FROM VESSEL VOLUMETRICS TO ORGANIC GEOMETRICS

A Thesis

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by

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1952: Born in Rochester, New York


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GRANTS AND AWARDS

1987: Tinker Foundation Travel Grant for Research
Columbus Art League Annual Exhibition: Purchase Award
Sculpture at Heritage Village, Bexley, Ohio: Jurors' First Place Award
Oberlin College: Haskell Graduate Fellowship
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1988: ArtQuest, Los Angeles, California: Second Place Award in Environmental/Installation Sculpture
The Ohio State University: Special Grant-in-Aid, College of the Humanities
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A work of art can serve as societal critique, express personal dream imagery, make reference to archaeological artifacts, explore abstract spatial and temporal concepts, or create ritual. My goal as an artist is a directed exploration of form through object-making, in the context of exploring the inherent properties and historical uses of ceramic raw materials and techniques.

I have chosen to work in clay, and the physical qualities of clay as primal earth material inform my work. In discussing the work of Seattle ceramist Robert Sperry in "Planetary Clay" (American Craft, December-January 1981-82), Matthew Kangas talks about a "medium-based link--between clay and the images it creates..." I remember my very early fascination with an earthen pinnacle/plateau left by housing-tract construction in Rochester, New York: my young friends and I would mount expeditions to explore and excavate our local "Matterhorn," using the exposed natural clay to fashion crude figurines embodying our fantasies. These inchoate experiences using clay as form-giving material colored my much later interest in ceramics.

Working on a degree in philosophy at Oberlin College, immersed in the rarefied air of scholarly pursuit, I
came to consider modern philosophy's dependence upon rhetorical sparring and subtle semantic distinctions to be a form of mildly pretentious pedantry. I took up the study of Hatha Yoga (which became the core field for a second degree, in physical education), which replaced academic scholarship as my focus. I moved outside town limits to live in an organic farming group. At this student co-operative, "Stone Circle," we baked bread, planted a large vegetable garden, and shared an interest in "going back to the land." At this time I discovered pottery at the Oberlin Student Potters' Guild. For me, clay was magic: the quintessential physicality of this material, combined with its ability to capture any impression, to record and preserve traces of force, immediately and permanently captivated my interest. After this epiphany came the gradual ongoing process of becoming attuned to the plasticity and adaptability of clay. By my last semester at Oberlin, the shift from philosophy was complete: after graduation I built a large woodburning kiln for the Potters' Guild and set up a studio on a small Oberlin farmstead.

During the first dozen years of my involvement in claywork, wheel-thrown vessels were my exclusive focus. The inspiration for this work came from pottery of pre-industrial cultures, especially pre-Classical Greek, Bronze Age Mideastern, and West African vessels. An
abiding interest in learning about the actual ceramic material of museum-collection pieces, and the methods by which they were made, brought me to study collections in Boston, Cleveland, Washington, and New York. Meanwhile, my work consisted of woodfired functional ware, including pitchers, bowls, mugs, and jugs. In 1975, a move to Marshfield, Vermont, to join a crafts cooperative gave me the opportunity to build another large woodburning kiln. Due to my dire economic circumstance at the time, and a dash of potter's romanticism, my kiln project included producing hundreds of homemade refractory brick. During the Vermont years I made flowerpots to derive an income from wholesaling to garden centers. As well, I made experimental works, wheel-thrown bottle forms which were altered, burnished, and Raku-fired. Cutting and hauling firewood to burn and mixing clay, I thrived on a regimen of physical labor and the solitude of a log cabin in the woods. I had a healthy dose of idealized illusion about the Vermont lifestyle—and still do. I pursued a work ethic inspired in part by the "potter's ethos" of the rural potters of Mashiko, Japan, about whom I had read in Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*: humble (yet, of course, ennobling) day-to-day craftwork, in harmony with nature. However, my second-hand understanding of this lifestyle made improbable the realization of that Eastern ideal. Then again, there were social politics to be considered: I did not accept the staunchly heirarchical apprenticeship
system as my path.

