SEEING my way

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A Thesis

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by

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To make art it is necessary to first learn how to SEE, to learn how to respond and to react to what is around and within oneself. Once I began to center on visual and psychological images which were generated through this process, I experimented with an assortment of materials and techniques. This led to preferences in direction and emphasis for my visual pieces which have become MY WAY of channeling and working with my 'art-energy.'

'Art-energy' is the word I have adopted to describe the phenomena of creating with physical materials the images, impulses, and emotions which I constantly experience and identify. I use this art-energy to generate a framework for my seeing and my doing with the context of making art.

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During the years I was a studio potter, 1971-1976, I endeavored to make strong statements with each of my thrown pieces as I dealt with both form and function and with their interrelation. As my work developed, I received positive feedback from fellow potters, customers and students.

Eventually, however, I decided I wanted to learn more about the 'fine art' aspects of this medium which I believed somehow transcended, though were part of, the craft orientations of my work. I felt that formal instruction and exposure to painting, drawing and sculpture would expand my perspectives.

Graduate school has indeed provided me with technical skills and experience with a wide range of materials besides clay. I have had constructive critical feedback on my ideas and my pieces. I have also had the opportunity to learn about the historical perspectives of art.

Having spent these years of sustained learning, experimentation, personal development and teaching, I now have a consistent approach for identifying and channeling this art-energy, this internal impetus toward seeing and expressing my way in visual terms, as I continue to examine questions based on my experiences and on my evolution as a working artist.
My primary consideration is to present new visual realities through my work which will serve as a stimulus for consideration or contemplation. By consciously and deliberately combining both formal elements and personal attitudes I intend for my pieces to stimulate feelings, memories or moods which may or may not be the same for each viewer, or even for myself over a period of time.

I intend for my work to be well-crafted as well as visually exciting; the strength of the pieces depends greatly on both characteristics. I balance technical aspects with the power of the raw materials so that one does not overwhelm the other.

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As I have developed as an artist I have been stimulated and influenced by many other artists. One ceramicist who has had great impact on me is Stephen de Staebler. He manipulates the clay so that it does not lose the primary qualities of its organic origins. The pieces he creates maintain an articulation of the material in its elementary form, even though they may evoke images or serve functions.

His work confirms my belief that the finished surface of clay need not be glazed, nor must it be smooth or 'refined.'
His sculptures seem most at home in grass or among stones outdoors. My pieces, too, though visually very different evoke a presence which seem more integral with a natural environment rather than a gallery.

The written words of David Smith have also had a great significance on me. I am not so stimulated by his sculpture as I am by his thoughts about being an artist. The following quotations of his are one which I read again and again as I work:

"The battle for the solution is the most important. The conflict for realization is what makes art, not its certainty, nor its technique or material."

"If you ask me why I make sculpture, I must answer that it is my way of life, my balance, and my justification for being."

"The artist must work towards that which he does not know. Whether this is called invention or finding or searching, it must be a projection beyond the given state of art."

"Art if made from dreams and visions and things not known and least of all from things that can be said. It comes from the inside of who you are when you face yourself. If is an inner declaration of purpose."

"We must speak of affection -- intense affection which the artist has for his work -- an affection of relief, proudness, belligerent vitality, satisfaction and conviction. Can or do the critics, the audience, the philosophers ever possess the intensity of affection for the work which the creator possesses? Do they have the belligerent vitality of understanding which seems the attribute of contemporary work? Can they project the intense affection to the work of art?"

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As I deal with my own work and its relation to the art which is being made today, I have asked myself many questions. John Cage once said, "Choice consists in choosing what questions to ask." I agree. The questions we ask are the key to how and to what we learn to see, and it is essential to the direction we choose as a result. Any answer we find should necessarily generate more questions so that our work continues to grow. I have compiled a list of these questions I use which I believe are important ones for students of art and for artists to consider from time to time. (See appendix)

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As I work I deal with a general problem-solving framework which utilizes, cooperatively and interchangeably, both ideas or concepts and materials and techniques. I have developed a working procedure which remains rather consistent as I explore and experiment. This process consists of the following steps:

a) I first focus on a particular idea (how I SEE an experience, an attitude, image or belief), or on certain materials or techniques.

b) I then analyze, through thinking and actual studio work, the alternatives in order to define and to limit what I choose to pay attention to. (Again, it is MY way.)
c) During and after these explorations I evaluate what I have done both personally (what does it mean to me?) and on a wider basis (how can or do others relate to this?)
d) I then start working to resolve the alternatives and the extensions which invariably are presented. My work thus evolves in series as my ideas influence one another.

