EXPERIMENTATION:

A LEARNING PROCESS

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by
Mark A. Belfonti, Bachelor of Fine Arts

The Ohio State University
1980

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser

Department of Art
Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................. 1
Functionalism ............................................... 2
Discarded Function ........................................ 3
Unconventional Surfaces ................................. 5
Landscapes ................................................... 7
Elimination of the Wheel ................................. 10
Formal Attitudes ........................................... 12
Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to explain the evolution of my work at The Ohio State University. It is not necessarily intended to have universal implications nor to be a technical essay, but rather, a personal journey pertaining to the evolution of my work.

Through discovering a personal vision of ideas and forms, through the use of texture, space, balance and mass, I have found my identity in the art world. My work is direct in the use of materials, it shows experimentation and discovery. The act of creating work must please me for the work to be valid. I need to express myself. This expression is an outlet for my energy; the creative process and the energy derived from it is vital to the success of my work. However important the process is, ultimately the work must stand alone. I am interested in the visual aspects of communication, but if my work needs to be explained, then it is not a success, for it ideally exists apart from a spoken language.
Functionalism

As a person who was strongly attracted to the process of throwing on the potters wheel, I came to The Ohio State University to study functional pottery. I was a potter who had always dreamed of elevating my work to the state of a fine art. It occurred to me that my work was more sculptural than functional, when I happened upon the idea of making teapots. Not just ordinary teapots that are small, light and primarily functional in their intent, but extremely large, massive and awkward teapots that were an assemblage of thrown and handbuilt forms and were quite aggressive; they had a "machismo" quality which reflected my personality. The concept of function continued to be a factor, whether as a reality or simply a metaphor. I felt that the vessel could also be dealt with as an idea, rather than simply as a reality.

While building these new teapots, I repeatedly asked if these pieces had to be functional; and further, it finally became apparent that they no longer needed to be teapots at all.

These teapots are now a part of me that I would like to forget, except that some of the ideas I now incorporate in my sculpture were initially derived from creating the teapots. I liked the casual loose approach that is possible with clay, an approach exemplified by the Japanese Joman, Bizen, Momoyama and Oribe Periods which was rekindled by Peter Voulkos during the 1950's Abstract Expressionist movement in clay. Inherent in this movement was a "larger than life", high energy way of working the clay that I felt compatible with.
Discarded Function

Upon completion of the massive "teapot" series I felt a shifting of interests from functional pottery to ceramic sculpture. In order to further abstract the form, I abandoned all handles, feet, spouts and lids, adding instead, projections, protrusions and extrusions of massive clay. At this point I also began working more spontaneously whenever possible, taking advantage of the various accidents that occurred in the assembling and firing processes. This attitude developed in me a measure of self confidence in my ability to respond to the unexpected. This resulted in my actively seeking risks with the physical aspects of the pieces. I worked with a traditional method of assemblage, but by working without a preconceived image and by executing ideas as they arose during the process, I created sculpture out of the fusion and contradiction of separate forms. The forms were massive and expressed the energy of that mass. My work took on an abstract expressionist flavor without my realizing it. I was using the organic forms of Voulkos, playing soft against soft, hard against hard, and soft against hard. I was searching for new, more personally expressive forms developed from the fusion of the wheel thrown vessel with that of hand/slab construction. In dealing with the thrown forms as a base and with handbuilt appendages the sculpture still had reference to the teapot, in that the thrown form, in comparison to the appendages, remained the dominant part of the piece. The thrown elements were influenced by a number of sources: Don Reitz¹, Bob Winokur², but

1. Don Reitz, Professor of Ceramics, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
2. Bob Winokur, Professor of Ceramics, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.
predominantly from the Korean Pedestal forms of the Kaya and Silla periods of the 5th and 6th centuries A.D..

A reaction to working spontaneously resulted in a need to have strong, definite ideas behind my work; ideas that drew out inner emotions or inner meanings that I could respond to in clay. With the occurrence of the reactor accident at Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania there developed for me an intense personal interest due to the location so near to my home. This concern manifests itself in my sculpture where sterile "cooling tower" forms and imagined mutant appendages were joined in a series of pieces that I felt were expressive of a concrete idea. These appendages took on a more dominating visual force than in prior work.
Unconventional Surfaces

Because I enjoyed clay when it was still in the wet state, I chose terra sigillata\(^1\) as a surface finish in an attempt to capture the plastic state of the clay. But for technical reasons terra sigillata failed. More importantly, the fact that terra sigillata was identified as a traditional and predictable solution to the surface dilemma disturbed me. I was holding on to the traditional values of pottery, grasping to the aesthetic concept of "truth to the materials". What I was doing was moving beyond traditional pottery in form and construction, but contradicting myself by finishing the work with traditional methods.

