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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In the Candidacy for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**CYCLE**

by

Suzanne Leary Kaplan

October 22, 1997

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## APPROVALS

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(RDL)

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Date: 11-5-97

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire and I remember my parents would lead my sisters and me on nature walks up Mt. Monadnock and in our back woods. We hiked in all types of weather and in all the seasons. They taught me to observe nature; and still today, I love walking in the woods, climbing mountains and observing nature's beauty. In the last few years when I walk in the woods, I see things that are not natural: life is precarious: nature and people seem to be in conflict. Human existence can thrive, but we have to understand how we can foster better use of our world and its beauty. My work grows from a passion to live, to sustain all types of life, to portray and to celebrate the beauty and power of our natural world. In some way I hope my work may, by reminding others of nature's beauty, help preserve that beauty to other generations.

## **ARTISTS AND INFLUENCES**

Over the course of my life, I have been visually aware of many different types of artists and artworks. Of the many artists' work I have seen, there are three artists that I would like to make mention of because their ideas and processes seem to come closest to the work I have been developing the past few years. All three seem to portray and celebrate the important bond among nature, humankind and beauty.

Andy Goldsworthy is an outdoor installation artist. His art focuses primarily on nature. His creations are built outside from things found within the area and often times they last only a short period of time. He brings his artwork to the public by taking photographs and presenting the large format photos in galleries and books. What I find most captivating is the many ways he expresses his ideas using nature; extracting natural elements and composing them into beautiful images. Through his art, he has found the



most direct way of expressing his spiritual connection. He stated:

Working with nature means working on nature's terms. I cannot stop the rain falling or a stream running. If I did it would no longer be raining and the stream would dry up. Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the life-blood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I want to get under the surface. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just that material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue. At its most successful my 'touch' looks into the heart of nature: most days I don't even get close. These things are all part of the transient process that I cannot understand unless my touch is also transient--- only so is the cycle unbroken, the process complete. I cannot explain the importance to me of being part of a place, its seasons and changes. . . .(Freidman and Goldsworthy 1993, 160)

Goldsworthy's work speaks to me. He has respect for his surroundings, the past and the future and it is in nature where Goldsworthy is spiritually connected and creates his work. His work is not only full of substance but also visually appealing to my senses.

Steven Destaebler is a ceramic sculptor whose art work can be generally described as figurative. His work caught my attention at a ceramic conference in 1987. His work captivated me with both scale and content. It was some of the largest clay work I had ever seen and the images create a wonderful marriage between human beings and their earth. He makes large pillars and within each pillar is a figure. The figures seem to be emerging from the pillars in one view and then appear to be breaking down and melting back into the landscape of the pillar in another view.

DeStaebler's figures are randomly metamorphic, as randomly metamorphic as clay. It is hard to determine whether his figures are still in the process of being formed, or malformed, or formed piecemeal- different parts at different rates- or in the process of disintegrating into formless fragments. They are absolutely ambiguous in character, inhabiting no one condition stably. For all the residual heroic aura they muster, his figural bodies are incoherent, almost to the point of monstrosity (Kuspit 1988, 27).

The giant clay figures of DeStaebler are constructed from smaller components which gives him the freedom to build up the form, emphasize or de-emphasize certain parts of the human body. The large pillars seem ancient and the figures somewhat familiar. What I like most about his work is that even though the finished objects are massive and weighty, the detail and feel of clay worked by hand still exists. His process of component building,



the subject of the human figure and his “ancient” theme certainly made a fashionable imprint on me as is apparent in my thesis work.

Alberto Giacometti is a sculptor who worked figuratively with bronze and other materials. His figurative work is more traditional and certainly recognizable. The thin, elongated, almost weightless figures of rough texture are his trademark. He worked primarily in wax eventually casting in bronze and his work can be seen in museums all over the world. What I like about his work is that it seems at first glance as though the figures were made instantaneously, capturing gesture in quick studies. Upon further investigation, it becomes more apparent that the work was labored over; each facet a monumental decision and each curve a tremendous dilemma. Giacometti’s frustration and difficulty working was well known, and he wrote about it often, “A large figure seemed to me false and a small one equally unbearable”, he once said, “and then often they become so tiny that with one touch of my knife they disappear into dust” (Giacometti 1965, 28). As I worked toward my thesis show, I felt burdened to understand what I was doing and why. Forms and ideas that came easily to me were put on hold and scrutinized. Decision making was difficult. I found some solace in that a great artist whose work I enjoyed looking at struggled too. And, even though he labored, the work seems simple and accurate, with a strong sense of structure.

