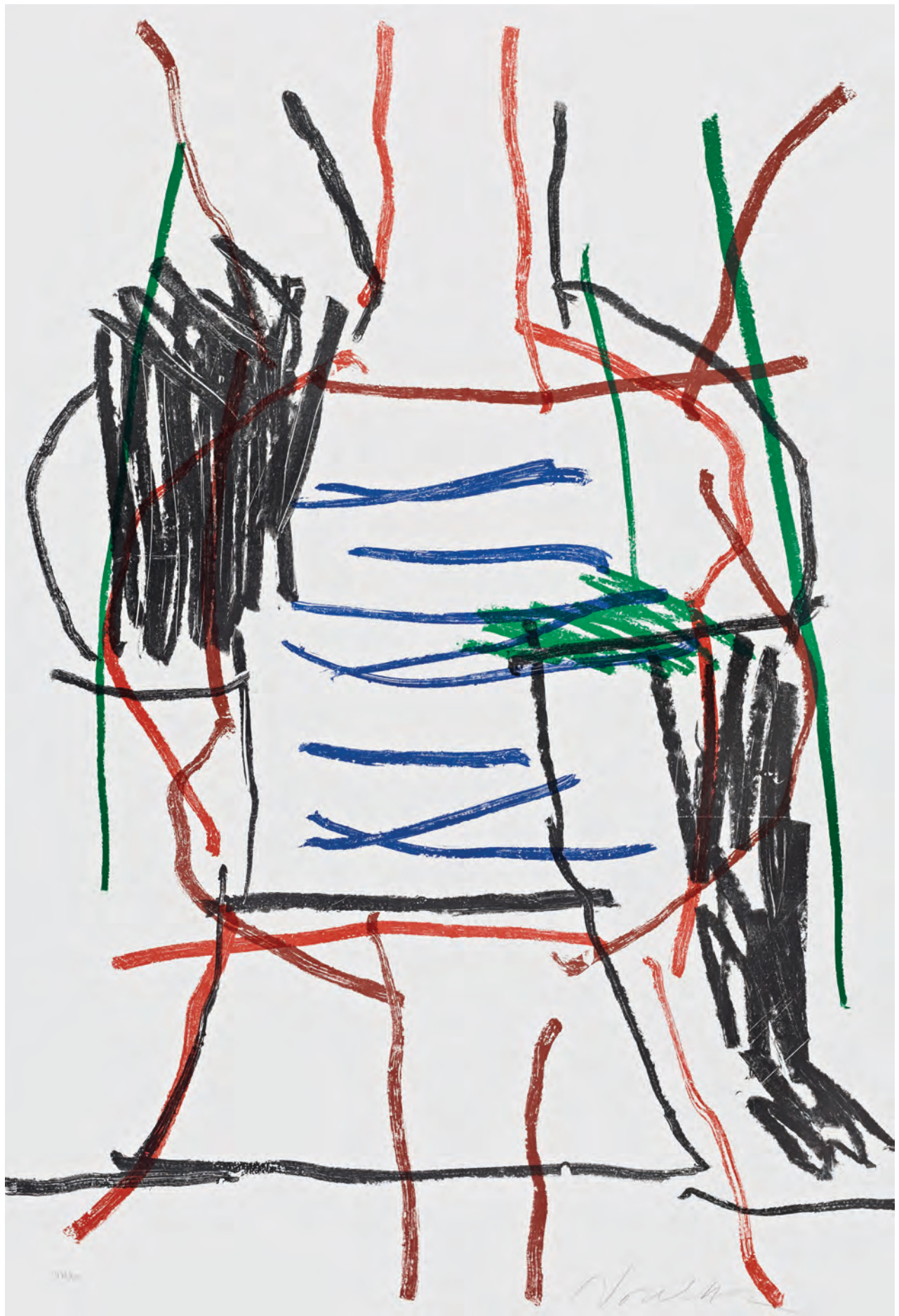
Abstract V: Flyface, 1979, color lithograph, edition of 200, signed and dated, 31.25 x 23.5 inches, CR179.0-Pr





Abstract VI: Checks in the Mail, 1979, color lithograph, edition of 200, signed and dated, 34.5 x 23.5 inches, CR180.0-Pr





*Abstract VII: Give Us a Break*, 1979, color lithograph, edition of 200, signed and dated, 34.5 x 23.5 inches, CR181.0-Pr





*Abstract VIII: I Got the Cobalt Blues*, 1979, color lithograph, edition of 200, signed and dated, 32.5 x 24 inches, CR182.0-Pr

PRINTS PHOTOGRAPHED BY M. LEE FATHERREE