Clay as Symbol, Object and Clay,
An Examination of My Work

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Table of Contents

Introduction . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1
Clay as Symbol - The Idea and Purpose. . . . . 2
Clay as Object - The Piece Itself. . . . . . . . . 10
Clay as Clay - The Material and Process . . . . 13
Conclusions . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 16
Appendix A . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 17
Plates . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18 - 34
Bibliography . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 35
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the main body of my work at Ohio State University during the past year. It has been divided into three sections because the work has three distinct aspects: symbol, the reason that underlies the making of the piece, object, the piece itself as a part of the real world, and clay, a material chosen for its workability and pleasing physical characteristics. These three aspects are common to all the pieces despite their separate subject matter. Each piece is concerned with man symbolically, each consists of recognizable objects, and each is made from clay slabs that are obviously clay. These three aspects united are the work.
Clay as Symbol – The Idea and Purpose

It is generally agreed that the use of symbols is what differentiates man from animal. A word or visual symbol may express a whole complex of interrelated thoughts and feelings that are inexpressible in other ways. For example, the cross as a Christian symbol is more than the object itself. It is all the teachings of Christ, His death, and the whole series of developments, teachings and structures within the Christian church since his death. On the other hand, since there is no one-to-one relationship between a symbolic object and the thing that is symbolized, a single symbol may mean different things in different contexts or, out of context, be ambiguous. Consider the difference between + in church, between two numbers, on a roadsigh or turned 45° between the same two numbers or under a skull. The + alone could take on any one of these meanings or several of them alternately or be only a mark on the paper. What is seen depends not only on the artist but also on the viewer who understands the message, finds more interpretations or sees only the physical reality.

For me, the making of objects is not enough, there must also be expression and meaning. The majority of the pieces represented in this paper are symbolic responses to
specific situations. As such they are expressions of personal feelings and fantasies and are tied to a limited point in time and space. It cannot be expected that the ordinary viewer could interpret these expressions. It is even hoped that he cannot do so. The pieces are not worth discussing as personal expressions of the artist since they have meaning for only a very few people on this level.

There is, however, a more universal level of meaning in all the pieces which can and often does reach others, at times communicating specific thoughts, at times only vague feelings. In most pieces there is a possibility of different interpretations for different viewers or for the same viewer at different times. Each of these possible interpretations is valid and real in its own right. The piece is not truly complete without them.

If there is any one symbolic theme uniting all these pieces it is a sexual one. Sexuality is a characteristic common to all men and as such is a good basis for communication between artist and viewer. The fact of our common but varied experience with sexuality allows the artist and the viewer to elaborate on a particular meaning in his own way and to accept or reject a piece as it relates to his own experience or fills his own need to see things in a particular way. Further discussion of the symbolic content
of this work must involve an analysis of each piece or a consistant group of pieces separately.

Landscapes (Plates I, II, III, IV, V) Each landscape consists of a mouth or torso embellished with trees, animals, grass and man made structures. The colors are those of a natural landscape. Although these pieces vary greatly on a personal expressive level, they do present a consistant picture to the viewer. They are literally and figuratatively a union of man and nature, both permanently interdependent.

The incongruity of the literal association of trees on a mouth or a church for a nipple adds a note of humor to these pieces. They are to be enjoyed and so is the almost playful transformation from an incongruous to a sexual image. No matter how carefully the landscape is disguised at some point the softly rounded mouths become vaginas with water flowing literally between the lips and foliage hair surrounding them. The torso-landscape also becomes a sexual image with a river between the legs and trees in place of hair. The church on the hill-breast proclaims the worship of the breast by the American male while cows, long a fertility symbol, graze peacefully on the thigh.

Beyond this game of transformations there remains the
more serious theme of the union of man and nature and the traditional use of both sexual elements and landscape elements to symbolize the eternal generative side of life itself.

