A MULTI-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:
BRINGING MY AFRICAN EXPERIENCES HOME
THROUGH THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

A Thesis

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

by

JOHN PETER D'AGOSTINO, B.F.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1990

Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Michael Chipperfield
Robert Shay
Georg Heimdal

Advisor
Department of Art
VITA

December 3, 1956  Born: Neptune, New Jersey

1983  B.F.A., Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, Highest Honor

1990  M.F.A. Candidate, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, Phi Beta Delta

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field:  Art
Studios in Ceramic Art
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vita ......................................................... ii
List of Plates ........................................ vi

Introduction ............................................. 1
Focal Points: Africa, Color, and Form .................... 3
The Environment and Economics ......................... 6
The Work: Pottery Images and Spirits ................... 8
Equilibrium: Ritual and Art ................................ 11
The Work: Layering and Materials ....................... 14
Structure: A Multi-Cultural Perspective ................. 16
Conclusion ................................................... 19
LIST OF PLATES

I. WEST AFRICAN POTTERY XXIX ........................................... 5
II. WEST AFRICAN POTTERY SPIRIT II .................................... 9
III. WEST AFRICAN POTTERY SPIRIT XV ................................. 12
INTRODUCTION

Each individual begins their graduate studies with a series of expectations and goals which change and develop as they are explored, examined, and reexamined. Through this continuing process of searching, the value of what art means to the artist begins to become more clearly defined. Likewise, means of production and various modes of communicating ideas are also explored and developed. Finally, the issue of where and how art fits into the rest of your life's interests and goals enters as another variable in the larger wholistic equation.

I came to Ohio State with a history as a performance artist whose main body of work centered around the issue of hunger in less developed nations. I came with two and half years of experience working in the Peace Corps on infrastructure projects designed to bring clean water, health care, and improved education to villages in Togo, West Africa. But most important for my graduate studies, I brought with me fond memories of the rich culture of those African villages. They've become so much a part of my life.

As a performance artist it was not unusual for my performances to go on for days. They'd usually include various activities having multiple levels of audience participation and involvement. My performances became so open-ended and so much a part of my life that almost any action or experience could be assimilated as a part of the whole. Eventually I realized that a return to a discreet physical object was appropriate so that I could stand back and look at what I was doing more clearly. Sometimes it's hard to see the trees
through the forest. The pure economy of working with form, surface, and imagery in a more traditional manner also appealed to me.

However, I soon found that working on ceramic forms and the surface of paintings had limitations which were not present while working in the realm of performance. These limitations forced me to narrow the complexity of the ideas that I wished to communicate and to focus on the most important elements. The limitations helped me define what was important to me in my art and what was important to communicate to others.
FOCAL POINTS: AFRICA, COLOR, AND FORM

The selection and co-mingling of elements from my experiences in Africa with aspects of my feelings and thoughts about art and life has provided me plenty of material with which to work. My art attempts to communicate some of the richness and diversity of life found in the villages where I served as a volunteer. The color and vibrancy of the market and village festivals in Africa influenced my selection of color and its application. The simplicity and integrity of traditional African pottery reawakened my sensitivity to the essential nature of form. I was "reawakened" to this essential nature of form in that as an undergraduate sculpture major I was first introduced to modernist interpretations of form through the work of Brancusi, Moore, and especially the Minimalists. I soon moved on to work in the area of performance and left, what I thought were, "archaic" forms and ideas behind.

Yet, these elements of simple form and bright color are direct and universally recognized. Similar pottery forms are found throughout history in almost every culture. They are early manifestations of agrarian civilization, of ample supplies of grain, and utilitarian ware used for the preparation of food. They are part of all our traditions.

