

--- --
||| **exhibit** |||

Of Chamber Pots and Kings

by Tim Davis

"In roaring for a chamber-pot, dismiss the controversy bleeding the more entangled by your hearing: all the peace you make in their cause is, calling both the parties knaves." — Coriolanus, Act 2, Scene 1

At www.atlas.co.uk you can purchase, for five pounds sterling, a "polypropylene adult chamber pot" that is allegedly "bowl shaped with lipped edges and has a handle extending down from the lip at one side." This product is unabashedly marketed toward those "who prefer a chamber pot to the common privy." While choice is the opiate of the masses, it is difficult to imagine actually choosing the chamber pot over porcelain plumbing.

Timothy Blearier, known professionally as "Timmy" is, however, one such person. As curator of The Chamber Pot Show, running now through April 6 at the Gallery of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (90 Orchard St.; 431-0233), Timmy has outed this long-closeted object and elevated a most humble little tub to the level of a gut wrenching artistic commodity.

The Tenement Museum is one of New York's greatest museum set pieces. The 1863 tenement building which is its heart and soul was home to German-Jewish and Italian-Catholic families until 1935. Natalie Gumpertz ran a piece-making shop along the Allen Street red light district throughout the 1870s, pulling in \$300 a year — about half of her yearly rent.

As Timmy conducted tours for tikes and visiting schoolteachers from tenementless American recesses, the timeless qualities of Manhattan squalor became evident. "Many immigrants still have no plumbing; shared bathrooms are still common on the Lower East Side. How many people do you know with a bathtub in the kitchen?" Add an answering machine and this restored but unrenovated apartment building could easily be inhabited today by you or me, fellow off-white-collar worker. Says Timmy, "things haven't changed."

A chamber pot sitting on the floor of the standard tour begged the question of how much has actually changed. The pot was copied and distributed to nearly 20 artists to prod, spin, paste up, install, sew over and collage. The re-



"Skating Through Life Lulu LoLo,"
by Lulu Lolo

|||||exhibit|||||

sults are understandably mixed, as would be any bag of interpretations, but the sincerity and simplicity of many responses keeps the show comfortable and folksy and in line with the late wave of "outsider" art sitting inside many of New York's art establishments these days. Don't worry about bringing the kids to a show featuring such a fecal theme: "Latrine brown and beeswax is the antithesis of what I stand for," insists our curator. And sure enough there are many fewer sphincters here than at, say, the "Putt Modernism" artists' mini golf course of a few years ago. "Humble" is how many of the works come off.

