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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE BOAT AS SCULPTURAL METAPHOR

by

Scott M. Place

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Introduction

This thesis was undertaken to explore the possibilities of utilizing the boat as a unique form for my own work in the realm of ceramic sculpture. I dealt with the boat as a metaphor to depict personal fantasies, daydreams and past encounters. In these pieces I depict the sense of freedom I feel from skimming across the surface of water. Some appear as though they are in rapids of a river. Another is a depiction of being in the middle of a big body of water and feeling rather small.
Form With Surface

I am attracted to the form of boats in general. The idea of an object skimming across the water is fascinating to me. Some boats do not even look as though they would float. Others look as though they are moving 100 M.P.H. when they are still tied up at the dock. I like boats; old, new, fast, slow, big, little...everything about them. Boats of all eras are cherished by the user. Fine craftsmanship seems to be consistently executed by shipwrights throughout time.

With the pieces I have made I have attempted to deal with the form and the surface as one issue. In effect, the form of the object makes the surface while at the same time the surface defines the form.

To define the forms I utilize texture and color. This is also what gave the pieces their individual character. While making these pieces I approached each with a clear mind in an attempt to depict different aspects of being in a boat.

I wanted the pieces to have a minimalistic look to them in anticipation of less being more. Capturing a moment in time with the boat in motion was my goal with the majority of the pieces. My intention was to present the essence of the boat.
Historical Reference

Most cultures that have utilized boats depicted their vessels in their art. For most, the boat served as a tool for transporting people, livestock and cargo while it also represented a form of spiritual transportation. Cultures that lived near water also had folklore based upon traveling on a boat in the after-life.

Clay models of boats are an excellent source for documenting boats that were sailed years ago. The actual ships would have decomposed or sank by this point in time. Clay models of various ships were made as toys for children to play with. Ceremonial vessels of boats are also very prevalent in many cultures. The ceremony was likely to have been conducted to ask for safe seas and a good harvest of fish. These ceremonial vessels were also a spiritual vehicle for travel in the next life.

The Vikings were superior shipwrights of their time. These ships were more seaworthy and sailed faster than any other boat ever made at that point. These qualities gave them the upper hand when invading other people or while at battle on the open water. The prow of these ships often had a dragon that extended out over the water. The initial sight of a dragon or a serpent coming across the water must have sent fear and horror through every vein and bone in their enemies' body. The craftsmanship of a Viking ship is impeccable. Every attention possible is given to details. The prow of the Osberg ship ca, 950 A.D. (Figure 1) is an example of how guilted bronze was used to lend structural support to the bow while it also adds to the beauty of it. The pattern in the bronze is that of dragons at battle. Having a ship adorned with a powerful mythological creature had to get adrenaline pumping through the bodies of the Viking warriors. Metaphorically the warriors were the dragons and dragons are indestructible.

Ceremonies and rituals of the Vikings often involved their ships. This is
because of the role the ship played in their prosperity. Most of these Pagan ceremonies were extensive and would appall most people of today’s society. The death of a powerful man seemed to call for an extensive ceremony.

The following account of a Rus cremation on the Volga was written by Ahmad Ibn Fadhlan (an Arab observer) when serving on an embassy from Baghdad to the Bulgars 921-2 A.D.: “They burn him in this fashion: they leave him for the first ten days in the grave. His possessions they divide into three parts: one part for his daughters and wives; another for garments to clothe the corpse; another part covers the cost of the intoxicating drink which they consume in the course of ten days, uniting sexually with women and playing musical instruments. Meanwhile, the slave-girl who gives herself to be burned with him, in these ten days drinks and indulges in pleasure; she decks her head and her person with all sorts of ornaments and fine dress and so arrayed gives herself to the men. The ninth day, having drawn the ship up on the river bank, they guarded it. In the middle of the ship they prepared a dome of wood and covered this with various forms of fabrics. Then they brought a couch and put it on the ship and covered it with a mattress of Greek brocade. Then came an old woman whom they call the Angel of Death, and she spread upon the couch the furnishing mentioned. It is she who has charge of all the clothes-making and arranging of things, and it is she who kills the slave girl. I saw that she was a strapping old woman, fat and luring. The tenth day, they brought the deceased out of the ground and put him inside the pavilion and put around him different kinds of flowers and fragrant plants. Many men and women gathered and played musical instruments and each of his kinsmen built a pavilion at some distance. The slave-girl arrayed herself and went to the pavilions of the kinsmen of the dead man, and the master of each had sexual intercourse once with her, saying in a loud voice, “Tell your master that I have done the
duty (or exercise the right) of love and friendship”. And so, as she went to all the pavilions to the last one, all the men had intercourse with her. When this was over, they cut a dog in two halves and put it in the boat, then, having cut the head off a rooster, they threw it, head and body to the right and left of the ship. After that the group of men who have cohabited with the slave-girl make of their hands a sort of paved way whereby the girl, placing her feet on the palms of the men, comes down and mounts again to the ship and recites many things. She goes into the pavilion in which her husband has been put, and six of the relatives of her husband go into the pavilion and unite sexually with his wife in the presence of the dead man. When they have finished these duties of love, the old woman who, according to the belief of these people, is the Angel of Death arrives and lays the wife to sleep beside her husband. Of the six men, two seize the legs of the slave-girl, and two others her hands, and the old woman, twisting her veil, puts it around her neck and gives the ends to the two other men so that they can pull it so tight that the soul escapes from her body. Then the closest relative of the dead man, after they have placed the girl whom they have killed beside her master, came, took a piece of wood which he lighted at a fire, and walked backwards with his head toward the boat and his face turned (towards the people), with one hand holding the kindled stick and the other covering his anus, being completely naked, for the purpose of setting fire to the wood that had been made ready beneath the ship. Thereupon the flames engulfed the wood, then the ship, the pavilion, the man, the girl, and everything in the ship. A powerful, fearful wind began to blow so that the flames became fiercer and more intense. And actually an hour had not passed before the ship, the wood, the girl and her master were nothing but cinders and ashes.

