

Walter Dexter: *Bottle with Face* — *Bill*

Brian Grison

Volume 52, Number 214, Supplement, Spring 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/61899ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Grison, B. (2009). Walter Dexter: *Bottle with Face* — *Bill*. *Vie des Arts*, 52(214), 6–6.

WALTER DEXTER

BOTTLE WITH FACE – BILL

By Brian Grisson



One of Walter Dexter's recent high-art ceramic 'bottle' sculptures, *Bottle with Face – Bill*, includes a face emerging from the chest. The bottle form, with its similarity to the human upper torso, is a project Dexter has been working on for at least fifteen years. They embody both a tenuous reference to pottery's traditional concern with function, as well as Dexter's interest in painting. As well, the bottles reference his early work in figurative sculpture. However, along with other changes, the bas-relief face is something new.

Bottle with Face was hand-built to 24 ¼ inches high, 16 inches across and 6 ½ inches deep. Though it is not a closed form, the bottle does not include the neck that is common in most of these sculptures. Instead the neck supporting the face is included as a long spine-like engaged column rising from the base of the bottle. The spine often appears in Dexter's bottles, though they usually continue up through and become the neck. The neck supporting the face in *Bottle with Face* suggests that the figure they imply is actually positioned in front and slightly below the bottle, and

that the bottle itself is actually another figure standing protectively behind the face.

The oval form of the face is largely pushed out from inside the bottle with anatomical details added with clay or carved or scratched into it. The slightly masculine face gazes forward with a calm expression. On the other hand, the scratches that help delineate the face and extend down the neck have an expressive, even violent quality that contradicts the peace in the face.

After being bisque-fired and glazed, *Bottle with Face* was fired only once, an unusual restraint in Walter Dexter's bottle sculptures. Often after the standard single firing, Dexter will continue glazing and re-firing, sometimes up to six times.

It is also unusual that the back of *Bottle with Face* is not a variation on the front. This suggests that whereas Dexter's bottles are also a way to create large flat ceramic surfaces that he can accost with colour, brushwork, textures and shapes, *Bottle with Face* clearly has a more sculptural meaning.

This interpretation is supported by the subtle glazed surface. Walter Dexter's glaze decoration is more commonly applied in a sweeping gestural quality reminiscent of painting rather than calligraphy. *Bottle with Face* has almost no glaze at all, and only one colour. Using his fingers, Dexter rubbed a solution of copper, iron and water into the deep carving and scratching on the face and neck. Then he applied a clear, overall, semi-gloss glaze. The result is that the surface of the bottle is much like human skin.

The subtitle for *Bottle with Face* is a reference to Dexter's older brother, Bill Dexter, who, in his eighties, is not well. Through this sculpture, Walter Dexter might be unconsciously contemplating issues of mortality, his relationship with his older brother, and the artist's ability to turn a calm face toward all that life gives us. □

EVAN PENNY

THE DIMS OF PANAGIOTA: CONVERSATION #2

By J. Lynn Fraser

The geography of a face changes over time, not just due to external weathering and life-created fissures, but also as a reaction to the body's internal responses to life's uncertainties and joys.

Western society, however, prefers to ignore the fleshy reality of our selves in the world. We construct smooth, thin-walled façades of

DOROTHY GROSTERN

THE SECRET II

By Lori Beaman

In *The Secret II*, (part of a pastel on paper series of the same name), Dorothy Grostern captures the moment of transference of words in the form of a secret that may be enlightening, damaging, or liberating. Her work sets the stage for various interpretive possibilities, and it is the viewer's experiences that flesh out the story. Grostern makes us witnesses to the moment of intimacy between what we imagine are friends, lovers, maybe even enemies or rivals—bodies are close, information is whispered, we are offered a glimpse of reaction whose interpretation is left to us to decipher. This is a moment we aren't