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As an artist I have developed from three basic points of departure, or reference, on a consistent basis. I use these three directions with essentially separate strategies, but in often unexpected ways they interrelate, or I deliberately join them when appropriate.

The three areas/ideas on which I have focused are:

A - AN EXAGGERATED RIDGE FORM. This ceramic form, first developed through a casserole shape, has taken many convolutions and permutations as I have joined it with a variety of materials and processes. The interior of what began as a vessel form has become most important to me primarily as a sensual, concave shape. I have placed the form in sewer pipe, under water, buried it in earth and clay, and perched it in crevices of trees. Most recently, I have embedded it inside a spherical ceramic form. Because I have worked so much with earth tones, I painted these new forms with iridescent acrylics so they acquired a pearly, ethereal sensibility. Their function now be-
comes more visual rather than utilitarian. I intend to continue to take this shape through further permutations.

B - THE USE OF THE HEXAGON. This straightforward geometric shape has become the basis for much of my work with many materials. I first began using hexagonal clay tiles to put photographs on their surfaces. I like how the shape 'interlocks' with itself, and I have explored this relationship in ceramic wall murals and with handmade paper. Clay platelets, or crystals, are hexagonally shaped. Thus the connection of this form as I use it with clay is integrated very nicely. I have carried this aspect into my work with roofing slate which is cut on one end into three edges. By placing the ends together a hexagon is formed. I also sketch this 'mirror image' onto the surface of the slate.

C - LAYERS, EDGES, STRATIFICATIONS AND LAMINATIONS OF DIFFERENT MATERIALS. These elements consistently have been an area of exploration in my work. I relate to the geological textured formations I see in my environment through my sculptural pieces. Slate and shale are formed by heat and pressure into stratified material. I endeavor to emphasize this
critical characteristic as I work with it. I also combine glass, metal, and plexiglass with it to create 'laminated spaces' which carry this theme further.

My primary concern as I work with handmade paper is its textured surface and its ragged deckle edge which emphasize its strate orientation. I laminate color as I make the paper, layer upon layer. I fold the paper to display its edges as they relate to its surface.

This orientation has also influenced my thrown pieces to the extent that I tend to avoid smooth exterior surfaces in my functional work; I literally dig my fingers into the clay to create a textured, stratified surface.

Within these three directions which are MY WAY at this time, there are infinite variations and possibilities. I find as I continue to explore the givens and the new perspectives that my judgements become increasingly more discriminating, and my work becomes both more unified and more personal.

It is evident that I approach art on many levels, often simultaneously. I am always playing with possibilities both in and outside the studio. Something I have resolved in one media will translate to another. My ideas or themes of approach bear influence on each other. Again, it is intrinsic to SEEING MY WAY.

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Besides learning a great deal about materials and techniques as I have worked, I have also come to terms with several mental attitudes which influence my activities as an artist:

* It is crucial to spend time alone in the studio without distraction or diversion. I go to a teacher when I have specific questions, not as a 'cop out' to my own ability to resolve my problems.
* I have learned to trust my creative momentum even through slow or 'dry' periods; the art-energy is always working.
* I now trust myself to take risks with new materials or unfamiliar processes; I can learn anything I want to, and relatively quickly at that.
* I find that my work does draw from my exposure to traditional sources, but I feel it must not be derivative or 'safe' in a decorative sense. I do not want to make 'boring' art which speaks to problems or concepts that have already been dealt with successfully by others.
* I am open to accident and spontaneity within the studio processes which may lead me in a different direction than I originally intended. I trust my flexibility around my basic considerations.
* I consider myself my hardest critic; I always ask 'Why?' about my ideas and my materials. I take nothing for granted, and I try to maintain high standards.
* I see that my visual work is essentially a 'by-product' of my art-energy. The value of each piece resides basically in its temporary resolution of the problems I pose to myself, or it is a 'for the time being' answer to the questions I explore with materials and techniques. Sometimes, then, permanence of the piece is incidental or deliberately avoided.

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In addition to considering my own specific directions in art, I have thought about 'Art' on a broader basis. What, really, is the meaning of this world? It has many connotations and definitions depending on our experiences and our point of reference.

One primary aspect of a state of mind concerning 'Art' is that it involves an action (an idea or concept which is carried out visually, audibly or through performance) which then evokes interaction with whomever it reaches. This leads ultimately to a reaction, a response. This action-interaction-reaction is present regardless of the time period in which the art object was originally created and when it is viewed or experienced. This process is the basic motivation of an artist to present his work for public response.

