Access and denial

Jill Oberman

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ACCESS AND DENIAL

By
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August, 1995
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INTRODUCTION

In creating the body of work for my thesis exhibition, I investigated the themes of personal barriers. The resulting ceramic sculptures explore some of the issues that people encounter as they attempt to establish meaningful connections to one another. Emphasizing the many layers that people possess, and the different ways that these layers can be revealed, I created both wall and pedestal sculptures that examine the many ways that I allow, and sometimes deny, others access to my innermost being. I often surround the important aspects of who I am with layers of protective walls, which act as a barrier to my true self. In each sculpture I included an opening, or “doorway”, which may suggest a potentially elusive passageway through these barriers.

As I worked through these emotions and behaviors to create sculpture, I studied ancient ruins and architecture. Here I discovered a connection between my ideas and the universality in the wearing away of our protective structures. I also looked at abstract paintings to learn more about creating a specific mood as well as an illusion of space using color. By combining these references, I hoped to create form and surface which implied depth and invited contemplation.
PHILOSOPHY

Both the making of art and the viewing of art incorporate the ideas of communication. When we understand and relate to another person, a connection is made. In knowing that I wanted to both discover and reveal myself with my art, my thesis was born from a need to analyze the way that I relate with others and develop meaningful connections to the people around me, and then to share my discoveries.

On an individual level, I am very introspective. However, I spend much of my time concerned about others and reflecting on how our actions effect each other. I am told that I am open and sharing about my opinions, but that I am "guarded and mysterious" about things that deeply effect me. These personal traits are some of the feelings that I hoped to instill in my artwork, as a kind of play between the obvious and the discrete.

Although I may tend to hide parts of myself in my daily life, there is no place to hide when making art. Successful art takes personal, genuine emotions, and channels these intangible feelings into three dimensions. Suzanne Langer, a philosopher and art educator describes art as "...projections of felt life into spatial, temporal, and poetic structures. They are images of feelings, that formulate for our cognition...and present feelings to our understanding."\(^1\) By creating sculpture, I create an object which has a life of its own. Using clay, I can manipulate the form of each sculpture to clearly and

precisely address my conceptual concerns. With my sculptures, I can attempt to establish a tangible image that communicates a specific idea that can be interpreted beyond time or culture. If the ideas of the sculpture are clear, people with varied experiences and backgrounds may approach the work, contemplate its meaning, and relate to its purpose. When this occurs, I have successfully communicated with an individual that I otherwise may never have had contact with in any other way. Through my art, I hope to tap into my personal perspective, and present these emotions in sculpture in a universally comprehensive way.
Doorways have always been a fascination of mine. They are such a powerful image. Open doors invite us in, while closed doors shut us out. But at the same time, open doors leave us vulnerable, while closed doors protect us. The doorway symbolizes both the point where we enter and develop a personal connection, as well as the point where we are denied access. In Val Clery’s book on photographs of doorways, he identifies the duality of doorways as:

...the frontier crossing between outside and inside, between social and personal, between public and private, between them and us, doors mark out our moments of truth, our point of contact, on their hinges swing our fate, through them we go from one passage of our lives to another, retreating, arriving, departing, returning...²

A doorway is the threshold between you and me. In order to make a connection, one of us must open a door, and the other must go in.

When I flipped through the pages of a book on ancient architecture, I was struck by the resiliency of the doorway. As the pictures went by, I was amazed by the number of doorways that remained standing long after the walls had fallen (see figure 1). I was especially taken by a book which illustrated the architecture of the Inca people of ancient Peru. The architectural style of the Inca is distinct. The Incan people created immense structures by precisely fitting together large granite stones. Characteristics of the

architectural remains are numerous trapezoidal gateways and niches, which served important, but unclear, ceremonial meaning.

The Inca were an exceptionally spiritual people, and the architectural spaces created for their religious functions were numerous. Although many architectural structures from the Incan culture have survived, little is known about the significance of these remains. It is clear, however, that these structures were used for ceremonial rituals. “In ancient Peru, both in the mountains and the coast, the constant concern of the people was with their origins, with which the future was involved.”3 It appears as if many of these ceremonies stemmed from a desire to understand where they came from, and to give thanks for life.