Color means life. The greens of spring, the reds and yellows of summer flowers, the blue of a clear sky all bring associations of new birth and joy. Where do we not find celebrations expressed with bright and vibrant colors? I am always pleased to see people's eyes light up when they see my work. I've seen people from all parts of the globe walk away smiling. Both these elements, simple form and vibrant color, also reflect and correspond to my personal needs which I will explain later.
Color has been explored in a systematic way by artists such as; Albers, Mondrian, Vasarely, Riley, and members of the Op Art movement. The work of these artists has contributed greatly to my understanding of the technicalities of color interactions. We can also find other common systematic applications of color theory in the work of advertisers, package designers, and African sign painters. They use similar theories of color contrasts and compliments which are utilized in a less subtle manner, especially in package design.

There is energy and dynamism in the villages of Togo as the villagers try to improve their subsistence living conditions. Yet there is a stasis as they hold onto tradition. Farmers still awake every morning to go to their fields. They hoe the ground with tools that are similar to the ones that their grandparents used. They eat and drink from calabash and pottery vessels. New types have been introduced in plastic and metal, but the older forms are still prevalent. Certain forms and patterns of life remain the same and provide stability. These two contrasting elements of dynamism and stasis also mirror, for me, life in Africa today. One foot walks gently in a traditional sandal as the other marches along in Italian shoes or Chinese Converse sneakers. One shows respect for ancestral tradition, the stability of the family, and the simple life of the village, while the other speaks of the energy of growth, change and the dynamics of an international economy as reflected in the colorful imported cloth found in village market stalls.

While partaking in ceremonial "shots" of Togolese moonshine one is always encouraged to take a second glass because according the conventional wisdom, "L'homme marche sur deux pieds, n'est pas?" - Man walks on two feet, doesn't he? I admire their logic. Tradition has more of a place in Togolese society than in the U.S. and other western nations. Our thirst for everything being "new and improved" has led to rampant materialism and the consumption of 80% of the worlds resources. It's good to relax and have a second taste of a simple pleasure.
PLATE I, WEST AFRICAN POTTERY XXIX
THE ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMICS

When money is tight you have no choice but to be resourceful. The resourcefulness and creativity needed for survival in a developing country is inspiring. Young metal workers craft fabulous toy taxis from tin cans. Styrofoam packing materials mixed with a little gasoline become synthetic roofing patch. Strips of scrap cloth are sewn together to make colorful clothing. It reminds me of the good sense and creativity that our grandmothers had as they made quilts out of scrap material.

The environmentally harmful effects of the over-exploitation of the Earth's natural resources has led me to believe that we have a moral obligation not to waste resources. Consequently, I try to recycle as much material as possible in my work. Most of the slip I've used in making my clay was gleaned from clay reuse bins and the boards that I paint on are all industrial discards or found objects. I wouldn't be totally truthful though if I said that environmental concerns were my only motivation for using these materials. My present income as a student puts me just above the poverty line in the U.S. The fact is that they are cheaper and the only materials that I can afford without putting myself considerably deeper in debt. Old wood has a much more interesting texture, and the scratches, dents, dings, and flaws of the found pieces give them a certain degree of character. These kinds of inherent qualities can be discovered in materials all around us. Our world is filled with natural and man-made textures, colors, and surfaces. Our natural environment offers us much tactile and visual stimulation. Often these qualities go unnoticed. We usually perceive and appreciate things relative to their function. Manufactured items that show
signs of wear or that have lost their perceived function are soon discarded. Thus, there are visual treasurers to be found if one can hone their senses to the essential attributes of all that is in our environment. I value these physical characteristics of reality just as I value the intrinsic qualities in all of my experiences. Using these treasurers in the creation of my art reinforces within me the tendency to be open and unconditionally sensitive to the inherent value in all things. So the decision to use these materials is a complex mix of personal, aesthetic, moral, and economic reasons.
THE WORK: POTTERY IMAGES AND SPIRITS

I mount simple pottery images made of clay on scrap sheets of plywood, particle board, masonite, chip board, and formica laminated factory discards. Sometimes I mount a pot on a board and the board on another board concentrically. Sometimes these have scrap wood frames around the edges. Always though, the pot is the central image.

