Multiple Component, Ceramic Sculpture

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MULTIPLE COMPONENT, CERAMIC SCULPTURE

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May 6, 1977

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MULTIPLE COMPONENT, CERAMIC SCULPTURES

I intend to make at least five multiple component, ceramic sculptures, several of which will be over five feet in length. Each of these pieces will reveal a progression of form. In addition, I hope they will serve as a visual, historical record of the employment of an energy, force, or direction which has directly or indirectly contacted the material. I may also choose to use other media in harmonious and or contrasting combination with the clay.
INTRODUCTION

For the past year and a half I have been working with multi-component ceramic sculptures that in some way reveal either literally, abstractly, or conceptually, a progression of form. Interested in working with the spatial relationships of parts that are eventually united and become a whole, I feel it is important that my work be representative of a force or energy that has directly or indirectly altered the material. In pursuit of this thesis, I decided to work with subdivisions of two very familiar shapes, the concentric solid circle or doughnut, and the rectangular solid or monolithic shape.

To achieve massive, thick shapes with a rich orange clay color, which I find desirable, it was necessary to formulate a sculpture clay body to fit those needs. Robert Schmitz suggested a clay body he had used which conformed to my needs. It was relatively simple to prepare because it consists of one-third A. P. Green "Missouri" fire clay, one-third A. P. Green "Valentine XX", and one-third twenty mesh grog. I later changed this recipe to 35 percent A. P. Green "Missouri" fire clay, 35 percent A. P. Green "Valentine XX", and 30 percent medium mesh grog. I found that the larger particle size of grog left a more desirable surface texture when it was finished with a "surform" tool. The
concrete-like surface, unlike the original recipe texture, seemed to be an inherent part of the form. The adjusted clay body is surprisingly plastic, adheres to itself exceptionally well, has 8 percent shrinkage at cone nine, 7 percent shrinkage at cone five, and fires to a deep orange color with blue-black specks. The color remains the same at cones five and nine; to reduce fuel costs I fired all the pieces at cone five in a continuous medium reduction atmosphere.

The clay, due to its low shrinkage also repairs well. I was successful in repairing small breaks in the bone dry state by wetting, slipping together and burnishing the adjacent surfaces. I also found that it is possible to repair cracks, broken pieces, and chips in finished fired pieces by first epoxying the broken pieces together and then filling the cracks and chips with a mixture of fired clay dust and Elmer's Glue. When dried, it can be sanded and then speckled with a black pencil. I also discovered that very narrow cracks could be filled in with a dark wax stick that is normally used to fill holes in wood paneling. I rubbed the wax into cracks, scraped off the excess, and then wiped the surface with turpentine. These discoveries, which were made during the pursuit of my thesis, will no doubt be useful in the future.
MULTIPLE COMPONENT, CERAMIC SCULPTURES

The first thesis piece I entitled "Progression Reflection". It was conceived with the idea of a progression in size, a reaction to the force of gravity, a unity of linear direction, and the creation of the illusion of floating in space. The piece consists of ten inverted U-shapes or semi-circles, each one progressively smaller than the next, mounted on a horizontal mirror. The reflections of the inverted U's materialize the missing halves of the semi-circles and create the illusion of ten rings floating in space. The U's were made by rolling out ten coils, each one progressively longer and thicker than the next. They were then bent in a U-shape, squeezed at each end, and slammed onto a workbench. The enlarging taper at each end of the U, due to its reaction to this force, I found particularly interesting. Having visually documented this force reaction, I set the components in sequence, lay the edge of a board across the middle of each one, and hammered the board partially into each piece. This caused the clay to exhibit another kind of force, and united the components in a linear progression with all of them simultaneously experiencing the same force. The piece was designed for, and works best, out-of-doors where the only other thing reflected in the mirror is the sky. I feel that an indoor
Plate 1 "Progression Reflection"
Plate 3 "Progression Reflection"
environment clutters the reflected image and causes the piece to become confusing.