Despite the many influences of well admired artists, the work I have always been drawn to involves images of women, ideas of spirit and issues of life in all living things. We as a people and planet are connected. Historically, many of these ideas have been represented by female figures and notions of fertility. The Venus of Willendorf c. 25,000-20,000 BC is just one example of the many fertility figurines found in cultures all over the world (Janson 1977, 26). Throughout the thousands of languages and dialect, African art tells stories of creation and mythology. “Art shows man in stages of his existence, birth, life and death. African motherhood shows the mystery and power of life, portrayed frankly in all parts of the female body” (Parrinder 1967, 13). The link between the female image

and the fertility of both man and earth has been almost universal and cultures have been forming such figures from clay for centuries. Using clay for my art seemed only natural as I was struggling to depict the same ideas that have been sought after throughout time.

## **THE WORK**

### ***Cycle***

I made three separate forms that combine as one installation sculpture for my thesis show. The title, *Cycle*, represents all three images; however, for the sake of discussion I will address each separately (see plate 1). The overall theme of the work suggests ideas of birth, nurturing, life, death and spiritual rebirth. Sketches, construction drawings and plans, and some prefabricated components were made before the installation date, but prior to that, I had never before seen any of the forms completed. Each of the forms, large in scale, consisted of components made with fired clay and an unfired adobe mixture. One of the forms included cast glass and metal images

### ***Circle of Life***

The form subtitled, *Circle of Life*, is a dome of adobe approximately five feet in diameter topped with large bowl like forms (see plate 2). Each of the bowls lay partially atop one another completing a unified circle. For me, the adobe base represents the earth and the bowl like forms symbolize breasts, the most purely nurturing anatomical portion of the body. The forms can also be seen simply as bowls, that which man feeds himself, sustaining life. The circle is also a symbol; representing the continuous cycle of nurturing





Plate 1: CYCLE. Installation View





Plate 2: Detail CYCLE: Circle Of Life



and life itself.

The image, Circle of Life, was constructed by making first an armature of plywood and chicken wire covered in adobe. I decided to use adobe for the bases of all my forms because of its universal application (it is used as a building material in many parts of the world) and that is made from only natural materials and requires no “modern technology” (i.e. fossil fuels, electricity) to serve its purpose. Similarly, adobe seemed to me an easy way to represent the earth.

The adobe mixture consisted of: 25% dirt, 25% sand, 25% red art clay (terra cotta), 25% straw and water as needed. Although adobe typically contains some cement, I chose to eliminate it from my mixture so that all of what I used in the show could be recycled later. I purchased the straw from a local farmer, dug the dirt from a friends garden and used sand donated from a local sand pit. Although I would have preferred to mix the adobe by hand, time made that option seem unlikely so, I used the schools’ industrial size dough mixer and made 200 pound batches. To cover the armatures of all three forms in the show, I had to mix over one ton of adobe. The moving of all the materials required numerous trips in my little Subaru wagon and lots of lifting.

The breast forms were made from rolled out slabs formed into a large plaster bowl. When the clay was hard enough to be removed from the form, I then manipulated them, altering the texture and adding the nipple. One important aspect for the entire sculptural installation was to have different colored forms in an attempt to symbolize the diversity and range of different cultures. In order to achieve this goal, I used two different clay bodies and a number of chemical solutions sprayed onto the surfaces. I mixed spray bottles of red iron oxide and water in various concentrations and applied the solution when the forms were bone dry. All of the clay components were fired just once saving time, kiln use and energy.

In order to achieve the darkest brown components, I used a terra cotta clay mixture: 50 pounds red art, 25 pounds ball clay, 25 pounds kyanite, 10 pounds course grog and 10

pounds fine grog. The combination of particle sizes created a fairly dense clay which seemed to work well for my application. I fired this clay to cone 1, approximately 2100 degrees Fahrenheit. The second clay body I used was developed by RIT graduate Chin-Yuan Chang. The mixture is: 25 pounds ball clay, 25 pounds fire clay, 25 pounds red art clay, 25 pounds kyanite and 20 pounds medium grog. This clay withstands outdoor temperature fluctuations well and served my purposes very well. I fired this clay to cone 1 as well and by adding the red iron oxide solutions, I achieved a compatible palette from which to work.