Machu Picchu, located on the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains, is a structure that was created to celebrate life. It is a city built entirely of white granite, containing numerous interconnecting galleries and compartments, each for distinct ritual ceremony. The spaces are small, suggesting rituals for few individuals at a time, and marked by the abundance of doorways, leading from one gallery to the next (see figure 2). The architecture itself seems to have been created to emphasize the doorway, which serves as a boundary between one space and another. It is theorized that:

The Inca had great concern with such boundaries and with the movement of people across them. The ceremonial passage from one space or one patio to another may have marked important social and political transformations, and the gateways themselves may have legitimized such change.4

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The architectural remains of the Incan culture certainly supports this theory. As the physical doorways have survived, so to has the spiritual belief that we can transform our situation by simply crossing through a doorway.
Because I intended to make sculpture that would communicate my ideas on a personal, intimate level, I knew that the actual scale of the work would be relatively small. Besides using perspective to create the illusion of depth, I knew that I would have to use the surface to imply additional depth and scope to a tangibly flat surface. Since I wanted the sculptures to become a unique place unto themselves, I looked at the work of Mark Rothko, an artist who had successfully achieved this task with his paintings (see figures 3 and 4). From studying his paintings, I hoped to find a way to capture some of the atmosphere and depth that Rothko painted, using clay and glaze instead of canvas and paint.

Mark Rothko had a very clear idea of what he hoped to accomplish with his paintings. His ideas were often misunderstood because of their depth, their power, and their urgency. Directly reflecting his personal feelings of turmoil and despair, Rothko wanted to create paintings that would transform the viewers from a physical space to an introspective one where they felt “trapped” inside the paintings. In his book on the life and work of Mark Rothko, James Breslin writes that in viewing Rothko’s paintings “…we are confronted with solitude, emptiness, diffusion, loss. Yet we are also pulled into a new world, an unknown space, filled with sensuous, colored light.” Breslin continues to describe Rothko’s large work as “…Commanding of presence, beautiful and seductive,

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6 Ibid., 28.
aggressive and invasive, works that addressed a solitary viewer, works that evoke a relation that is silent and empathetic, yet distant and separate."^{7}

Like Rothko, I hoped to convey contextual meaning through the manipulation of color and surface, to pull the viewer inside my work, and to create an environment for the viewer to explore.

^{7} Breslin, 31.
figure 3
Mark Rothko
*Blue and Grey*. 1962
Oil on canvas, 79 1/4 x 69"
figure 4
Mark Rothko

*Untitled*. 1961
Oil on canvas, 105 x 83"
In creating the doorway series, I employed both wall and pedestal sculptures to investigate similar themes. Exhibited together, each sculpture offers a slight variation on the basic scenario, successfully creating a unified body of work.

With the wall sculptures, I focused on the visual play of the illusion of space. Using flat slabs to create distinct layers, and deliberately overlapping the opening in each layer, I was able to establish a receding perspective. The manipulation of light and dark glazes also serves to enhance this illusion of depth.

The pedestal sculptures are similar to the wall piece in their attempt to create the illusion of depth, but in addition to creating perspective, I explored the ideas of mass. These sculptures look like solid weight, and the doorways recede into a physical place, not just an implied one.

I began this body of work with the wall sculptures. The first sculpture that I made, the white one, was the smallest wall piece (see figure 5). The piece is twelve and a half inches tall, ten inches wide, and comes three inches away from the wall. There are three doorways, each getting progressively smaller, placed slightly over to the right side of the piece. There is an additional slab on the left side. The entire piece is covered with a white terra sigillata, and then smoke-fired. The front surface of the piece is slightly chipping, and that, in combination with the slab on the left side of the piece, makes an abstract reference to architecture. As the doorways recede back into the piece, each layer gets
figure 5
*Untitled. 1995*
Clay, terra sigillata, 12.5 x 10 x 3"
slightly darker, almost obscuring the smallest doorway entirely. By receding the doorways into darkness, the inner space of the piece is unknown. The space is not threatening, just dark, and far away.