Alphabet blocks — "Self Portrait at the Ohio State University" (Plates VI, VII). The alphabet blocks are an obviously personal statement related to a poem by George Sefaris, "How hard to collect the thousand fragments of each and every man."¹ They are an attempt to 'collect the fragments' of one person at one point in time. But no one is so isolated that his meanings have value for no one else and many of the 'fragments' are so ambiguous they could have meaning for anyone.

There is an obvious association here with the alphabet blocks of everyone's childhood. These were used to learn simple associations and to build physical structures. "Self Portrait" extends an invitation to find further associations and build mental structures. Common themes run throughout, some sexual (mouth, lizard, and teeth) some mythical (apple and names) some directed to the viewer (Who are you? Why?) and some are directed to the school

¹ Sefaris, George, Poems 1964 p. 42
(Oh! and I still am!). There are nearly endless possibilities when one considers the possible combinations of connotations and cross associations of each individual viewer.

Clothing. (Plates VIII, XVII) Clothes are, in general, the representatives of people or of situations created by people. They do not exist without man. They are so closely associated with him they may be said to represent his moods or characteristics (a gay tie, a sweet dress). Clothes remain where they are placed when they are removed and are, in that way, a record of the way they were placed and the person doing the placing. The clothes pieces in this body of work may be seen as either people themselves or as symbols of past action. In the latter case they may or may not evoke the presence of the actor. Beyond this there are few possible generalizations since each piece is an individual statement.

"Same old Routine (for Bill)." (Plate VIII) This piece consists of a pillow with shoes and earrings casually but consciously placed on it. It is related to the "let me slip into something more comfortable" school of seduction. Whether it is seen as a game enjoyed by two willing partners or as an evil action will depend on the viewer.

"My Magic Sex Object Sweater." (Plate IX) This piece
is a representation of a sweater that almost has a person inside. It stands for that whole group of clothing which imposes its characteristics upon the wearer rather than the other way around. This includes not only sexy clothes but also uniforms and clothes in a particular dress code. A person can never quite see clothes like this without also seeing a specific type of personality along with them, regardless of the true personality of the owner.

"Self Portrait as a Nude - Transition" and "Tennis Shoes - Spring". (Plates X, XI) These two pieces, a chair with a shirt, jeans, bra and panties thrown over it and a pair of tennis shoes are both similar in that they both involve the transition of removing the old to make way for the new. The first is an art student uniform thrown off leaving the former owner free from pretenses and nude before she takes on the uniform of a profession. This new uniform could have been hanging neatly nearby if the profession had been known. The tennis shoes, old and worn out from the months of cold, have been thrown off in a ritual welcoming of Spring. They are in a way a symbolic rebirth.

"Red Shirt - Oh!" (Plate XII) This piece consists of a limp rod shirt staked to a 2 x 4. It could be seen as
representing either a person or event. In the first case the shirt is a person pinned in a too narrow situation. In the second, someone has placed the shirt where it is and inferences could be made as to why. It might also be symbolic of sexual penetration.

"Loss of Innocence." (Plate XIII, XIV) This piece consists of a reflective cylindrical object with a white dress thrown over it, a slip at the bottom of it and the reflection of a woman in black panties walking away from it. This is an obvious symbolic rape - the penetration of a white, and therefore innocent, dress by a phallic symbol. On the other hand because of the figure, it could be viewed as a real situation with a willing participant.

"We Could Make Beautiful Music." (Plate XV) This piece consists of a pair of blue jeans draped over the edge of a violin case lined with pink satin. This might represent a situation involving a sloppy person who probably left his violin in a drawer and can't find either that or his pants. It could also be seen as representing a male (blue jeans) and female (violin case) engaged in pleasant activity. Whether the violin case is consuming the jeans, the jeans are crawling into the case, or both are engaged in the making of music depends upon the viewer.
"Untitled Gown." (Plate XVI, XVII) A wedding gown, bridal bouquet and veil are lying where thrown on a rug in this piece. It has been interpreted in two ways, one by most men and the other by most women. Men usually see it as the aftermath of a wedding with an implied sexual statement. Women tend to see it as before a wedding which never takes place and as a rejection of the traditional concept of marriage.
Clay as Object - The Piece Itself

Peter Fingesten says in The Eclipse of Symbolism that factual presence and symbolic meaning have a figure ground relationship. In other words, one can see one or the other or each alternately but not at the same time. The symbolic side is important but so is the physical reality.