It is both fascinating and educational to receive reaction from those who interact with my work. People respond in ways I never considered. The 'cyclic' nature where this reaction inevitably leads to further action on my part has helped
sustain my development as an artist.

Today in our culture 'Art' has come to embrace many other aspects besides just the consideration of the actual pieces. The hexagonal-shaped format serves my purpose of illustrating how these various aspects are each related to one another. (See appendix)

Attitudes, choice of material and technique, sellability or not, are all influenced by current styles, schools and traditional bearings. As an artist I must consider all of this interaction carefully, even if I choose to reject this context in terms of public exposure.

The time in graduate school, then, has been a period of synthesis, and a sustained opportunity to think and work creatively. I have used this environment to develop and sustain my art-energy and to delineate and to clarify my directions. I will continue to respond to situations and stimulations as an artist who is SEEING MY WAY.
APPENDIX

Questions For Myself and Others Along The Way ...

*What, to you, is art? Does the definition change the more you work with art materials, the more you see others' art?

*When you start to work, do you have a basic, root question you want to explore or explain? Where does it come from?

*What prompts you to make art -- assignments, materials, problems, ideas or concepts, expectations of others?

*What is an artist? Are you an artist?

*Do you make art within traditional style or premise? If not, why do you choose to break away from it?

*How do you feel influenced by 'current art trends,' if indeed you do?

*How much of what we see and react to within an art context is influenced or determined by our societal and political values, by our myths?

*Is art influenced by a sense of nationalism or does it exist on a universal level?

*Is man's destiny ultimately enlightened or confused by the presence of art?

*Is it possible to see art of the past in the same way it was originally viewed?

*Can anything become art? Why? How? When?

*What is the relationship between uniqueness and universality in art?

*Does the meaning of art come from the object, the artist, the viewer, or the context?

*Have reproductions changed our meaning of art?

*Should art teach us something? If so, what??

*As you make art, or before you start to work, do you write or speak about what you intend to do? If so, it yourself or to others?
*Do you care if others see or respond to what you do, or do you work primarily only for yourself?

*What do art critics have to do with artists and art? Do you think they are necessary for the art world?

*Do you think it is important to learn about art and start making art at a very young age if you are going to be any good at it?

*How do you decide on the scale of your work? Is there a relationship between scale and the importance of the work?

*How important are emotional, metaphysical or psychological considerations in your art?

*What is beauty? What is aesthetics? Do you strive for these in your work?

*Would you deliberately make something ugly? Why or why not?

*Is art basically elitist? Can only artists understand other artists' work?

*Should art be entertaining?

*Is art for art's sake a valid premise?

*Can art be 'non-referential'?

*Can art be 'non-objectified'?

*When is an object an art object and when is it an object?

*What role has the artist played historically? Has this role changed today?

*What is the role of content and function in how we relate to art objects? Can we create art without one or both?

*When is something art and when is it decoration?

*What is the relationship between art and craft, both in process and product?

*Does your intent to sell or not to sell your art influence what kind of art you make?

*Is the permanence of an art piece important to you?
*How do you relate each characteristic or part of your piece to its whole? Vice versa?

*Do you ever create a piece that the viewer must 'complete' in his mind psychologically?

*Do you prefer to show your work in series, or to only show the 'final' results of your efforts?

*Can you tell when something that is complex becomes chaotic?

*What is it that unifies your work? Do you seek coherency or unity? Why and how, if so? If not, why not?

*What is a frame for? Do you use one? If not, why not?

*In what ways can a scientist be an artist?

*What are the differences or similarities between inquiry and documentation?

*Would you design a work of art and let a machine reproduce it?

*What role, if any, does chance or randomness play in your work?

*What is the difference between work and play? Why do we say 'artwork'?

*What is style? What is your style? How did you arrive at it?

*Is art 'sexless' or can it be seen as having either masculine or feminine characteristics or symbols? Is art stronger with or without these attributes?

*What role does your ego play in your art?

*What is the difference between art about life and art about art?

*As an artist, what do you expect from art?
HISTORICAL CONTENTS/TRADITION
(adhere to or break from)

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS
(the art market game to sell or not to sell)

MATERIALS
(possibilities, variations, limits)

ART

IDEAS CONCEPTS EXPERIENCES

TOOLS PROCESSES TECHNIQUES

SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE RECOGNITION
(the politics of current aesthetics the critics)
Fired Slate 15" x 24"
clay, slumped glass

Fired State

Handmade Paper
18" x 30"