The next piece that I made is the black wall piece (see figure 6). This piece is seventeen and a half inches tall, nineteen inches wide, and two inches deep. Made entirely of a single thick slab, I pressed into the slab to create the illusion of three separate layers of doorways inside a larger frame. I glazed the frame area with a matte black glaze, and glazed the smallest doorway with a shiny black glaze. The rest of the piece I left unglazed. I raku fired this piece, and reduced it. The result was a warm black inside, framed by a cooler black outside, with a cool black, small, shiny doorway. The purpose of alternating from a cool to a warm back to a cool black surface was to allow the small doorway to jump out at the viewer, creating a question as to whether the smallest doorway was the closest or the farthest away.

Still working with thick slabs, I made the red wall sculpture next (see figure 7). To create the doorways, I joined two slabs together with epoxy after they had been separately glaze fired. The large base slab, which gives the piece the dimensions of eighteen and a half inches tall, twenty-two inches wide, and two and a half inches deep, is glazed simply. The center is glazed with a deep matte black, and the chiseled edges are highlighted with a matte red glaze. The center square slab is glazed with a reddish matte glaze, that when raku fired, randomly flashes in spots with blues, browns and reds. The black matte surface of the larger slab shows through the chiseled doorway on the right of
figure 6
*Untitled, 1995*
clay, 17.5 x 19 x 2"
figure 7
*Untitled.* 1995
clay, 18.5 x 22 x 2.5"
the smaller slab. The chiseled edges found in this body of work represent the separation of a small part from a larger one, implying that this piece is cut away from a greater whole.

The last wall piece that I made is the brownish one, twenty-two inches tall, eighteen inches wide, and three inches deep (see figure 8). I rotated the orientation of the doorways of this piece, leaving the biggest slab not as an architectural frame for the doorways, but as another doorway itself. Made up of three distinct slabs, each slab was glazed with a matte brown glaze, flashing shades of browns, whites and purples when reduced. Depending on the amount of reduction, I was able to control the intensity of the color, creating lighter shades with a lighter reduction. Again, I joined the slabs post-firing, building the doorways coming out towards the viewer. In this piece, the smallest doorway is the closest to the surface. By changing the progression of color, and working from dark to light as the doorways grow from big to small, the play between far and near is again emphasized.

I decided to move away from the wall and to make sculptures that sat on pedestals in an attempt to alter the previous experience that the wall sculptures allowed. Still keeping the doorway as my focus, I thought that by taking the sculptures away from the wall, the doorways might lead the viewer to a different place, an implied space that went deeper into the sculpture than the others had before.

I made the next two sculptures virtually at the same time. The gray sculpture (see figure 9) measures twenty-seventy and a half inches wide, twenty-one inches in length, and three inches high. The black one (see figure 10) is just slightly smaller, measuring twenty-six inches wide, eighteen and a half inches in length, and two inches tall. Both sculptures
figure 8
*Untitled*. 1995
clay, 22 x 18 x 3”
figure 9
*Untitled*. 1995
clay, 27.5 x 21 x 3”
figure 10
*Untitled. 1995*
clay, 26 x 18.5 x 2"
have a chiseled outside edge, a smooth, flat inner surface, and a single, deep doorway on the top right corner of each piece. While both pieces look solid and heavy, the gray piece is light in color, and the black piece is a contrasting dark. To glaze the gray piece I first covered the entire surface with a red terra sigillata, and bisque fired the piece. I then applied the matte, stony gray glaze, and fired the piece again. Because the gray glaze tends to run, the red terra sigillata was exposed, and mixed in with the glaze, emphasizing the chiseled edge of the piece. To highlight the smooth, flat center piece, I then etched away the glaze from the center, and left the inner surface raw. With the black piece, I applied the rich, matte black glaze to the entire piece, and fired. While the black glaze enhanced the aggressively chiseled outer edge, the smooth, center surface was somewhat dull. I then etched the black glaze away, and applied the gray glaze to the center square after the piece had been preheated. I then immediately re-fired the piece, causing the stony matte glaze to pull apart, leaving a rich gray inner surface surrounding the dark black doorway. In both of these pieces, the doorways seem to bore into the solid mass of the sculptures, bringing the viewer down deep inside these small openings.