As objects, these pieces exist in a physical world with the viewer. They have length, width, depth, surface, implied space, abstract and representational qualities. They are not only meanings but also real things. These particular pieces belong to the representational tradition in art. In this way, they form a secure link with the past, not actively seeking new forms and materials but new expression within an established tradition.

It has been shown that a person doesn't see the world in all its infinite detail but instead, selectively abstracts the invariant characteristics of an object (or event) and in so doing ignores the less characteristic details. It is easier to perceive simplified and exag-

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2 Fingesten, Peter, The Eclipse of Symbolism, 1970 p. 103
3 Gibson, James J., The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems 1966
gerated versions of an object than the object itself.\textsuperscript{4} This, then, seems to be the challenge to the representational artist, to pre-extract the minimum necessary qualities of "shirtness" or "mouthness" and emphasize these to the point of ignoring all incidental characteristics.\textsuperscript{5} The viewer, in seeing all the characteristics of "shirtness" assumes he sees a shirt until closer observation reveals exactly what he does see. The incidental characteristics of the artists material seem to make little difference so long as the major characteristics of the model are emphasized sufficiently.

These pieces, with the probable exception of the landscapes, are meant to relate to the viewer on his own ground, within his own space. This intensifies the illusion of reality. The clothes pieces are directly related to him by scale and occupy his space rather than being framed or set off. Those which evoke the presence of the person who left the clothes increase the viewers involvement by inducing him to participate in the creation of the piece.

The blocks relate to the viewer in a different and perhaps more intimate way. They must be physically touched,

\textsuperscript{4}Gibson, Elenor J., \textit{Principles of Perceptual Learning and Development}, 1969 p. 5
\textsuperscript{5}Gombrich, E. H., \textit{Art and Illusion} 1959 part 1 chapter 1
held, turned and thought about before they have much meaning. When it becomes difficult for the viewer to decide which side to put down toward the table the piece has succeeded.

Unlike the blocks and clothing pieces, the landscapes are small contained worlds of their own. To fully participate in them the viewer must "shrink" and imagine the feel of that particular imaginary world.

As objects, then, these pieces are primarily involved with simplification, exaggeration, and the viewer's participation in their system. They also maintain an ever present concern for the materials from which they were made.
Clay as Clay - The Material and Process

The processes and philosophy involved in the making of all these pieces is similar. From a philosophical point of view there is a complete acceptance of the natural qualities of clay and the smaller accidents that happen throughout the working process. It is important to the honest relationship between artist and material that the clay remain clay and not become an imitation of some other material or object. A clay shirt may be delightful in its incongruity and associations, while a "real" shirt that has literally fooled the viewer may be a disappointment or go undiscovered. The material is a real and vital part of the piece.

The techniques are simple. The soft clay is wedged slightly then flipped gently onto the floor so that it stretches. This stretching process is repeated until the slab reaches the desired thickness (1/3" to 1/2" depending on the piece). If the naturally developed surface texture is undesirable the final flattening is done with a smooth rolling pin.

The slab is then immediately cut to size or folded into place. There are rarely any supports used under the pieces. Rather, they are stretched, folded or joined into
a self supporting form. This sort of form has the additional benefit of rarely slumping or warping during the firing.

Details are added to the landscape or clothing pieces immediately after forming but before joining the sides of the blocks. Few tools are used and little reworking is done. All joints are made while the pieces are still quite wet by carefully working together the edges and an extra coil of clay. Scoring and slip are used only when the pieces require extra drying before they can be handled. The product is generally the result of the artist’s immediate physical contact with the clay.