### ***Existence***

The second form, subtitled Existence, is another component constructed piece (see plate 3). There are approximately eight hundred (800) feet made from fired clay composed in a spiral. The spiral form spans about five and a half feet (5 1/2') in diameter, starts very low to the base, rises up close to two feet (2') in the middle and recedes back low to the base in the inside of the form. The spiral sits atop an adobe base seven feet (7') in diameter about twenty inches (20") high. This form represents ideas of life. The feet were used to symbolize the act of traveling or journeying through a human life. The feet start as if they are coming from the earth representing birth or the first few steps; then, rising to its peak as we do in life and finally back to the earth, where we return.

The adobe base was constructed the same way as for the Circle of Life and the feet were made from a plaster mold cast of my own foot. The mold was made of just the bottom of my foot so I could press clay into an open faced, one part mold. I envisioned this image so that the bottom of the feet would be "face up" but the way I pressed the clay left unexpectedly unique and interesting finger marks on the opposite side. I thought about presenting the feet both ways but ultimately decided I liked the look of all the toes and





Plate 3: Detail CYCLE: Existence



heels. Again, I used the different colored clay bodies continuing the theme of world cultures.

### ***Spiritual Rebirth***

The third form of the installation subtitled, *Spiritual Rebirth*, is the largest of the group (see plate 4). The overall dimensions are 12 feet long by 6 feet wide by 10 feet high. It mimics the form of a ziggurat and is decorated with many different symbols. The base is three rectangles layered on top of each other, each one smaller than the one below. All of the base is covered in adobe. On top of the base is a combination of 57 clay and glass blocks assembled to complete the crescendo effect of a ziggurat and capped with a cast pewter female figure. The form was chosen to suggest the ideas associated with death and the spiritual world and the symbols within glass seem to imply more universal themes of man, earth and cycles of nature. In the glass there are images of feet, spirals, breasts and eggs. I see this as a monument to the coexistence of Mother Earth and mankind.

The techniques used in this form employed all of my learning experiences. The adobe base was the most complicated structure of the three bases. The armature was built of plywood components outside the gallery and moved in in pieces. Although it could have been sheathed in chicken wire as the others, I used wood strapping similar to lath and plaster type construction. Almost all of the items were gathered from the school's dumpster as I wanted to use recycled materials.

The clay blocks were made from a wooden mold such that I pressed slabs into the form to produce five sides of a cube and then attached the top prior to emptying the form. The process worked well enough so that the blocks were uniform for stacking and could be made rather quickly. The glass blocks proved to be the most difficult technical hurdle. Advice from glass practitioners suggested that surrounding copper inside of glass would

