BENEATH THE SURFACE

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by
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The Ohio State University
1986

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To my mother and father
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My most sincere thanks and deepest appreciation go to Professors Deborah Horrell and Robert Shay, for their insight, encouragement and unending patience. Thanks also go to Professor Richard Roth, whose questions and suggestions were well taken. The support of my friends and colleagues, Nina Aberle, Juliellen Byrne, Mary Forker and Gerald Fulton, was nothing less than invaluable. To Philip Lamie, who has become a brother to me, I offer a special thanks for his advocacy and fair criticism.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

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It is not down in any map; true places never are.

Herman Melville
Moby Dick

With unintentional regularity I find myself driving long distances to get to other places. The lengths of time spent doing little but steering the isolated chamber of my car opens thoughts to another level of consciousness. As I drive I begin to sense an underlying force, a ghost in the machine. I realize there is more involved in the scheme of things than is evident. Time extends farther, distant visions fore and aft, grander forces. And I begin to feel this big picture, too. Gravity holds me to the surface. It weights the car to the highway and me to my seat. I can feel the Earth beneath me and the space around me.

Was that what travel meant? An exploration of the deserts of memory, rather than those around me?

Claude Levi-Strauss
Tristes Tropiques

Time fascinates me. Time is a phenomenon embodied by the desert of the American Southwest. In the desert, time warps. The land is laid open by time, where erosion makes
visible an abstract concept that we measure physically with clocks, calendars and maps.

The time I have spent flying, as a child in my father's Cessna and as an adult in 747s, has reinforced these connections. The distance creates a clarity. Humans appear as rulers imposing order and artifice on a plan of grander design. On the ground we worry about an inventory of what is, but from the air we can think of what might be.

*It ain't what you make, it's what makes you do it.*

Dennis Oppenheim

Sittings

I began to learn about Zen not so much through words spoken to me or from books read, as I did by watching the actions of a professor, and by looking at Japanese ceramics. Zen is an essential part of Japanese ceramic history, and it has become a part of my work with clay.

I find that Zen helps explain my feelings about art and life. For me, Zen is the will of any activity, doing anything perfectly or imperfectly, perfectly. It is a belief which I need not believe in, a thing which is not a thing. It is both egoism and egolessness; nothing can exist without its separteness from oneness. It is reflective, it is simple. It is quiet, it is essence.
The best [routes] always connect nowhere to nowhere . . .
The main skill is to keep from getting lost.

Robert Pirsig
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

The zen of travel is the process, the experience of getting from one place to another. To travel is not to arrive at a predetermined destination. It is to open the eyes and mind and senses so that nothing is missed along the way. I am often surprised at what I find.

Travel usually involves physical movement. In dance, travelling is moving across the floor and through the space. When I dance I find another connection between the past and present. It allows me a conscious/physical and unconscious/psychological experience of space and time. I feel gravity when I dance.

Art comes from not believing what is going on in this world.

Nancy Spero
A Sketchbook with Voices

It is difficult to put into words things that exist only as feelings within me. The importance of what happens on a day to day basis in our society means little to me. Politics and business are so selfishly impersonal, artificial and temporary when looking at the world in geologic time. History is shaped by geologic time, and recorded history is a by-product of human presence.
... we must not suppose that human individuals invent their specific human ways with every birth. Like the instincts, the collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited.

Carl Jung
Modern Man in Search of a Soul

Artifacts make me curious. Each one is a partial and temporary answer, found by digging in an unfathomable puzzle of mystery and revelation, only to become another question. Individually they are fragmented, removed from their context. Collectively they may reveal an answer. We use artifacts to establish and validate a human existence in a particular time and place. These objects serve to realize the connection to our collective unconscious. They are tangible manifestations somehow understood by all.

I have nothing against art, but all the same, it's a pretty dull and narrow affair compared with a world view in which all of nature spoke to man.

Claude Levi-Strauss
Myth and Meaning

Most of our modern society has disconnected its conscious from this undercurrent, this continuum. As a romantic and idealist I think of a simpler time when art was an integral part of life and culture. I would like to reconnect the past to the present, reducing the elements to their essence. Art-making is the connecting vehicle.
And I'm still not convinced that I didn't penetrate beyond geography.

Saul Bellow
Henderson the Rain King

Sand, clay and stone are different forms of the same material, the same parent. Stones possess qualities that attract us to use them as markers, monuments, material to build with: nature's building blocks. Sand is impermanent, transient, transformed from stone by time. Clay can be either.

I knew something about Navaho sandpainting and of the Hopi belief that their people emerged from below the surface of the desert. I'd seen photographs of rock gardens in Japanese temples. And I always drew in the sand at the beach. Later, I made some art from sand, with clay objects penetrating the surface. These may have been the most successful pieces in realizing my concerns, but I didn't know this when I made them.

Another time I found myself making clay tablets, which I thought of as maps, a record of a place and time. I thought of a land surface manipulated by a human hand, and the implication that they had been dug up from the earth. Maps are records of measurement that visualize what is abstract in nature as well as what is too immense to be seen. I use them to guide me when travelling, to get to another place.
Clay is moulded into a vessel; the utility of the vessel depends on its hollow interior.

Lao Tzu
The Sayings of Lao Tzu

I made some vessels from clay that I grouped together in random piles on the floor. There were many of them but each one was different from the others, part of a whole. They looked like stones and rocks to me, boulders I might walk across in the desert. Each one had a small opening I put there to suggest a contained space. I thought about kivas, underground rooms, and their connection to another place.

The art I have made has been egoless in an attempt to speak more universally about a common existence. I have tried to reduce what is not necessary to find an essence. I see answers beneath the surface. Or are there? The lure of the unknown can captivate a romantic. I have used art to answer questions, to find an understanding of myself. But each piece asks another question.

And so it goes.

Kurt Vonnegut
Breakfast of Champions
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