The second piece, titled "Six Circles", is very much related to the first. In this piece, however, I was not interested in a reflected image, but rather, a real clay duplicate. Still desiring suspended shapes, I also wanted to somehow keep the flatness of plane and dividing properties that the mirror exhibited in the previous piece. This time I made two each of six progressive coils, bent each of them and again slammed them onto a workbench. In half of them I impressed a small hole in the top of each semi-circle to later be used as a place in which I would set a metal supporting rod to be used in mounting them on a wooden block. I decided to separate the pieces by using half-inch plate glass, which provided that flat plane and dividing property I wanted. Next I set six steel rods into the semi-circles using an industrial, bolt setting cement called "Por-Rok". This material sets up in a matter of minutes, can be mixed up and used as a paste or pourable substance, and is stronger than concrete. I then filled in the rest of the space with a mixture of fired clay dust and Elmer's Glue. I mounted the rods in a darkened piece of four by four, lay the glass on top of it, and placed the other shapes on top of the glass. I later decided I did not like the crudeness or color of the commercial four by four, so I made another one out of mahogany with a stripe of walnut running through the middle. The new component's mahogany
color more closely related to the color of the clay, and the stripe of walnut dividing the mahogany related to the edge of the glass dividing the clay shapes. At first glance, when looking at the piece from above, it is hard to decide whether the viewer is looking through glass or seeing a reflection in a mirror. The surface of the glass does give a slight reflection which adds still another dimension to the piece.

Size and scale has become a very important consideration in my work. Small pieces seem to suggest models, which in turn make me feel less serious about them. Being able to hover over sculptures can give one a sense of control and security. On the other hand, very large pieces can be overpowering and sometimes depart from reality. However, when sculpture begins to approach human scale and mass, the piece takes on a one-to-one relationship with the viewer and can assault the ego. It is this kind of relationship, one of person to piece, that I find most intriguing. In fact, when I cut the piece of oak used for the base of "Three Circles", I made a "gut" judgment as to what I thought would be the proper length. Later I measured the beam and it was five feet eight and three quarter inches, exactly my own height to the quarter inch!

When I began designing "Three Circles", I wanted to create a piece relating to the first two, but scaled up and set in a garden atmosphere. Again I rolled out two each of three coils progressively larger and longer in size, the first
set being twenty-five pounds apiece, the second being fifty pounds apiece, and the third being one hundred pounds apiece. Again they were each bent in a semi-circle, slammed down on a workbench and left to get leather-hard. I realized, after I manipulated the one hundred pound pieces, that I would have to find another way of constructing the components if I wanted to work larger. When the pieces became leather-hard, I turned them on their sides and scooped them out so that the walls were no thicker than one inch. In half of them, I dug out a hole in the top side of the semi-circles in order to later set the mounting pipes. Because these pieces were extremely large and heavy, I fired them on a quarter to half-inch bed of grog. A few of these components cracked near the underside of the inverted U, and I feel that this enhances the sculpture as a whole. The cracks document an honest reaction to the tensions and forces acting upon the pieces, and also release the viewer from the time-imposed ideals that all art objects should be precious. I then mounted three steel pipes into the semi-circles using "Por-Rok" and mounted them in progression into an oak beam. Since the piece was designed for a garden, but was going to be displayed indoors, I made a shallow rectangular box for it to sit in and filled it with perlite. The perlite gave the piece an outdoor environmental quality much as one would find in a Japanese garden.

At this point I wanted to construct larger sculptures, but was physically unable to do so. The pieces had simply
become too massive to manipulate. I decided to put my work with large circles aside until I could resolve my construction problems.

After setting aside my work with large circles, I began designing a piece titled "Double Monolith". My original idea was to construct two rectangular solids differing in size but of the same proportion. I then began formulating ideas about incorporation of a force factor. My first thought was to physically drive an object through both rectangles, but decided that this act would interfere with the cleanness and crispness I wanted to portray in this piece. I finally decided that the more conceptual approach of separating the top of each rectangle and making them appear to hover causing a visual tension and focal point would be more appropriate.