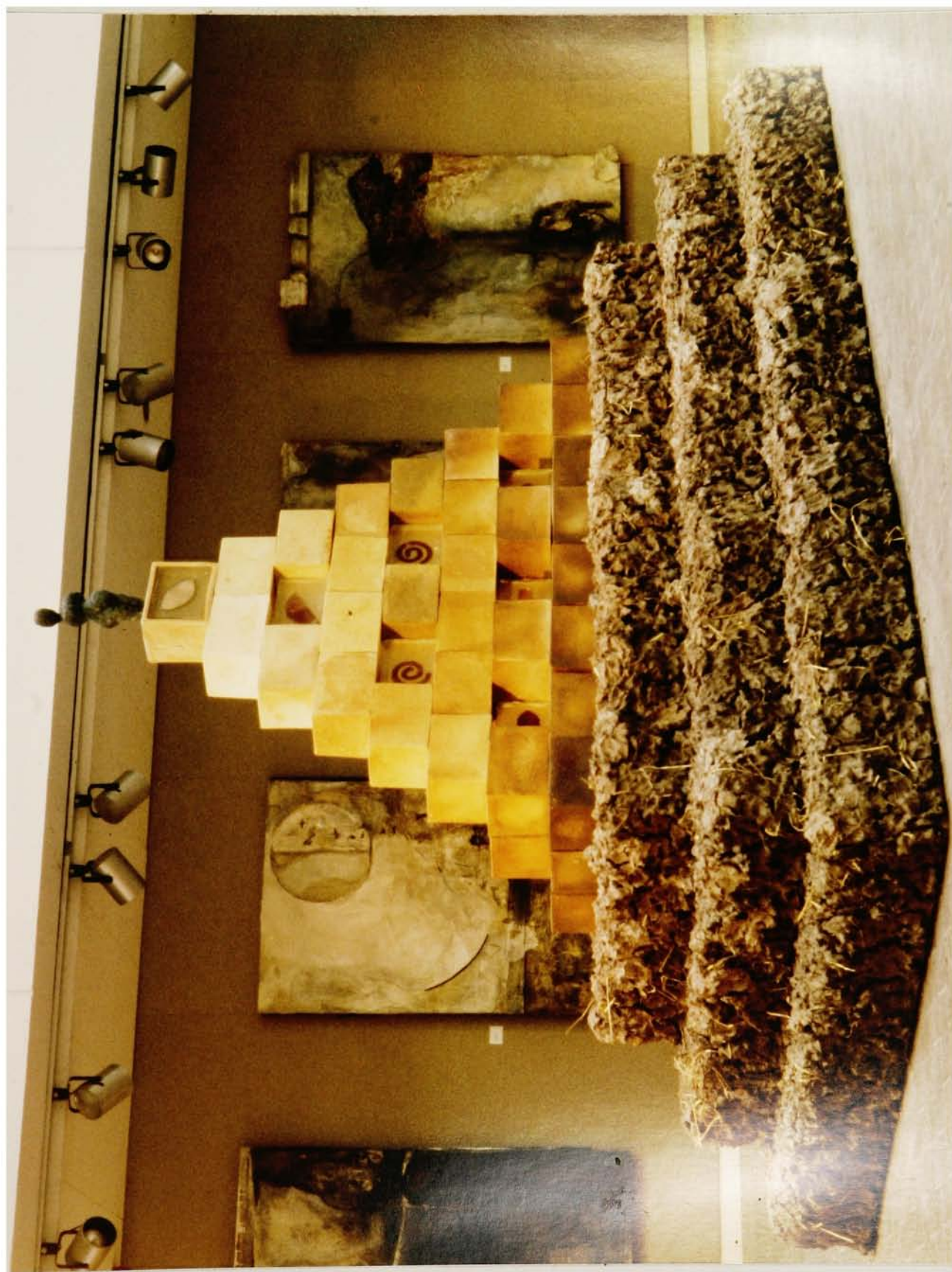


Plate 4: Detail CYCLE: Spiritual Rebirth



lead to severe fracturing due to the different rates at which the materials expand and contract. Realizing the possibility of failure, I proceeded experimentally. Thus far, all of the cast glass blocks are completely intact without signs of crazing or fracture. They were made by pouring molten glass into a sand mold, laying the 16 gauge copper cut-out into the glass and filling the mold with more glass. I allowed the casting to cool about fifteen minutes and then placed the block into a glass annealing oven to cool overnight. When I could remove the blocks, I cut them to fit the standard block size and used silicone to adhere them into the ziggurat form.

The cast metal figure on top of the sculpture was made in a traditional lost wax type of casting process. I formed the figure out of wax, engineered the spru system and fabricated a one piece plaster mold. I chose to make the metal figure out of pewter because it melts at a low temperature (approximately 580 degrees Fahrenheit) and RIT did not have the facilities to cast such a large figure requiring higher temperature materials. I was extremely lucky that the casting worked first time around, and I was able to clean up the casting and apply a copper patina in a short period of time. I attached the figure by drilling and threading a hole into the casting and bolting through a hole in the top block.

## **CONCLUSION**

Once I completed the installation, I got to see all of my work together for the first time. Circle of Life, Existence and Spiritual Rebirth functioned as a whole. The Cycle seemed complete and the visual experience appeared coherent. The work incorporated in making Cycle was both challenging and rewarding. How I arrived at the forms presented in the gallery is somewhat of a mystery even now. I thought deeply about that which is important to me and with enough support from my thesis advisors and friends, felt confident in such an installation type of experiment. Given the opportunity, I wouldn't change a thing. The separate forms brought together for the first time in one area seemed to

express all of the ideas I had hoped they would: the connections among nature, humankind, and beauty.

The physical work required to complete the sculpture was demanding. The techniques I used succeeded because of what I learned and that seems to me a wonderful accomplishment. Incorporating clay, metal and glass gave me the feeling that my studies paid off. I think of my thesis work as a true culmination of my experiences in art and, as importantly, a chance to express my love of nature and its importance, power, and beauty!

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