**How many people
do you know
with a bathtub in
the kitchen?**

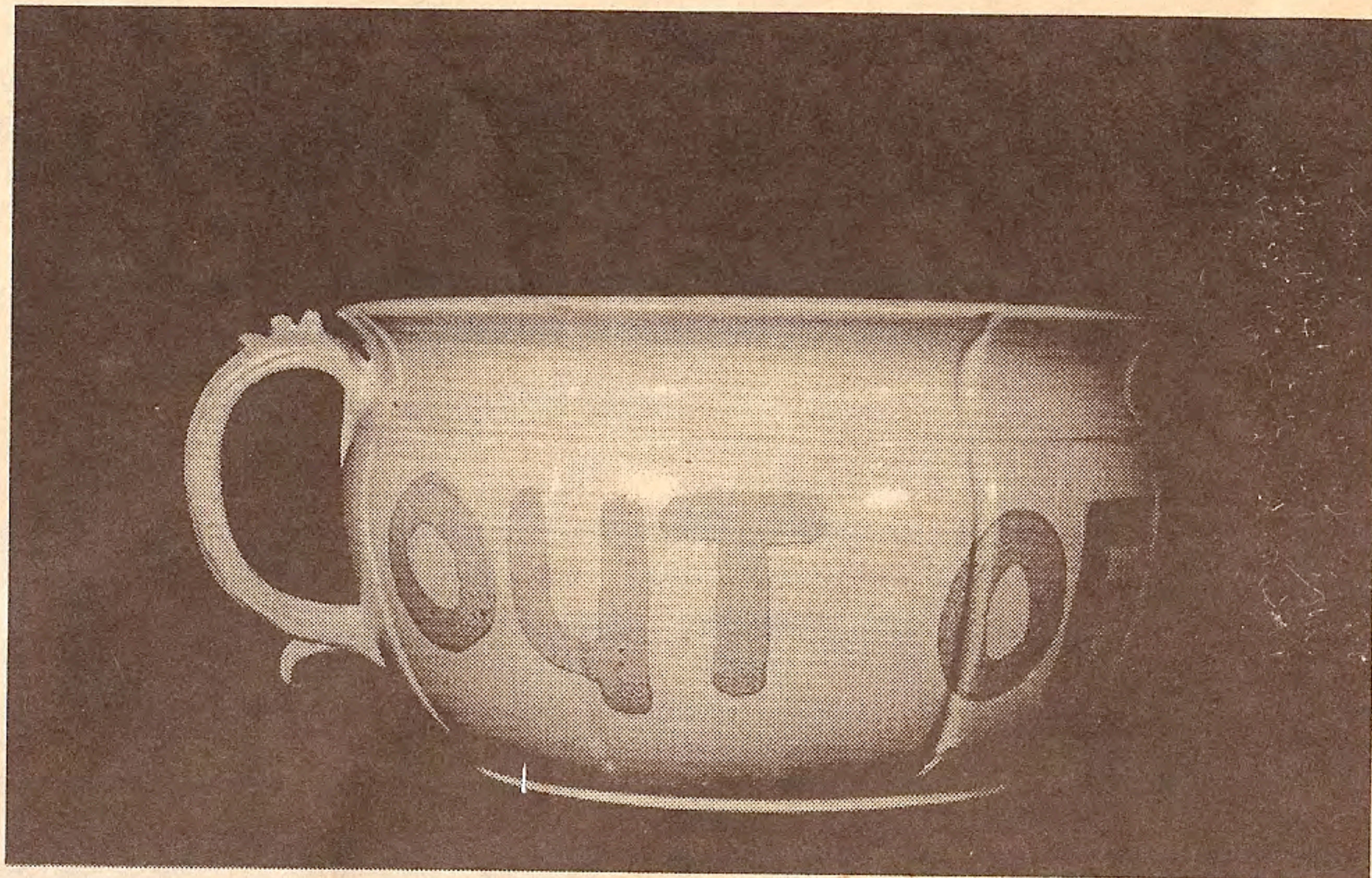
The "pot of gold" motif gets a lot of play. Chris Lin's untitled piece takes this most playfully and literally, with a curious (fully clothed) figure off a Grant Wood wedding cake sitting atop the gold bricks he has defecated. Lin is a Taiwanese immigrant, and the evocation of financial reward upon which much immigration is predicated helps to transcend obvious visual and visceral puns.

Linda Lee's sculpture invokes the fold-up cot upon which Jasper Johns might have crashed in his studio, circa 1954 — transplanted to the Lower East Side. The sandwiched

cot has embedded in it blue wainscoted slats in the shape of an American flag, from which a demitasse chamber pot filled with bobby pins protrudes. It is very much a work of art in the Johns tradition, deadpan and graphic, carpentered and blunt, and helps one focus on the rest of the show's funky menagerie.

Many of the artists find that kitsch rescues the chamber pot from its status as a relic. Two done by Italians might be booth prizes won at the San Gennaro festival. Steve Defrank's "Outpouring" fills the pot with black pitch and Lite Brite pegs. Aimee Simmons' fur-lined

latrine is ready for a cheap date, deep set with fake ice cubes and a bottle of Official New York State Pink Champagne all sealed with a lipstick kiss. It is hard to say exactly why these kitschy pieces seem relevant to the tenement experience, except to visit the tenement building and see how modernized it became over the decades — how life did not conform to the sepia movie set version of the Lower East Side. The gas company installed



"Out of Order," by Cary S. Leibowitz/Candy Ass

a meter which cost a quarter. Ceilings were painted with art nouveau and deco designs as they arose. The tenement was as various and full of intention as the pieces in this worthwhile show. ■

The Chamber Pot Show, runs through April 6 at the Gallery of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (90 Orchard St.; 431-0233). Call for museum hours.