OFF CENTER IN THE MIDDLE

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Art

by

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Graduate school was a time of intense growth for me. This growth is both part of my art and also of my understanding of my philosophical approach to the creative act. I have gained a much clearer insight into the influences, both in and out of the studio, that affect my work and are manifest in the art. I have also discovered that the process of making art, the actual time spent working in the studio is very important to me, probably, in fact, more so than the actual finished piece of art. It is my intention, to illustrate my understanding of this period of growth during my two years in graduate school.

I trace my present work to the envelope jar series (plate 1) which I began about a year ago. These vessel forms occupy three-dimensional space because they are free-standing and self-supporting. However, they truly infer a relationship to two-dimensional and non-volumetric space because I intend them to be viewed from the front and back only. When the viewer sees these forms from the side, they seem to disappear, for they possess only a knife’s edge width of two clay slabs joined together. There is barely any space between them, only enough to keep the side walls from collapsing.

Until recently I believed that my years spent as a photographer had no influence on my work in clay. I considered the particular ways with which I dealt with visual information in photography and the specific method
of seeing in that medium as having passed. I now realize that this assumption was incorrect; the influences of photography on my work in clay consist of a reliance on the square or horizontal format and a continued concern with two-dimensional space. The envelope jars are the best example of this; in them, the potential for containment has been denied through the two-dimensional treatment of a traditional, three-dimensional object. These pieces are about the concept of a vessel rather than merely representing vessels themselves.

During the time in which these forms developed, images of mud wall-reliefs from the Dahomean kingdom palace walls in Abomey, Africa influenced me greatly. These wall-reliefs depict various aspects of daily life in Dahomey in the nineteenth century. They consist of twelve to fourteen inch squares carved in bas-relief, and are brightly colored with iron oxide, yellow ochre, cobalt, and other colorants (plate 2).

These reliefs provided me with insights into my own work: I saw the vessel as a two-dimensional object portrayed within the format one would associate with a photograph, i.e. a square or horizontal frame surrounding an image.

Leaving the vessel forms of the envelope jars, I started constructing wall-reliefs. These reliefs consisted of hollow clay boxes which served as frames for
the two-dimensional, cut-out shapes of various vessel or vase forms. I placed these forms within the frames (plates 3 and 4). The hollow containers of the wall-relief series, however, became more than a simple framing device; they were no longer secondary to the vessel forms within them. They had become sculptural elements.

I looked again to the African wall-reliefs, examining the relationship of the reliefs to their surrounding space, the palace walls and doorways. This unique perspective provided me with a new understanding of the ways in which the reliefs functioned visually in the space that surrounded them. This space became as interesting to me as the space inside the wall-reliefs, themselves. Thus, in my work, the frames were becoming as visually important as the vessel forms within them. A relationship thus developed between the frames and the vessels. As the frames had begun to function as sculptural elements, compositionally, they played a more active role in the pieces I was making. The frames and the vessels inside them now functioned on an equal visual footing.

Other architectural elements such as cement balustrades, stairways, pillars, columns, adobe buildings, and brightly colored tile facades became sources of inspiration for my work. The balustrades looked strangely familiar to me—like clay vases. Adobe buildings, with
their soft, rounded edges and clay-like textures and
colors seemed like larger versions of wall-reliefs I
wanted to make (plates 5 and 6). Ultimately I became
intrigued with an enigmatic sense of place that I felt
when I incorporated this variety of architectural elements
into my work.

Certain architectural elements became personal icons
for me. I began to play with these elements using various
clays and glaze colors. Taxicab yellow, tangerine orange
and Mediterranean turquoise emerged as dominant colors. I
associated these colors with the architectural forms I had
been looking at. Many times these bright, vibrant colors
were what initially prompted me to choose a specific form
to incorporate into my work. The brightly colored tile
facades of buildings might be one example.

While I have discovered something about my work, I
cannot explain much of it. Nor do I feel the need to be
able to explain it. Typically, I begin a piece with
certain ideas in mind only to discover that new ideas and
directions emerge through the process of working. This
intuitive, stream-of-conscious method of working has
always been an important part of my art-making process.
In The Bride and the Bachelors Calvin Tomkins quotes
Marcel Duchamp as saying that the artist is a "mediumistic
being." As a mediumistic being the artist does not know
what he is doing, nor why he is doing it. The viewer must
interpret the work of art and complete the creative cycle.
For this reason, I believe that it is not for me to speak about "meaning" in my art. Description is for me more relevant, for my art has a meaning in spite of me. It has meaning(s) which I may or may not have intended. Discerning meaning in my art is, for me, problematic because I am not certain whether I even want to discover meaning. In that purely intellectual discovery process, the magic and mystery of art-making might be destroyed.

Making art is not my sole function in the world. When I am in the studio, it is before or after teaching, shopping for groceries, or being a mother. I have a pre-determined amount of time for my art. Because of this, I believe my process for making art is a reaction to my life, which also plays a significant role in my art. Teaching, being a student, or being a mother calls for a logical, specific, deliberate and predictable approach. Making art, on the other hand, allows me the opportunity to explore a side of me that is accountable to no one. Armed with the knowledge that I have gained through looking at art, thinking about art, and making art, as well as with my innate sense of intuition, I allow my irrational, unpredictable, obscure and illogical side to take over when I work in the studio. The discoveries I make in the creative process are just as important as the success of the finished pieces. My energies spring from
this potential for discovery. For me, the surprise, the
not quite knowing the outcome, while involved in the
process, is where the magic lies.

I have concluded that ultimately, the actual
(tangible) works of art function almost exclusively as
that of a force that propels me on to make the next piece,
etc., etc. I believe that being comfortable with that
idea is to be an artist.
LIST OF PLATES

1. Other Edges.
2. Offering.
3. Red Edge.
5. building front, Columbus, Ohio.
6. building front, San Francisco, California.
Other Edges.
Red Edge.
PLATE 4

Half Blue.
Plate 5

building front, Columbus, Ohio.
Plate 6

Building front, San Francisco, California.
BIBLIOGRAPHY