In 1977, while in 10-day National Guard detention at the Portsmouth, New Hampshire armory—the result of my participation in the first massive non-violent Seabrook anti-nuclear occupation—I was invited by "jail-mates" to visit their crafts co-op in Orland, Maine. It turned out that H.O.M.E (Homeworkers Organized for More Employment) needed a potter and teacher, and so I moved to Maine. My work diversified to include gas-fired glazed functional ware and local-clay flowerpots. In one marathon day, I made 414 flowerpots (Plate I). Meanwhile, during those years I made burnished Raku vessels which at times, through the transforming power of fire, combined harmony of proportion with the dynamic of 'geologic-organic' surfaces.

Wheelthrown pottery making is a profoundly physical activity involving strength and coordination comparable to that of an athlete in training. The athlete's pursuit of perfection in movement corresponds to the wheelthrower's goal of perfect wheelthrowing technique. To me, pottery making seems the more serious endeavor in that the potter's effort leaves a series of permanent material marks—a record. This frozen-motion quality of clay has always been important to me. Centrifugal and gravitational forces are coaxed to enclose internal volumes. No longer under the sway of the "potter's ethos," I still make
wheelthrown clay vessels in order to periodically renew my connection with the pottery traditions that served as first catalyst for my art. The non-figural wheel-thrown vessel is for me an archetypally three-dimensional abstract object. I see the making of these vessels as formal sketches, the material evidence of a physical discipline, and at times as precious objects. The study of the extremely rich history of ceramics reveals a record of human inventiveness and aesthetic refinement throughout the ages. These considerations have informed my work, serving as a continual stimulus and inspiration.

During 1978-79 I traveled for a few months in Great Britain and Spain, visiting traditional pottery workshops, contemporary studio potters, and museums. I worked as shop assistant to Jim Keeling of Middle Barton Flowerpottery in Oxfordshire, England. Jim, a Cambridge graduate who had apprenticed at the last of the rural family flowerpotteries, used immense quantities of local clay. My job was to load kilns, pug clay, trim, and wedge—once, 600 pounds in a day. I fulfilled a long-time wish to meet master potter Michael Cardew, graduate in philosophy from Oxford. Cardew's Pioneer Pottery, in which he described his philosophy and detailed the process of setting up the pottery training center in Jos, Nigeria, helped form my outlook on claywork at an early stage. I was later to make good use of his shared experiences during my years in the
Dominican Republic.

Spanish folk potters work within an authentic unbroken millenial tradition of making clay vessels. As pointed out by José Llorens Artigas and José Corredor-Matheos in the preface to *Spanish Folk Ceramics*,

...present day Spanish ceramics deserves much consideration. It is the last link of a chain begun thousands of years ago, almost when man first appeared on earth. If man first began to develop by performing work, ceramics can best tell us of it...All of history fits into this chain of vessels which is coming now to its end...The potters should know, and not forget, the importance that their work has. This importance will be recognized one day when their work has been abandoned. 1

In three visits to the Iberian peninsula, I have visited with and photographed many Spanish folk potters. Recent pieces such as *La Tercera Caída* (Plate II), *Fragment: House of the Cups* (Plate III), and *Column:Stack* (Plate IV) pay homage to this source by presenting repeated patterns made with pots or bricks, as fragments in an architectonic context.

During this 1978 journey I met with archaeologists and curators: Keith Nicklin, then a postgraduate researcher at London's Museum of Mankind, shared with me his collection of Nigerian pottery and masks; Janine Bourriau, Curator of Egyptian art at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, allowed me to handle predynastic Badarian burnished ware. The study basement-storage ceramics collections sparked my
interest in the ethnoarchaeology of crafts. This in turn formed one basis for my subsequent travels.