Actually, I create three different types of pottery images. One is a West Africa Pottery image and the other two are West African Pottery Spirits. The West African Pottery image is simply a low relief rendering of a pot. They vary in size. Some of them are taller than they are wide, some are elongated, while others are more spherical. These are very direct images. They are images of simple pots rendered in terra cota, bisqued, and then multi-fire glazed.

West African Pottery Spirits are created by utilizing the clay to create a pot image in the negative space of the mounting board. The first type of pottery spirit uses a ceramic shape that collars the image of the pot in the negative space. The rims of the pottery images are generally fairly large. The height of the rim then determines and corresponds to the width of the collar. The collar defines the edges and begins at the rim, circles the contour, and simultaneously creates a two-dimensional image of a pot.
PLATE II, WEST AFRICAN POTTERY SPIRIT II
These works are referred to as spirits because they are frontal and more two-dimensional. They are "images" or "ideas" of the volumes of pots. The same conceptual framework is used by African artists in their production of spirit images. Stylized facial features, body posture, and ornamentation convey the essential nature of the spirit represented. It is not necessary to create a realistic portrayal or to view the piece in the round.

The idea, essence, or spirit of a pot is the volume inside. A pot exists for the volume inside. Its spirit need only reflect this aspect. The vitality or nucleus of the spirit rests in the center.

To create an image of vitality or spiritual energy I often use bright complementary colors. These tend to vibrate and sometimes create an afterglow when stared at for a couple of minutes. Sometimes I will emphasize this effect by painting a subtly different shade of the same color around the edge of the core. Focusing on the nucleus of the spirit is very meditative. The work is similar to the mandalas of the Hindu religion, but any connection is purely coincidental.

We normally view the exterior skin of a pot. We look at the form and appreciate the color and texture of the glazed surface. The spirit is neglected for the material shell. In my Pottery Spirit pieces I try to create a balance between that of the interior and exterior; of that which is unseen yet known and that which is readily apparent.
EQUILIBRIUM: RITUAL AND ART

As in my vessel forms, it is also essential in West Africa to keep a similar balance between the world of the spirits and ancestors and the tangible world of physical existence. A friend of mine, Gidi Yao, once explained that the ancestors are not relegated to positions in heaven or hell. They exist with us just as spirits do. In spite of the importation of European civilization, the West Africans hold onto these beliefs and attempt to maintain this balance. It is something you feel all around you.

The possibility of disequilibrium comes with change. When a boy changes from child to man, when a woman changes from daughter to wife, or when a person becomes an ancestor, ceremonies must be conducted to maintain a proper balance. Even when a field becomes a floor of a building ceremonies must be performed to assure a safe transition.

Art is one way in which I explore the world around me and try to come to conclusions about it. As such, it is an educational process. Exposing oneself to new ideas and different experiences brings about the state of what Festinger has termed "cognitive dissonance" in his 1957 book entitled A Theory Of Cognitive Dissonance. One goes through a period of dissonance or disequilibrium as new information is processed and assimilated. The process of making art is a personal ritualization of these developmental transitions. It helps me to maintain my individual sense of cognitive balance.

The second type of pottery spirit that I create utilize four corners of clay to define the contour of the pot. These corners have their origins in my experiences as a constructor of school buildings in Togolese villages.
PLATE III, WEST AFRICAN POTTERY SPIRIT XV
After the foundation is laid and before the walls go up to create a building the corners of the foundation become important points. Just as we can define a square with the use of four dots and the concept of closure, these four corners define the exterior positioning of the walls and the interior volume of the building. The spirit of a field is about to change into the spirit of a school. Blessings and offerings must be made to each corner. Libations of gin and beer must be offered to those who once cultivated the field. A chicken must be killed and its blood sprinkled on each corner and on the tools of those who will construct the building. A connection is thus made between the past and present users of the land. Construction can now proceed safely.
THE WORK: LAYERING AND MATERIALS

All these three types of pottery or pottery spirit images are mounted on scrap wood which is decorated in various ways. I use a variety of materials to build layered textured colorful surfaces. I build on the textures that are already in the wood, plywood or chip board. Each of them have qualities that I enhance and bring to them a new life.

