ALTERED AND CONSTRUCTED CERAMIC FORMS

by

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An Essay Submitted in Lieu of Thesis
To the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ART

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1966
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Voyage</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cookie Jar</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Weed Pot</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Head Rest</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Stoneware Bottle</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Study Number 2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Slab and Wheel</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Raku</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Study Number 1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Square Circle</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The free spirit is the spirit of Joy. It delights to create in beauty. It is unafraid, it knows no fear. It declares the earth to be its home, and the fragrance of earth to be its inspiration. 1

To be truly free and uninhibited in an approach to art, or to life, is a difficult aim to achieve. There are times when it seems that progress can be made only by destruction of a form or an idea. At such times it is difficult to throw out old ways and start from the beginning toward a new goal. But new goals, new forms and changing concepts are, or should be, a part of everyday life. I remember very clearly hesitating before the first cylinder that I cut apart and reassembled. This hesitation was a type of fear of the unknown; a fear that what one discovers cannot be understood and incorporated into a meaningful expression of form. To be "free" in concept of approach is in a sense quite paradoxical because there are always past traditions; solutions that other artists have discovered and left as a heritage as well as one's own previous solutions. I can see what they discovered and stated to express their concepts of form and space, but I feel that I must discover and solve my own form-space problems with my own intuition and intellect as a guide. I simply must allow that part of me to speak which demands that I go to clay in the first place. This is the need

Figure 1. Voyage
that Herbert Read calls a "will to form."

The whole 'drive' in any purposive will to form (the only rational explanation of artistic development) is towards an equilibrium of inner feeling and the outer world of experience, and the work of art functions as the realization of such an equilibrium.  

I become as absorbed in the space-form relationships of a teapot or cookie jar as in those of an abstract sculpture, since I believe that all can exist on a deeper level. Henry Moore has written:

For me a work must first have a vitality of its own. I do not mean a reflection of the vitality of life, of movement, physical action, frisking, dancing figures and so on, but that a work can have in it a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent.  

By "object" I am sure that Mr. Moore did not have in mind a teapot or cookie jar, but if this underlying spirit can come through human form, or representational art of any kind, I fail to see why it cannot come through in something functional. I feel that the cookie jar (Fig. 2) exists as a sculptural form into which I have incorporated function. Therefore, I can find no reason to distinguish between crafts and fine arts. "... Ceramics is not alien to painting or sculpture. All the various art forms, verbal and aural as well as visual and plastic, are interrelated."

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3 Ibid., p. 37.

Figure 2. Cookie Jar

Figure 3. Weed Pot
or not a given form expresses what Moore calls the "intense life of its own." Perhaps I should state it this way: Any given piece can exist on more than one level of perception, and a good piece exists on several levels whether or not use is incorporated into the design.

With a wall all around
A clay bowl is moulded;
But the use of the bowl
Will depend on the part
Of the bowl that is void. 5

Not only the use, but the spatial unity depends on the void—how one is made aware of the space engulfing or engulfed in the form. Space and form, positive and negative, yin and yang, all have for me a similar meaning. I am not aware of space until my eye bumps into an object; that is to say, until a form of some sort shows me that the space around it exists. At one extreme, a minimum amount of form is used to explore a great amount of space, as in, for example, Picasso's wire constructions of 1930. At the other extreme, form is emphasized as a positive element as in the cloaked, block-formed Egyptian figures that appear in the XI Dynasty. 6 Between these there is a complete spectrum of transitional forms that range from one extreme to the other. In my work, Voyage (Figure 1) blends a large amount of negative space into


positive form, whereas Weed Pot (Fig. 3) relies more on positive form for its sculptural statement.

The idea of juxtaposing space-form is not unique to me but has been used by artists of the past and present. My work lies, I believe, in the tradition of Henry Moore, Kenneth Armitage and Peter Voulkos, all of whom have worked with integrating and juxtaposing space-form, positive and negative space, rough and smooth texture, hard and soft edges. It has been little more than a decade since the abstract sculptural influences from Europe penetrated into the ceramic arts of the United States. Among the pioneers were Ellen Key-Oberg and her husband, Rolf, David Weinrib and Peter Voulkos. Mrs. Key-Oberg's early works are abstract sculptures made of hollowed-out clay forms, which resemble some of the works done by Miro and Arp. In Craft Horizons of February, 1956, David Weinrib is credited with using "Slab built elements in (creating a) new pottery (form). . . . Many are meant to be viewed like sculpture, from all sides." The article points out that Weinrib is concerned with both volume and open space and that the apparent overlapping of the two objectives does not in the least invalidate the basic functional idea of the pot. The same year Peter


Voulkos, perhaps even then America's best known potter, held his first abstract sculpture exhibit. "There were multi-form vases four feet high in which wheel-thrown elements of varying sizes and shape had been joined together—forms set on their sides and their ends sealed up, flat disk-like elements added. . . . Some visitors saw an influence of Picasso."9 Also, I think, an influence from Japan and other primitive art sources. These influences from the past could have come from a number of cultures which built large sculptural pieces from clay. Among the most ancient are the votive images of predynastic Egypt.10 The Han and Tang Chinese produced many sculptural objects, the size of which seemed to depend on the wealth and position of the deceased, that were buried with the dead for their use in the next world: tomb defenders to chase away evil spirits, towered pleasure pavillons, or simple everyday objects.11 The Japanese Haniwa tomb figures which lined the burial approach express real feeling for the clay from which they are made.12 Not even a brief discussion of clay forms could ignore the powerful pottery forms from

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10Woldering, op. cit., pp. 31-33.