Yearning to see new lands, taste new foods and speak Spanish—and contracted to initiate a Spanish-language pottery training school—I went to live in the Dominican Republic in 1980. I developed a pottery training curriculum with emphasis on use of local raw materials in the production. My role was also to design studio space and equipment, and to advise the architect and engineer during the construction of the studio complex. My student assistants were taught first-hand to design and use potter's wheels and kilns. The presentation of my wheel-thrown burnished vessels (Plate V) in the Galería Nacional de Arte Moderno as art objects provoked a shift in the Dominican outlook on claywork. Since 1981 this had a "ripple effect"; my students and other Dominican potters, in addition to making wheelthrown ashtrays for discoteques and lamps for hotel chains, now also show in juried exhibitions. Sadly, however, socioeconomic inequity in that island country, magnified by recent devaluations of the peso, have had a negative impact upon all Dominican workers. Nevertheless, a sense of pride in their work has encouraged these Dominican potters to continue to make innovative ceramics.

Upon completing my term in the Dominican Republic at
the end of 1983, I used savings to embark upon extended travel through England, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus, Greece and Italy. The 18-month trip included photographic documentation of traditional potters at work (Plates VI and VII), as well as study of museum collections. I used local ceramic materials in Egypt, Israel and Spain. These burnished, bonfired vessels were exhibited in a city hall (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Canary Islands), a museum of ceramics (Museo Nacional de la Cerámica in Barcelona), and U.S. Embassies (Cairo and Jerusalem). In one sense, this was an exercise in using raw material and equipment in a variety of settings; the geography, clays and wheels changed while these "multi-national" vessels turned out to be a consistent body of work. Cross-cultural visual input gave me a new perspective on my own work, and I decided to return to school in order to concentrate on my ceramics in an experimentation-oriented environment.

Upon return to the U.S. in 1985, I enrolled as a special student in the ceramics program at Alfred University. My work underwent a dramatic change: I shifted my focus away from the wheel and began handbuilding. I dropped a reliance upon known techniques and embarked upon the unknown. The potter's wheel as a tool had suggested specific process-steps, while the vessel format implied working parameters. Confronted by the non-applicability of
my past work habits, in a sense I had to "face the void."
So, I began with simple ideas, first mixing a few tons of clay utilizing scrap left by former students. To this mixture I added large quantities of sawdust, an idea gleaned from watching potters at Fayoum Oasis in Egypt make porous water jars. The addition of sawdust aggregate aids in quick drying and allows for firing of thick-walled or solid clay objects. Further, this non-clay filler cuts the clay's natural plasticity, transforming it as sculptural material. At Alfred my first clay objects were made by a negative-mold, solid construction method, using metal tubes, grates and other found objects as form-determiners, then was cut and shaped on a brick saw (Plate VIII). In making these objects I was expanding my form-vocabulary and artistic repertoire.

My great-grandfather, a village baker in rural Russia, had kneaded untold quantities of bread dough. Spiral wedging, a related process, has always formed a central aspect of my potter's-life. Wedging achieves mixing and compression of the clay, in a rhythmic process that encourages the potter's inner concentration. This internal centering is described in Paulus Behrenson's Finding One's Way with Clay as a means toward balancing one's energies. The spiral wedging process can result in an elongation of the clay mass into a sharp conical shape. I began to further extend this shape, to bend the tip of the cone in
a linear gesture, assembling counterbalanced stacked combinations. I became aware of associations of these forms with spirals, shells (Plate IX), horns (Plate X), thorns, antlers and tusks, and began to view the work as sharing these universal images.

Professor David Love of the Oberlin Department of Philosophy taught a seminar in which we dealt with the distinction between cause and reason. A cause is the necessary physico-chemical catalyst for an action or event, while a reason is closely allied with intention, speaking to the complexity of motivation surrounding the effecting of an action or event.

In thinking about a written description or explanation of my art, I would like to note that the thought of Robert Smithson has informed my view. As Robert Hobbs of Cornell writes in his introductory essay to the exhibition "Robert Smithson Sculpture" (1980),

In his writings Smithson...[assembled] a vast range of possible interpretations of his works so that the reader becomes bogged down, dizzied, and exhilarated by the chaos of possibilities. 2

Although erudite self-exegesis appeals to the philosophy student in me, I'll not engage in that process at present. As Michael Cardew states in Pioneer Pottery,
They [artists] only know that art is about art; in this case, the art of pottery is about pottery. Unlike literary communication, an art does not carry a message; it is a message. If you still persist and ask the artist what the message is, he will be unable to satisfy you. If he could, it would not be necessary for the art to exist.  