Working yellow and red into the cracks between the chips in chip board and then applying blues and greens on the surface creates a complex rich surface. By weaving complementary colors this way the surfaces and cracks accentuate each other, giving them vibrancy and depth of texture. Put a layer of clear medium between the two and the effect is even more pronounced.

African ritual statues or fetishes are often encrusted with layer upon layer of various matter. Chicken blood, millet beer, flour and water mixtures, fluids and juices of all kinds build up over the life of the fetish and empower it. The heavier the coating the more power the object acquires. Older fetishes are revered as are the elders of the village. Age is respected. Adorning the piece with cowrie shells, animal teeth, bones, pieces of metal, and other forms of decoration follows the same aesthetic principle as the encrustations. The more the better.

I rely on layers of color and texture to adorn my pottery fetishes or icons. To adorn the ceramic portions of my work I use modern glaze technology to create crackle and textured effects. I also use the bright colors of low tire commercial stains, lusters, and glazes. These are multi-fired and often create deep layered effects.
In addition to the surface treatment of the wood that I previously mentioned, I use combinations of mediums to introduce other textures onto the surface. Acrylic modeling paste, heavy brush and knife applications of acrylic paint, drips and globs, and the use of cattle markers provide a foundation of wonderfully textured surface. Layers of colors are then added with gels, china markers, prisma color sticks, oil crayons, and more delicate applications of paint. I fully enjoy watching the colors change and blend as I add layer after layer. Viewers seem to respond similarly to the finished product.
STRUCTURE: A MULTI-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Up to this point I think that it is obvious that I enjoy the sensual interactions of colors, however there is also the underlining issue of structure that has yet to be explained.

"To follow a line of reasoning" is a type of structuring of thoughts. It is linear and logical; A + B = C. One must do this everyday in explaining things to students, your advisors, or bosses. The use of logic and argument in search of an "absolute" truth has permeated much of western thought. The discussion of art has not been excluded from this realm. One must logically convince someone of the validity of your ideas over another's. In such a system logic and argument often express a degree of innate competitive aggression, which I often find unappealing.

Logic has its advantages. It works well for scientific inquiry. It can help reveal assumptions which are contrary to fact. But in incidents where causality is not readily determinable or in the case of feelings and emotions additional tools and overriding structures of thought and sensitivity might be needed. Maintaining a logical disposition is hard. One's ideas are described as "soft headed" or "fuzzy minded" if they are not totally logical. Frankly, there are a lot of soft and/or fuzzy things that are generally considered quite pleasurable and necessary for the survival of both body and soul.

Film makers and story tellers are aware of our tendencies for other structures. It takes little more than turning the lights down in the movie house or uttering, "once upon a time", around the camp fire for the audience to enter the state of what the English scholar, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, refers to as "a willing suspension of disbelief". What
follows is usually a tale of fantasy that defies all logic. We appreciate these explorations into the imagination. We need not employ the rigors of logic to enjoy works of art.

When I'm not required to maintain the rigidity and aggression of logic I usually prefer the soft and fuzzy. My art provides me with a much needed break from the conditions of logic. In it I can delve into the spiritual and exercise other structures of thought. Exercising these other structures or levels of consciousness is a personal motivation for doing my work.

There are other ways to structure one's thoughts and ideas. Harmony or the unity of variety is a normal western standard on which we base our aesthetic design decisions. Elements are linked by closure and similarity. Shapes and colors are balanced throughout the composition. Elements are accented and juxtaposed. Creating the perfect unity, so that the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts is a highly valued aesthetic accomplishment.

From the cultures of the East we find that other principles may be just as important as the relationship between parts. The Japanese concept of "mu" or void is prevalent in the aesthetic of their rock gardens. The spaces between the elements are just as important as the elements themselves. The intervals between breaths in the practice of meditation or pauses between movements in a dance also reflect a similar concern. In the same respect asymmetrical balance can be achieved by balancing space with object. We absorb these principles and our art is enriched by them. Our aesthetic understanding is widened.