The construction of "Double Monolith" was done using cut slabs made with a slab roller, scoring and slipping the edges together and reinforcing them with an interior seam coil. This proved to be a very difficult and time consuming method for two reasons. First, it takes a great deal of time for the slabs to dry evenly, and second, the slabs were so large that they broke easily during the process of fabrication. The pieces were then scraped with a wooden rib and burnished with a rubber rib. Small pinholes were then made on the top of each rectangle to allow gases to escape. They had to be fired on a bed of grog which aids their movement while shrinking. One of the seams opened slightly but was repaired
Plate 10 "Double Monolith"
Plate 11 "Double Monolith"
with wood panel filler wax. During the firing an interesting pattern of flashing occurred on the broad surfaces. Darkened finger marks occurred on the front and sides, and I have two theories about their presence. First, I believe they could be some form of soluble salts which are contained in the perspiration of my hands, or, secondly, while rubbing the piece I further helped to burnish that area and brought more iron to the surface. In either case, I feel that the marks add a bit of the human element to the piece.

When finally assembling the piece, I tried to use some shiny silvery nuts as spacers for each separation. The metal did not relate to the piece in terms of color, texture, or function, so I chose to use little blocks of clay. Spacing the pieces in relationship to one another was enjoyable because they worked well in just about every possibility. I finally decided to display them in a head on position, the smaller one about ten feet in front of the larger, and their right sides in line respectively.

My success with "Double Monolith" encouraged me to work even larger and cleaner. I wanted to build a monolith close to my own size. However, I needed another method of construction, for the size of the previous pieces was all that I could handle. I then remembered a system of building small slab boxes using an expandable wooden form that Robert Schmitz had demonstrated, and decided to build a scaled-up variation of this form. I ripped a three-quarter inch, four by eight foot sheet of plywood and then cut two feet
Plate 13 "Ram-box" form
Plate 14 "Ram-box" form
off of each end forming two six by two foot pieces and two two by two foot pieces. Next I screwed four pieces of angle iron to the end of each piece of wood. To prevent the clay from sticking to the wood I used canvas in which I set grommets so it could be tied to the surfaces of the boards. I then drilled three parallel rows of holes in each board, screwed the edge of a two by four down the middle of the outside of the six foot pieces to give them additional strength, and finally painted the interior with an outdoor wood water proofer. To secure the form, I used seven-sixteenth inch nuts and bolts. With this form, I could make boxes ranging from six feet by two feet by two feet down to as small as I wanted. In this manner, one can build an almost totally seamless box.

When I started work on "Large Monolith", I set this "ram-box" up into a long narrow form and laid it on top of a canvas-covered board. I began slamming handfuls of clay onto the bottom and sides until I covered the entire interior surfaces with about one-half inch of clay. Realizing that compression was important, I paddled the clay quite severely. I let the clay extend half an inch beyond the top of the box. Next, I used a slab roller to make the last piece for the side. When it stiffened slightly, I scored and slipped its edges as well as the extended edge within the form and put them together, paddling them until the slab was almost flush with the top of the form. I then untied the ropes which held the canvas, unscrewed the nuts and bolts, and took
Plate 15 "Large Monolith"
Plate 16 "Large Monolith"
apart the form. Carefully I peeled away the canvas; the surface had a beautiful random pattern of each piece of clay that had been slammed onto it. However, this was not what I wanted, so I filled in all large voids and turned the piece on end. Waiting for the piece to become leather-hard, I repeated the whole process but shortened the length of the form for the top piece. After both pieces became leather-hard, I surformed the entire surface and rounded all edges and corners.

Due to the size of the pieces, I used the thirty cubic foot, Alpine, updraft kiln to fire the sculpture. Because of this size factor, the load inside the kiln was very open and made the kiln temperature difficult to control from top to bottom. Toward the end of the firing the top became approximately two cones hotter than the bottom, which forced me to shorten the flames. This drastic change, I believe, caused the surface cracks that occurred in this piece. However, I was able to repair the undesirable cracks with a mixture of fired clay dust and Elmer's Glue. The remainder of the cracks created an exciting pattern and display of internal forces and energies. The cracks in both top and bottom pieces, and also the closer relationship of their relative proportions, provided the more subtle progression I desired. The piece was in itself a progression in form.

