before their firing. Afterward they can be dipped in glaze and fired again, as many times as desired, for striking combinations of color and surface texture.

After a decade of working in this mode, Adams still doesn’t know what to call the objects he makes—they’re just his “things.” Critics sometimes assume the work alludes to specific, real-life organisms, but Adams himself resists drawing direct links between his ceramics and the natural world. The things are not obviously identifiable as either flora or fauna, and if in some moments they seem familiar (a leafy formation that hints at lettuce, or a color combination reminiscent of a tropical beetle), in others they are decidedly alien: the deep black, metallic glaze that will coat the kraken in his kitchen will be unlike anything found in the wild.

But, Adams explains, as he pieces together the tiny tentacled monster in front of him, he sets himself certain rules. In this case, each object has 18 limbs, which are always assembled in the same order, clockwise around the base. He pursues variations on a given combination of forms to their natural end—as in nature, he says, a species tends toward dwarfism or gigan
tism—and produces anywhere from five to 500 objects within a specific class. When it stops evolving, he moves on.

In his installations, density has an aesthetic effect—evoking an overcrowded terrarium, a proliferation of life just barely held at bay by the grid formation—but it’s also a product of necessity. Adams has made so many things that there’s literally nowhere else to put them. His studio space on campus, filled with tall racks loaded with crammed trays, has no room for him to actually work. Hundreds of works are scattered about his Cambridge home. Five years ago he purchased a 20-room Victorian farmhouse in New Hampshire—in no small part, he says, “for storage space.” The hayloft in the three-story barn there is also crowded with ceramic organisms, ranging in size from something that could be cradled in a palm to something that could easily strangle someone to death.

He produces ceramics almost daily and nearly compulsively, but only through the intervention of a couple of friends in New York did he begin to show at all. Because his apartment was getting crowded, he acquiesced to their encouragement (or, as he puts it, their “not-quite-coercion”) to

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**The Photographer’s Art**

**Burden professor** of photography Robin Kelsey is the rare art historian with a Yale law degree (read the profile, “From Daguerreotype to Photoshop,” January-February 2009, page 42). His new book, *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Harvard University Press, $32.95), addresses the aesthetic and intellectual problem of the medium as art, given the means of its creation, which can have a tenuous relationship to intent. From the introduction:

**Can photographs be art?** Institutionally, the answer is obviously yes. Our art museums and galleries abound in photography, and our scholarly journals lavish photographs with attention once reserved for work in other media….

The situation, however, is not as rosy and simple as all that. It’s not as though the art world assimilated photography solely on the basis of disinterested inquiry and careful argument. There were many incentives at work, including the lure of a profitable new market and the desire for more accessible museums….

Although some troubling aspects of these terms have received significant attention in recent years, one issue remains neglected: chance.

Photography is prone to chance. Every taker of snapshots knows that. The first look at a hastily taken picture is an act of discovery. In this one, an expression is exuberant or a gesture is winning; in that one, a mouth is agape or a hand blocks a face. Once in a blue moon, a rank amateur produces an exquisite picture. Trained photographers may be better at anticipating when and how such a picture might be made, but even they take scores of shots for every one worth posting or publishing….

These are questions that the art world has tended to muffle or ignore. Chance, one might say, lacks a constituency. Generally speaking, it valorizes neither the photograph nor the photographer. Most photographers, collectors, and curators would prefer to suggest that a picture speaks for itself and therefore the circumstances of its production are immaterial, or to presume that pictorial success reflects a mastery of the medium. But...