12Ibid., pp. 58-59.
Mexico and Latin America. Particularly impressive are the beautifully-abstracted figures of the Mayan and Olmec-Zapotec styles, hand-built forms which seem to express the very essence of clay.  

I try not to force or contrive a piece in advance, even though I make pencil sketches of shape and space in integration. So that the work can proceed spontaneously, I generally leave the sketches at home when going to work at the studio.

All perfect accomplishment in art or life is accompanied by the curious sensation that it is happening of itself--that it is not forced, studied or contrived. The sensation that the action is happening of itself, neither from an agent nor to a witness.

Clay is, of course, the material in which I work. It has definite structural limitations that are due to its lack of tensile strength and fragility during the firing process. For this reason overly-extended and unsupported shapes, thin or weak bases and large overhanging masses are difficult to fire, as they tend to droop, sag, break apart or crack. Inevitably during the process of building a form, textures such as torn edges, fingerprints and tool marks become impressed into the clay surface. In this way the surface nature of wet clay is naturally exploited. For me, the early plastic stage in which many surface textures

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and spontaneous shapes can be developed more than makes up for the structural limitations imposed by the firing. Furthermore, it is always possible to plan on adding other materials to the fired piece. Voyage (Fig. 1) incorporates bronze into the design and Head Rest (Fig. 4) has a velvet pillow. The intrinsically humble nature of clay—that of being, after all, just dirt—is perhaps its greatest advantage. To create something of worth from such a worthless substance is, in the least, gratifying, and, at best, the very epitome of creativity.

In accordance with tradition, color as a glaze has a natural and integral place on a ceramic form. Color added to space-form manipulation can become an impressive problem, one which few ceramic sculptors have really tackled. I have tried in a few instances to create a work in which color and form are of equal importance, one not dominating the other. However, the color of the bottle in Figure 5 plays the dominant role, whereas color in Study Number 2 (Fig. 6) is subordinate to the form. Slab and Wheel (Fig. 7) is probably the most successful in this regard, but the problem still remains.

One of the most spontaneous and immediate pottery processes is Raku. In this ancient Japanese process, finger and tool marks become a record of how the piece was made and altered. The quality of directness of handling and decorating should be quite evident in the final form. The Raku piece (Fig. 8) was fired in a small furnace at about 1800 degrees. When the lead-base glaze appears to be melted,
Figure 4. Head Rest
Figure 5. Stoneware Bottle
Figure 6. Study Number 2
Figure 7. Slab and Wheel
Figure 8. Raku
the piece is removed, red-hot, from the furnace and plunged into a bucket full of sawdust, leaves or other combustible material, where it is left, covered, to reduce in the highly carbon-filled atmosphere for several minutes. During this time glazes which contain iron or copper oxide change from the oxidized to the reduced state and change dramatically in color: Iron changes from its natural tan or straw color to cool colors of grey, grey-green, or olive-green. Copper oxide changes from warm shades of green to a bright or deep red. The color change is arrested by plunging the still-hot piece into cold water. The whole firing time for several pots is usually less than an hour.

As a thesis subject I have chosen altered and constructed forms. These forms have been made in a number of ways: Slab and Wheel was made by combining wheel-thrown forms with slab pieces; Study Number 1 (Fig. 9) was made by placing two bowls lip to lip and adding slab strips and thrown spouts; Head Rest was constructed by beating a thrown cylinder into an oval shape, cutting holes into which pieces of slab clay were inserted and finally, adding the pinched and constructed center piece. Except for the two small bowls at the top, Study Number 2 was made entirely of formed slabs (Fig. 5). The cookie jar (Fig. 2) was made from a wheel-thrown cylinder that was capped and placed on its side. While in this position the top and side handles were added and the opening was cut into the new top of the form.
Figure 9. Study Number 1
Stored somewhere in a misty part of my brain is an ideal, a perfect union of elements that would express all my ideas about form, space and color in one piece. This ideal is never achieved; in fact it seems constantly to be changing and I never come close to expressing it. It is not simply the believing and practicing of ideas and theories that make a work of art. "The ways of art, like life itself, are, if not accidental, at least mysterious and to an extent beyond evident human control."

The artist's response and intuition about the material and piece with which and upon which he is working have much more to do with the success or failure of any work. In any event, there are many divergent elements that must be dealt with or, perhaps, synthesized in the final form.

All things bear the shade on their backs,
And the sun in their arms;
By a blending of breath
From the sun and the shade
Equilibrium comes to the world.

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15 Nelson, op. cit., p. 68.

16 Tzu, op. cit., p. 95.
Figure 10. Square Circle
REFERENCES