Assembling the sculpture was uncomplicated because the large round edges eliminated the necessity of having
spacers between the pieces. The inward curvature at the edges created a strong focal point and helped visually unite the pieces. Because I had to shorten the flame, which caused an oxidizing atmosphere during the firing, parts of the clay surface were very light in color. I found that by oiling the clay with Watco wood finishing oil, I darkened its color and brought out a deeper grain.

Working with the box form provided a new idea for working with large circular shapes. Using four six-gallon plastic containers lined with paper as a round form, I filled the interior walls with clay slabs. After they were paddled in and allowed to slightly stiffen, I turned the containers upside-down, removed the containers from the clay walls, and peeled away the paper. Two clay forms were then placed next to each other and paddled towards one another. They were then joined together by coiling and further padding them. The same method was applied to the other set. When they were leather-hard, the entire surface was surformed. A hole was then cut in the top of one piece to later set a support pipe in.

As in my previous large forms, these components were also fired on a bed of grog. To successfully build and fire pieces larger than this, they would need to be constructed on the bed of a car kiln or lifted and loaded into a kiln with a mechanical device. As it was, I chipped the edge of one form while loading the kiln. The chip was later glued and then filled with a mixture of fired clay dust and Elmer's Glue.
Plate 17 "Split Circle"
Plate 20  "Split Circle"
Because the surface qualities of my clay body and of concrete are so similar, I decided to assemble the sculpture on a cast concrete base. I set a pipe into the center of the base, and when the concrete set, both were painted flat black. The piece I had previously cut a hole into was then placed onto the pipe and cemented in place using "Por-Rok". A piece of glass was placed on top, and the other form placed on it.

With this piece, as in the last, the thesis statement is conceptual in nature. The enlarging taper at the ends of each semi-circle was modeled rather than being a true reaction to force. The glass serves as a dividing plane to demonstrate to the viewer that the piece had been forceably cut in two. The sculpture in itself is a progression of form relating to the continuum of the circle and the reflection of images. With this piece, as in "Six Circles", the surface of the glass does give a slight reflection which adds another visual dimension for the observer to explore.

With my last piece I wanted to create a sculpture that was a bit more challenging than the previous ones. I wanted to relate the monolith with the circle and unite them with a graphic image on the surface of the monolith. The sculpture was originally conceived of as an upright monolith with a mirror on its top and a semi-circle on top of it. The surface of the monolith was to have a graphic image of the relationship between the reaction in the mirror and its counterpart.
Plate 21 "Monolith With Half Circle"
Plate 22 "Monolith With Half Circle" detail
The construction of this sculpture was very similar to that of "Large Monolith". The monolith component was made as before in the "ram-box" form, only this time I used small slabs from the slab roller instead of small hand fulls of clay. The semi-circle was built using the coil method, and then finished with a surform.

On previous occasions I had noticed that a burnished area of clay would fire darker than an unburnished section. Using this observation, I drew the reflected image from the mirror and semi-circle on both sides of the monolith and then burnished it with a piece of smooth glass. These pieces, as in all of my previous large sculptures, were fired on a bed of grog to prevent cracking.

When the components of the piece were assembled, the mirror failed to function as I had anticipated. The sharp, thin edge of the mirror in juxtaposition to the soft, massive edge of the clay visually clashed with one another. The mirror was so small in comparison to the semi-circle, that it was difficult to see enough reflected image. I felt that the sculpture worked best without the mirror, simply using the semi-circle and the graphically embellished monolith.

In this piece, which I entitled "Monolith With Half Circle", the progression of form is both conceptual and abstract. The form of the three-dimensional semi-circle progresses through the monolith and is translated into a two-dimensional image on the surface of it. So, the form
progresses from a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional one. It is this conceptual abstract surge that creates the energy and force within the piece.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I feel that I accomplished my proposal at least. In addition, I feel I have learned many of the technical aspects concerning ceramics, ranging from the problems of working on a monumental scale to the subtle differences one can obtain by different methods of surface treatment. More important than the technical achievements, I believe, is the aesthetic and intellectual growth that took place during the time I solved my self-imposed problems. I feel that it is this kind of growth that will foster new explorations in my work yet to come.