Sociological factors also play a large part in the formation and nourishment of our concepts of self. Our relationships to our families and others effects the way in which we perceive and structure our world. In Africa personal support, nourishment, and regenerative energy from the larger communal perspective is based in the family. The central focus of life in Africa is the family. The social structure revolves around the family and then
concentrically expands from clan to tribe to nation. The concentric nature of African society does not have the individual as the center.

Ritualistic activity and the aesthetic production that it requires follows a similar structure. Artists, musicians, dancers, and maskers will all communally work together to fulfill the requirements of the ceremony. By forming a circle in the center of town the villages themselves create a stage.

During ceremonies a specific representation of a deity may become a central focus of ritual activity. An individual, family, or community may focus on it during this time. The fetish or icon is usually frontal in nature. The power that they manifest usually comes from a central point in the statue. Either the head or the stomach becomes the focal point of the work. Scarification, encrustations, and ornamentation will reenforce its power.

These are all examples of concentricity. They are general descriptions which are not solely unique to African society. But the concentric structure seems to be most pervasive there. It seems appropriate to use this structure to present the images of my experiences in Africa.
CONCLUSION

My work in graduate school over the last two years has been a search for that which is personally nourishing in my art. Additionally, I’ve sought to discern which specific points of the search that I’d like to communicate to others. My interests vary from the study of art to the global environment and the diversity of cultures abroad. Living and working in Africa has brought me unique perspectives on these interests which I feel are valuable to further explore and share with others through my art.

My life is filled with the complexities of personal interrelationships and an interest in global affairs. My active participation in these areas provides an interesting yet hectic life. I work to create an equilibrium between these elements. I find that having the stability of a central image on which to focus on in my art is quite beneficial to my psychological and spiritual well-being.

With the information available to us today through telecommunications we are more aware of global issues than ever before. The interrelationships between deforestation, hunger, and the effects of industrial production on our globe are becoming common knowledge. My active involvement with these issues combined with the personal challenges of school, employment and family responsibilities can sometimes deplete my spiritual and emotional energies. A switch from a focus on these dark and difficult problems to the bright colors of celebrations is sometimes needed. It helps to think about the positive aspects of human civilization.
It also helps to actually do more than just talk about it. After over ten years of being concerned with these issues I still find that actions speak louder than words. I am happy to have the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of children in Africa through the sale of my work. We share this planet with our neighbors. But I don't feel that the issue of poverty should be the central focus of what I do as an artist. That aspect of my work is purposely understated. It's more important for the multi-cultural aspects of my work to shine through. Good neighbors and friends don't focus on the negative aspects of each other. They appreciate that they are fellow human beings and look toward the positive.

A benefit of working multi-culturally involves assimilation. One can learn from the diversity of another culture and these experiences can be shared. Exploring ideas that are more vital to existence in other societies is valuable for improving one's own society. Art that bridges the gap between cultures can inform us of our similarities. Appreciating our similarities helps to foster empathy. This exchange can go both ways and we all can become more enriched.

Assimilation is the key to my work. The process of assimilation is like weaving. The threads must fit together and align themselves with others. To benefit from my experiences in Africa I believe that these African threads must mesh in a meaningful way with the rest of my life. Understanding is as important as experiencing.

Structure or composition in art is like grammar to a linguist. You have to know both the words and the grammar of a foreign language to comprehend its sentences. Assimilation of both the experience and the structure in which it exists is necessary to begin to comprehend the weaving process. Both knowledge and, even more importantly, understanding is accomplished.

Through my studies and work I have come to a better understanding of the people in the villages of West Africa and the way in which they weave the past with the present.
Through my artistic explorations I've learned to select and weave together variously colored and textured threads from both our cultures. And though these combined processes I've come to a better understanding of myself as a person, and as an artist. I am very fortunate to have had this opportunity.