

# John Gill: An Artist Talk

*Excerpts from a talk hosted at Yossi Milo on April 17, 2025*



[Installation View] John Gill: *WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?* March 15 – April 26, Yossi Milo, New York.

## Can you tell us about the origins of your practice and some of your early inspirations?

**John Gill:** I remember going to a lecture Mel Bernstein was giving. Anne Currier pops up and says, “Pots come from pots.” Well, *I* love pots. Mel Bernstein said something really, really great — he says, “Clay has no semantics.” So, you know, the dust on my pants, *that's clay*. You know, anything that's been fired is clay.

And so, what I'm interested in is how can I get this stuff hot and vitrified, and into a language that is going to be important for people in the world to play with?

It's like my friend David Saunders — we were in Grace Borgenicht Gallery for years. And there, I was able to be trained by painters who were *great* painters, like Milton Avery, Max Beckmann, and Stuart Davis. I got a chance to really study what those paintings were about. And Grace said, “Oh, I'm retiring. I'm going to put you downstairs with Kraushaar.”

So, I was taking all of that information in. And at the same time, I had all the really great teachers that I've been working with at all the schools that I had been to, who were trying to figure out what languages they were trying to speak. I had the nice place of being in the gallery to say, “What can we do with ceramics?”

And I *love* ceramics.

As a little kid, I had this really beautiful metal lamp, and I used to just melt crayons on it all day long. This was not a very good idea because it could have started a really bad fire, but the hot lamp was just really nice to melt crayons on. In a way, it's just like ceramics, of how this thing is really important.

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*Covered Jar, 2023, Ceramic, 44" x 25" x 17.5" (112 x 63.5 x 44.5 cm)*

## How do you deal with flaws?

**JG:** I do deal with flaws. I gamble. And I think gambling is really important. We have the great reference of John Cage, whose works were *aleatoric*. They had to figure out a word for John Cage, who was *aleatoric*. You open up a piano for a little bit and then close it, and there's nothing coming. There's just the sound of the empty auditorium coming out. So it's not right, and it's not wrong. It's always right.

## Can you talk a bit about your use of colors?

**JG:** Well, about color: I have just one rule, which is that we don't put orange and black together because of Halloween. I used to have to teach color theory in freshman foundation. And everyone says, "Oh, I only like earth tones."



*Covered Jar, 2024. Ceramic.  
30 1/2" x 28" x 24" (77.5 x 71 x 61 cm)*

I don't know what color goes next to another color. I really don't even worry about that. I think that all colors go together, and some work harder. And I also like the *fight*, or the *tug*, or just how they jump up against something... I don't hold that back, because we have a certain *yes* to this work.

## That *yes* speaks to a generosity of the volume in this work, too. Can you speak more about your use of negative and open space?

**JG:** Well, when you go out West, you have these really beautiful canyons. When you go through Glenwood Springs Canyon on Route 70, it's all these rocks.

There's that really great rock climber named John Gill, who was a physicist in Colorado, who's the best - I mean, if you were into rock climbing, you know who John Gill would be, because he only does boulders. He knows how to move up. He's basically a spider on the outside of rock.

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But John Gill never, ever climbs the *outside* of rock. You know what he does? He climbs *inside* of the rock, because you'll never fall off the rock if you only climb the inside of it. It's really great. So, how do *I* climb the inside of it?

**In some of your work, you engage ideas of not being fully able to see into a space, or erasing, or obscuring. Can you tell us more about that?**

**JG:** Well, some of them, the glaze has different chemistries to it. And I love different chemistries. I have an ash glaze that sort of runs. I have a shino glaze that would be famous from Japanese pottery. And I just play with just it. You know, I like a good car accident, and art history is a really great car accident just to cram together these ideas. You know, if I had a corner, and I had three really expensive cars all of a sudden hit blink, what are the sculptures that would be? It's like John Chamberlain.

**The making of the thing can be very transparent, but the glazes themselves are opaque.**

**JG:** The other thing about the making is that I don't know which way up is. You know, this was the bottom at one time, and now it's the side. And so it would be something I would've learned from Bob Turner. Bob Turner just didn't know which up or down was, and he was trying to ask the question of it.



*Covered Jar, 2023, Ceramic, 30 1/2" x 28" x 18" (77.5 x 71 x 46 cm)*

**What about making things for their own sake?**

**JG:** The thing about something being functional is that it's a word I don't like. In my work, I want the piece to have *want*, not function. And I think it's if you have *want*, then it has a different thing. It's a personal curiosity that has *want*. If it was for a person, you know, that person is a person, or I guess they function as a person. But if that person has *want* and curiosity, then they're no longer just an object. They go, wow, this is a really interesting person. So, I think of my things that way. It's not function, but what's *want*.

When I was in graduate school, I was making jars, and they were made out of porcelain and sawdust. I was making these tomb pieces that were based on Anasazi ruins. We were looking at Anasazi ruins then. I would get this great big piece, a porcelain and sawdust *thing*. I fire it up, and I cut it on a saw and just ran that square piece into this really beautiful wattle-and-daub, bird's-nest type of thing. And the reason why I did that is I wanted to make sure that lid was so heavy that nothing could come out of it. It's sort of like Napoleon's tomb in Paris, where they put the guy in an oak box, they put the guy in a lead coffin, then they

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put the guy in a granite coffin, then they put a great big thing on top. *They don't want him to come out!* And so, you have these really great discussions on how you could really play with the use of something.

## Is there hardship to your work at all, or is there always joy?

**JG:** Well, I think there's a generosity. If you have *want* and your *want* is just *to give*, that's pretty cool. [The works are] giving out color. They're giving out form. They're giving out shapes that are sort of luscious or giving a plane. They're giving you all kinds of stuff. The whole thing is that you're just recording the making process. And the making process goes on for a couple of days, maybe even a week. Then, the painting process goes on for a long time because you have to glaze with a hundred buckets of glaze, and figure out how they go together.



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## How do you address when it seems like a work is going “wrong?”

**JG:** It doesn't go wrong. You can always use it in a different way. In freshman foundation, we had a bunch of, well, garbage, — the whole room was full of garbage — and you just make something. Pick that material off the floor, and make something out of it, and make it *big* — you know, go big or stay home. You know, there's so much litter in this town that you could make a great piece of art out of anything.

We walked by a really beautiful wall, and it had so much paper coming off the very first time I came to New York City — I saw billboards on top of billboards on top of billboards, and they're peeling off. I said, “Oh, that's what I studied in pop art!” And so now I know where it came from. Just putting my eyes to this stuff and trying to figure out how I could make it be in my own work is really important.

I think what's missing from art history is what we as artists can make. Pete Voulkos said, “The best pots are still in you.” So that's what's missing from art history. You know, I really love how some of these lids have a gap. It has this sense of being itself and taking up its own space. It doesn't have to match everything. *Obstreperous*. Willful.