It occurred to me that there might be an analogy between music and the visual arts; and since my taste in music tended towards "hard rock" I endeavored to capture that sensibility in my surfaces. My interpretation of incorporating "hard rock" music with my art involved the use of intense color and techniques that were most often not part of the traditional Japanese stoneware potters vocabulary. I incorporated such materials as: air-brushing and glaze spraying, undergalzes, lusters, acrylic paints, decals, and combinations with other materials such as glass, cement, plastics, feathers, glue, paper, nails and anything else that I found. It involved either multiple firings or no firings at all to get the desired effect. I used both mechanical and natural organic processes. My work developed a crude and offensive appearance.

Humor, if used, was a dry humor that would only appeal to a person knowledgable in the ceramic movement.

---

1. Terra Sigillata - A red vitreous slip glaze made of fine decanted particles of clay, and normally oxidized to form a red body.
The work began to take on the flavor of both the funk movement of the 1960's and the so called "Super Object" of the 1970's. Both involved the radical use of glazes and humor that was a direct reaction to the Abstract Expressionist movement. It was at this juncture that my work started to flow. The sarcasm in my work was derived from the way I treated the clay surface. I utilized a somewhat loose but traditional surface juxtaposed against any offbeat finish to complete my piece. This combination of two sensibilities gave the work a unique psychological feeling that has been seen in all my early work. This psychological feeling was also created from the juxtaposition of the mutant forms against a "normal" environment.
Landscapes

I was drawn into a body of work that closely paralleled the mutant growth series: "fantasy landscapes". They were closely related because they both emanated from my imagination. During this series I created a number of cactus landscapes. I was still dealing with a thrown base, but this time the cactus elements became the appendages that adorned the tops of the forms. In this series I introduced a foreign element - nails - that was to appear in my work recurrently. The spines of the cactus became nails - which were fired directly into the forms. In terms of the surface, I tried everything from paint to decals, but ended up using cement to finish the forms. The cement created an entirely new surface that differed from the clay; it was covering up the forms instead of complimenting them. I respond favorably to the dry matt surfaces that the cement created, but was struggling to get the cement to adhere to the forms. It became evident that clay-like materials were needed for physical compatibility and "gritty slips" became the answer. These "gritty slips" (a combination of fire clay, ball clay, goldart clay, frits and oxides) seemed to compliment almost every piece that I created. Their best feature was that when they were applied by spraying, the surface and texture of the clay was not hidden. The "gritty slips" gave every form a soft, sponge-like finish resembling styrofoam. I did numerous experiments to lower their maturation points and developed a greater palette of colors, and in a very short period of time, the surfaces once again became predictable, but this time in a positive sense.
During the "fantasy landscape" series, I was trying to integrate the thrown base with the handbuilt appendages through the repetition of the handbuilt appendages on the base, through the glazing of the surface or through the repetition of the texture.

The dissolution of the symmetrical form was a major breakthrough in my work. I finally disavowed the traditional thrown form that I was addicted to. The slicing also added variation to a very homogeneous surface. By cutting into the form and thus adding a texture and pattern to the negative space, and by using the positive form as an appendage on top, I was able to integrate the piece. This series started out very tentatively, and I was using sharp, geometric forms that were influenced by George Mason.¹ Using a random placement on top of the forms created an abstract and natural environment. I was dealing more with balance, mass, and the rhythm of articulate spaces.

In order to preserve the spontaneous quality of the piece, I started using solid forms that were achieved by stretching the clay and throwing it against a solid surface. These forms started to resemble rocks and geologic structures. The refinement of the base gave it a more solid appearance. It went from a classic Korean form to a more conical shape. I retained the forms in a pedestal format by using a narrower cylinder under the main form, but the work and ideas were primarily the same. I was merely refining the rough edges of the work.

As the work started to become reminiscent of geologic forms, I decided to formally adopt the idea and create a series of "mountain

1. George Mason - a visiting artist who attended The Ohio State University in 1979.
landscapes". The "mountain landscapes" were influenced primarily from the disparity between the lack of mountains in Ohio and the presence of mountains in my home in Pennsylvania. By slicing into the forms or cutting them in half, and by adding a textured slab, the resulting textured surface looked like a cliff; a cliff formed by man. It resembled the type of cliff that results from a highway crew cutting its way through a mountain.

One change that occurred in the "mountain landscapes" was that I was not limiting the handbuilt appendages to only the top of the base. With the start of this new series, the base itself became split in different segments ranging from halves to thirds and quarters. Also, the appendages flowed from the ground to the top of the base, acting as bridges and alternate bases. This effect integrated the piece even more than by merely repeating an element or a surface quality. The split of the piece into segments also created canyons and chasms. Certain areas of the base were paddled and altered to emphasize a more rock like quality and to reflect lights. This technique was also influenced by the textures the cliffs acquired after they were blasted and cut through.