At this point, I liked the increased depth that these pedestal sculpture implied, and I decided to try to add even more depth by creating some sculptures that stood upright. Still building sculptures that emphasized the layers of doorways that people possess, I made a small box with a set of two doorways as its opening (see figure 11). This piece is eleven inches tall, eight and a half inches wide and three and a half inches deep. The top edge of this sculpture is chiseled in a similar way as the previous two pieces, but the side edges are marked by a repetitive cut, as if the piece had been sawed away from a larger
figure 11
*Untitled. 1995*
clay, 11 x 8.5 x 3.5"
form. As the front face of the sculpture changes from one doorway to the next, the rust colored glaze becomes a more intense orange before turning to the blackness of the inner space inside the piece. While the differentiation between the inside and outside of this piece are clear, what lies on the inside is not.

The last piece that I created for my show is the metallic gray sculpture (see figure 12). This raku sculpture, measuring seventeen and a half inches tall, eight and a half inches wide, and three and a half inches deep, is the only piece which does not imply any depth, and denies the viewer access to its inside. While it has a chiseled top edge, and distinct saw marks on either side edge, the doorways of this piece lead the viewer in and right on through to the other side of the sculpture.
figure 12
*Untitled*, 1995
clay, 17.5 x 8.5 x 3.5”
CONCLUSION

The doorway series began as a body of work exploring issues of inside and outside. The scale of the sculptures is relatively small. The doorways themselves deny any physical passage to the inside, but encourage a transcendental one. The experience is an intimate one, between art and viewer, allowing only one individual in at a time. Some of the doorways are easy to pass through, and others are small, dark, and more obscure. This is the way that I understand the process of connecting myself with others. Sometime the bonds comes easily, other times we have to work a little harder to establish a connection.

The feelings that I experience from my influences are extremely powerful. Joining together the spiritual influences of the Incan Architecture, the depth and power of Mark Rothko’s paintings, and my feelings concerning me relating with the world was very natural for me. I feel that I was able to extract some of this emotion from my references, and instill it into my work. The pieces are refined, and the message of the work is clear. While the sculptures present my personal vision, I wanted to touch others with these feelings, and allow them to relate with their own experiences. Sharing personal experiences is like showing someone a door, and inviting them inside. I hope that my sculptures establish a meaningful connection with their viewers, transforming them. Then, like the Incan doorways, the sculptures legitimate such a change.
As I thought about the way that I relate with people, I discovered that I felt this strong need to protect myself. My protective barriers were strong, so strong that even I had difficulty accessing certain aspects of myself. I felt that parts of me were so protected, that they almost did not exist. This need to protect myself had grown so powerful, that it had become my nature. So, in order to discover what I had hidden away, and in turn reveal it to others, I had to find a way inside. What was inside was directly dependent on how deeply inside I wanted to search.

Looking deep, I saw the different protective layers clearly. The outer layers were thick and weathered; the edges were rough and broken. The surfaces were rich in color, as if to distract me from search. Each subsequent doorway enticed me to continue, to find out what lay beyond the next door. I wanted to make the effort, but I was afraid, afraid to discover that there wasn't anything inside after all.

With my artwork I feel as if I am tangibly telling the viewer something about myself that I cannot express in words. When I began this series it was important to me to place the doorways on the right side of the piece. I should really say that the doorways were placed on the right side of the piece as you look at it, but on the left side of the piece as it looks at you. The doorways on the left represent a point of entry deeper and deeper inside me. When people view my work, I feel as if they are looking deep into my soul. After all, the left side is where the heart is.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

CLAY BODY

Hawthorne Fire Clay 100 lbs.
Foundry Hill Creme Stoneware 50
OM-4 Ball Clay 50
Nepheline Syenite 10
Kyanite 20
Fine grog 10

GLAZES

White Terra Sigillata
OM-4 200 grams
Calgon 10 g.
water 800 ml.

Red Terra Sigillata
OM-4 50 grams
Red Iron Oxide 50 g.
Calgon 5 g.
water 400 ml.

Adam’s Black_A04
Nepheline Syenite 246 grams
Gerstley Borate 152
Barium Carbonate 178
Flint 246
EPK 81
Lithium Carbonate 97
Manganese Dioxide 100
Black Copper Oxide 20
Black Iron Oxide 40
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