My interest is the making of art rather than its interpretation. For the moment resisting the urge to indulge in the modus operandi attributed to Smithson, seen in light of David Love's semantic distinction, my clay horn/tusk forms were caused by inquiry into the form-giving implications of the act of wedging, which is dependent upon the movement-capturing nature of clay. My pieces share archetypes of horn and tusk, informed by a variety of reasons including my interest in the iconographic connotations of wealth, protection, fertility and power.

In other cultures, in other times, shrines were built with horns or tusks as the central icon. My pieces Flaming Nest (Plate XI), Pyre (Plate XII) and Bunch (Plate XIII) were informed by pre-literate cultures' ritual use of the horn/tusk as pragmatic semiotic device ("signalling" in its broadest sense). Excavated Neolithic shrine sites at Catal Huyuk in Anatolia and the Bronze Age Minoan palace at Knossos in Crete shared a common iconography of parallel horns (Plate XIV), and a cylinder-seal impression found in Elamite Susa depicts a horn-studded temple
structure. Biomorphic skin-covered dwellings of Upper Paleolithic Russia and Czechoslovakia (Plate XV) sported structural struts of Mastodon tusks and bones. Madagascar burial sites contain markers and totems utilizing elephant tusks and horns (Plate XVI). In Yoruba Nigeria tusks are associated with Obatala, protector deity of the elephant, symbol of authority and embodiment of wisdom. These images are laden with myriad nature/culture references also associated with some of my clay works.

My large-scale works Flaming Nest and Pyre (both 1987) evoked references to elephants through images of burnt, broken tusks. I came to see my clay forms as sacrifice-markers in homage to slaughtered elephants. These intelligent, gentle and noble animals, formerly known as "kings of the jungle," have been widely hunted for ivory: the booty was piled high. Today the population of elephants is in steep decline; ten years ago there were twice the African elephants as exist today. Tusk ivory is a highly-valued market commodity, and elephant-hunting is too strong a temptation for poachers marginalized from the economies of Africa. Feeding the consumer/collector greed for ivory, the killing of the elephant continues. After considering tusks in this context, I wanted to present an image suggestive of stacked tusks. Perhaps I seek to create substitutes for the sportsman's wall-mounted icon of carnage.
In late 1986 I saw a photograph of a horned paper carnival mask from the Dominican Republic which moved me with its beauty and power. I wanted to seek out the maker of the mask. Horned masks (Plate XVII) are used in festivals such as carnival, Holy Week, Corpus Christi, Independence Day, and local "saint's day" celebrations. I developed a research plan to travel to Venezuela, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and secured institutional funding for the endeavor. In photographing and filming maskmakers of the region during this 97-day field research, I focused upon the masks' horn imagery. My claywork shared similar iconography.

My environmental work Flaming Nest incorporated large ceramic spheres into a matrix of curved conical forms. With the clay objects resting upon a mass of straw at the base of the bonfire, the piece became an oversized "nest" of "eggs" and "tusks." The fire site was ringed with stones gathered and arranged at dusk, in anticipation of lighting the "nest." Friends played drums through the night. Since central Ohio is quite possibly the middle of Middle America, I built this site to evoke ritual.

Art functions, then, as the linkage between the archaic foundations and the macrostructure...It is no accident that there is a widespread interest in remembering our ancient tribal past and connections to sacred ways long lost. Anthropologists used to call "quaint" and "superstitious" such beliefs that, without prayers and certain ritual practices, the
sun might not come up. Now we see that we have for so long treated the earth as an inert thing to use and exploit, that she may in fact be dying and the sun might not come up for us.  

Days after its inauguration through fire, Flaming Nest was laid to ruin by stonethrowing and the site transformed from "nest" to "burial ground." That this destruction changed the way I perceived the work is an understatement; after the initial shock, I considered the implications of the transformation. The tusk-forms, which at first functioned as apotropaic devices, had been especially vulnerable. As an art piece, Flaming Nest partook of Smithson's concept of entropy and became almost ephemeral. I was somehow pleased to ponder that possibility.