Very little cracking occurred during drying whether the piece was dried quickly or slowly. The few cracks which did appear were rewet and had a coil worked into them. If the piece was broken when almost dry it was patched with fiberglass cloth attached with thick slip over the break as well. This seemed to hold well.

One piece, the veil from "Untitled Gown" has a cloth base. (Plate XVII) Fiberglass cloth with alternate threads pulled was dipped in slip then draped in place. Some of the spaces between threads were left open to simulate the texture of a veil. The bisque firing of this piece followed regular procedure but it was painted instead of
glazed to prevent stress cracking.

The firing involved a cone 4 bisque for adequate strength without undue shrinkage and a cone 06 glaze firing. A cone 019 firing was also used for pieces with lusters or china paint. The glazes were primarily cone 06 commercial glazes but the opaque white and two variations were mixed. Both glaze firing and cooling were done quickly to preserve the reds.

Most pieces were finished with paint and a variety of surface finishes which were not fired (Appendix A.). These were used to achieve the desirable texture and color variation and were applied according to instructions or instinct.
Conclusions

Although this work of the past year could be looked at in many ways, the categories I have examined here sum up its important aspects for me. Without a material that is good to work with, a product for others to react to and interact with, and a meaning behind the act of making, there is no reason for me to make art.
Fiberglass clay body

Missouri Fire Clay 100
C and C Ball Clay 25
Coarse grog 25
Burnt umber 2.2
plus 567 grams chopped fiberglass

Cone 07-04 Opaque white glaze
Alkaline Majolico Fritted glaze

Ferro Frit 3124 100
English Ball Clay 10
Zircopax 20

Other Materials Used

Krylon matt and shiny finish sprays
Testers model enamels
Spray paint
Pearl nail polish
Rub and Buff
Paste shoe polishes
Transparent shoe polish with blue glaze stain
Unfired glaze stains
Real jeans painted with latex paint
India Ink
"Imagined Scene for Seduction, October 29" 17"
- Fired and unfired glaze stains, white opaque glaze,
enamel paint, nail polish, Krylon shiny finish spray
II "Peaceful Landscape" 28"
- Fired and unfired glaze staiin, white opaque glaze, enamel paint, Krylon shiny finish spray, plastic cows
III "Peaceful Landscape" View 2
IV "Mouthscape Relief" 17"

- Fired and unfired glaze stain, white opaque glaze, enamel paint, Krylon shiny finish spray
V "Barren Mouthscape" 7"
- Fired glaze stain, commercial blue glaze, opaque white glaze, enamel paint, india ink
VI "Self Portrait at Ohio State University" Detail 4
- commercial glazes, white opaque glaze, underglaze
  and overglaze stains, lusters china paint.
VIII "Same Old Routine (For Bill)" 19"
- Commercial glaze, rub and buff, enamel paint
IX  "My Magic Sex Object Sweater"  48"
- Opaque white glaze with rutile, shoe polish
X "Self Portrait as a Nude – Transition" 38"
- Opaque white glaze, underglaze, enamel paint, spray paints, transparent shoe polish with blue stain, tee shirt, chair and pillow
XI "Tennis Shoes - Spring"  7"
- Opaque white glaze, commercial grey glaze, enamel
  paint, shoe polish
XII "Red Shirt - Oh!" 36"
- commercial red glaze, opaque white glaze, enamel paint, shoe polish
XIII "Loss of Innocence" 30"
- Commercial glazes, underglaze, enamel paint, rub and buff
XIV "Loss of Innocence" View 2
"We Could Make Beautiful Music"  52"  
- Commercial glazes, enamel paint, latex paint, satín, jeans
XVI "Untitled Gown" 6'
- Opaque white glaze, fiberglass cloth, spray paint, enamel paint, nail polish
XVII  "Untitled Gown"  Veil Detail
Bibliography


3. Piaget, Peter, *The Eclipse of Symbolism*, University of South Carolina Press