For the first time, finishing the piece was a natural development within the construction of the piece and no longer presented a separate concern. By spraying "gritty slips" in combination with dry underglazes I achieved a very soft and textured surface. I was now able to play with light sources reflecting on the cliff, utilizing different values to bring about a contrast between lights and shadows.
Elimination of the Wheel

A very important transition that occurred in my work was the elimination of the thrown parts and the concentration entirely on the hand-built assemblages that are on the tops of the piece. The throwing was becoming a crutch that was addicting; I was afraid to try to create something without the use of a technique that I had been using for a long time. But I felt the need for a change and this series provided the opportunity to institute that change. I enlarged the handbuilt rock structures that were on top of my pieces, and this simple change opened up a wide new range of possibilities. When these rock structures acquired a large scale, my eye perceived and reacted to elements that I had been dealing with superficially in my earlier work. The forms took on a stronger, more massive shape, and the negative space became an even more important consideration in my work. I subconsciously began dealing with balance, and upon becoming aware of its presence, I consciously incorporated it as a major element. The surface and texture of the clay also became more important as I gained conscious control over them. Spontaneity again played an important roll in the way that I handled the clay; I desired a fresh natural quality. The way clay reacts to pressure and weight exerted on it, the way the clay bends and sags, tears and stretches, became consciously sought after qualities when I constructed a piece.

Other influences now played a significant roll in my work. Stonehenge, with its massive slabs and strong forms became a logical influence.
The post and lintel joint was an important early factor in the construction of my work. Monument Valley in Arizona, was another new influence because of the strength of the natural formations along with the random balance of one form on another. My work started incorporating potential energy; the energy created by stacking forms, the energy created by balancing massive forms, and the energy of the mass itself. The rock structures, now precariously balanced and flowing with rhythm, took on the feeling of oriental caligraphy. This occurred spontaneously at first, and later on quite deliberately.
Formal Attitudes

There is an ongoing basic premise or idea behind the mountain landscape series. This premise is the struggle between man-made forms and natural landscapes. The man-made forms are seen through the act of gouging through the mountains by highway crews. This is symbolized in my work by the thrown and distorted series of mountain landscapes. The natural landscapes are those that are unaltered by man --- the mountains and rock formations of Monument Valley. This is represented in my work by the totally handbuilt forms that are spontaneous and fresh. The methods of formation of the piece --- the stretching techniques --- gives the piece the fresh quality that is seen in nature. There is also an inner struggle that is going on in each piece. The thrown form that has the quality of being made by man is contrasted to the handbuilt forms that are natural looking. There is also a struggle between the way the piece is set up in a random, natural fashion, and the knowledge that the piece is constructed by man. The inner struggle that occurs in the handbuilt form is a struggle of process verses formation. The process is the construction of a work by man resembling nature; while the formation is the creation of a work --- supposedly by natural causes --- but altered by man. The difference is in the "idea" of who created the work, man or nature.

As I contemplate my work, I have perceived a subtle change in the way that I think and create. Earlier, my work had a crude and sarcastic look, but by refining my ideas and processes, I realize that I was not afraid to make art that is beautiful.

A very important consideration in my work is that I use as few preconceived forms as possible. I start with a quantity of clay and work on it, expand on it and interact with it to finally create a finished
statement. I enjoy working out my problems in a series, carrying an idea until I am satisfied with the results. Preferring to experiment and explore as the need arises, I do not hesitate to jump ahead if a stronger idea presents itself. I take my ideas and impetus for the new pieces from previous work.

My most recent work involves simplification and refinement, going one step backwards and dealing with the more basic principles of mass, form, line, space, balance, surface, and color. I am being more direct in my approach to art, enjoying the results of mass and weight. The sagging and the compression that results from mass and weight exerted on it induces a "masoch" massive feeling in clay. I use "casual" forms that are a result of my approach to clay, contrasted by the placement of a hard edge or a seemingly ironic element. Negative space has become a very important element. The conscious use of this space can cause tension, calmness and an illusion to motion. Potential energy, a result of either tension or the thrusting motion of balance, is a visually exciting quality in my work.

Surface texture has become an additional feature in my scheme of ideas. The lack of "handling" the surface of the clay renders that surface more spontaneous, natural and responsive to my sensibilities.

I enjoy bold, bright, brilliant colors but frequently my work calls for the subtle use of color that compliments the forms. This usually means the use of sober and earthy hues. However, being subtle in the use of color does not necessarily mean the exclusion of bright, vivid colors. Subtleness is an awareness of how, when, and in what amounts a color is intrinsic to the form. The influence of the way nature uses color is
vital to the way I personally see color being used in my work. Finishing a form by placing a cool color against a warm color gives the piece tension and in many instances, a surreal ironic quality. Using color as an added element, juxtaposing two totally different colors, is another way to promote interest and energy in my work. Toning down an active surface by the use of earthy colors or highlighting an idle surface by the use of vivid colors are methods I use to complete the forms.

My thesis, to some extent, will continue as long as I create art, because my thesis, which is my work, revolves around experimentation and discovery.

I am now incorporating foreign materials with clay in my work, creating tension and irony in the forms. In the future, I see myself working more exclusively with other materials, especially cast cement forms, which will allow me to work on a large scale. Working with architects and through public businesses, I see my work leaning towards "public" sculpture and environmental installations. But I still see my work as being direct in the use of materials; the creative process and the energy derived form it as still being vital to the success of my work.