Pyre, a gallery installation, was in some ways a memorial to Flaming Nest fragments of the earlier work were mounted upon a structure of stacked railroad ties. Pyre filled the room, presenting the gallery public with a transformed architectural space. In filling the narrow passages not occupied by the sculpture, the observers became participants.

Horn/tusk images formed a theme of my thesis exhibition, which consisted of seven works, three of which (Flaming Nest, Pyre and Wedge) were presented through photographic documentation. Bunch consists of saggar-fired ceramic horn-forms hanging by a length of thick burnt
chain within a framework of rough-surfaced caulked wood. Springing from the gallery corner, the white support structure juts out above the entrance and includes the viewer in its implied perimeter. I made Bunch as a study, focusing on elements of weight, balance and implied movement. Images emerge, of prehistoric coral-encrusted fish strung together on a line. The effect of weight is suggested by a bulge in the cross-member supporting the chained ceramics. In a future version of Bunch, I plan to incorporate a length of fresh birch as the beam, so that the weight of the clay will strongly bend the sapling into an attenuated curve.

In Endtunnel (Plate XVIII), s-shaped pit-fired tusk-forms are mounted as the barrel-arch roof of a mixed-media section of tunnel. The vertical supporting elements consist of rough-cut 1975 Vermont lumber, burnt kiln bricks, metal grates and crates, plastic buckets, a stool, and a cardboard drum. The structure's facade is covered with wet red earthenware clay to visually unify these disparate "found objects" gleaned from my workspace. The floor surrounding Endtunnel is taped off, for visual/spatial framing and as warning barrier.

Fragment and Extension (Plate XIX), a wall piece, is made up of three ceramic remnants mounted within a two-dimensional graphite rendering of three concentric
catenary arches. These fired fragments were originally formed by forcing clay into the shallow wooden arch shapes later used when drawing the graphite lines. The catenary arch that serves as basis for *Fragments and Extension* was used in Persia during the Parthian and Sassanian eras. This work is intended to suggest reference to methods of museum display—as a foray into the realm of postmodern reconstruction...of pseudo-ruins.

A tall narrow stacking of hollow hand-made brick, *Column:Stack* is reminiscent of my 1975 kiln brick-making project. The repetitive and methodical process of fabricating the triangular modules for *Column:Stack* harkened back to my visits to Moroccan tileworks, where repetition seemed a cherished value. I used unfired dark-brown clay as a thick mortar between each white brick. Both the individual modules and the overall combined structure form equilateral triangles, each a flat-walled image of the other form. This formal mirroring suggests to me a juxtaposition of microcosm/macrocospm: perhaps this work is preliminary to a future large-scale "nouveau-minimalist" process piece.

*Wedge* (Plate XX), physically absent from the exhibition and represented through photographic documentation, is an outdoor piece installed May-September 1988 in Bexley, Ohio. *Wedge* presents a transparent pointed
tetrahedron bounded by a matrix of steel and wood. Within this tapering space, a series of rough bonfired clay spheres descends. **Wedge** is based upon my earlier work **La Tercera Caída**, now in the collection of the Galería Nacional de Arte Moderno of the Dominican Republic. That piece consists of a triangular glass-walled structure holding myriad fragments of burnished clay vessels made during my three years as a potter in that island country. With **Wedge** I want to convey a defiance of gravity. Through a dynamic of implied flux, the work attempts to engage the viewer by conjuring an "empathetic-kinesthetic perception." This term is intended to imply direct viewer participation in the sculpture's space; as in other forms of empathy, that associated with kinesthetics involves the viewer's response to a suggestion of movement presented by the sculpture in its "dynamic of implied flux."
Endnotes

2. "Robert Smithson Sculpture," [page not numbered]
3. Pioneer Pottery, page 244.
Bibliography


Plate I

Local-clay flowerpot, Maine, 1977
Plate II

"La Tercera Caída," Dominican Republic, 1987
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"Fragment: House of the Cups," Columbus, Ohio, 1988
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