Then they constructed in the place where had been the ship which they had drawn up out of the river something like a small round hill, in the middle of which they
erected a great post of birch wood, on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the Rus king and they departed.” (Kirkby p. 118-20)

Haniwa boats of Japan are said to be a rare find but are thought to have been made from the middle of the Tumulus Period on. (Miki, p. 35) The Haniwa boat found in the Saitobaro Tumulus (Figure 2) is testament to the elaborate shipbuilding skills of the early Japanese. The actual boat that this was modeled after would have been quite seaworthy and likely to have been rowed to the Asiatic continent to trade goods.

The Mesopotamian peoples created clay boat models which now serve as extensive documentation. Figure 3 is an Ancient Mesopotamian toy boat made in the 7th century B.C. The piece was excavated from the child's grave. This most likely served both as a toy and for spiritual transportation. Mesopotamian river craft (Figure 4) ca. 3400 B.C., were made for one person to paddle. Reed boats are the next step in the evolution of Mesopotamian navigation (Figure 5, ca. 3100 B.C.).

The Peruvian Pre-Inca coastal civilization Mochica III used the boat form in rituals. The ritual ceramic bowl ca.600-800 A.D. (Figure 6) would be filled with liquid and make the boat appear to be floating. The ritual must have been a manner of asking for safe journeys and a bountiful catch.

Figure 7 is an Egyptian Funerary offering from 2000-1700 B.C. This may very well have been ritualistically placed at the tomb by the family to ask for safe travel in the after-life.

Figure 8 is the "Norican Sky-Boat Rider" found in 1948 on a Celtic ritual site in what is now Austria. It is believed to be dated from about 660 B.C. "The expressive miniature sculpture may have had some connection with the complex of myths of the Deluge, which are as old as the origins of early primeval societies.” (Rudolph p. 58)

The boat as a tool is recognized by all human beings. Though the style and
craftsmanship may vary from culture to culture, each would recognize the others’ as a boat. Even if one were never to have seen the boat, it would be recognizable as one because the idea of boats is universal among humans. This universality makes the boat form an ideal image to work with in clay.
Approach to Working

When I first began this project I had no direct historical reference point. This made for a bit of a struggle in moving the concept along swiftly and in the right direction. Coming up with the concept of creating sculpture to depict memories and feelings about boating was simple. Creating the actual pieces and having them be viable as art was not so simple.

While creating this body of work the pieces told me what the next step in each sequence was. Once I realized that the work would tell me what to do if I just paid attention closely enough, the only trouble I had was keeping up with how fast the work was telling me what to do. This notion made for the process of making the pieces to be fast paced and enjoyably challenging.

I had been working through the development of making a sensible base for the boat forms. I had an instinct that the base should be a reflection of the boat as water takes on the reflection of whatever may be around it. Looking through a section about reflections in the book "Wilderness Scenario: Peaceful Images of the Wild", by Pat O’Hara, the paragraph as follows gave me insight:

Some say that the perfect reflection is a mirror of reality. But that reality is easily distorted. A stone tossed into the middle of still water sends out concentric pulses that fracture the reflected image. The slightest breeze will blur the water’s surface with an impressionistic texture.

He later went on to say that “Water is often the parent of my discoveries.” I took this statement to evolve into a duality between the boat and the water being the
parents of my discoveries. The boat by design needs water to truly exist. 

Seeing that the boat forms needed water as bases to sit upon I began looking at how the painters of the Impressionist Period dealt with the composition of objects and water. Claude Monet was my initial focus as he was the first to come to my mind. In looking through various books I was continually drawn to Monet. Monet in Holland served to be an excellent resource for the flavor I desired my own work to have. “Houses in the Achterzaan” (Figure 9) pg. 114, “The Zaan Near Zaandam” (Figure 10) pg. 124 and “The Mill ‘De Roozboom’” (Figure 11) pg. 160 are images I was particularly drawn to.

On Saturday November 25, 1995 things rapidly improved as a result of seeing the show at the Museum of Fine Art-Boston “Impressions of France: Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and their Rivals”. The key transition and improvement in my work came after seeing these paintings in person. Being in the same room as these paintings had a strong and positive impact on me that I can not put in words. This impact can be noticed in my work though. There were three paintings on display that I focused on.

“Lavacourt” Claude Monet 1880 (Figure 12)

“Low Tide” Eugene Boudin 1884

“Trououville, The Jetties at High Tide” 1890.
shown as a similar work (Figure 13)

“The Basin at Argenteuil” Gustave Caillebotte approximately 1883

“Sailboats in Argenteuil” 1888.
shown as a similar work (Figure 14)

Seeing these painting helped me to realize that the form and surfaces needed to be addressed in conjunction with one another. To sustain unity between the form and surface I adhered to knowing that the sum of its parts makes a whole.
**Description**

While paddling through the water I feel serenity all around. Paddling at a steady pace envelops me in a trance that becomes meditation. This meditation puts me at one with mind, body and boat. I exist as one entity with the boat being part of me. I am the boat.

In these pieces the boat is a metaphor to describe different aspects of my existence as a person. The boat is me!

People are on a spiritual journey during the span of their life. Each of my pieces is insight to the manner I make myself out to be and the way I really am. It is a cross-section of a description of who I am as a person.

People in general create barriers between their true inner self and the outside world. A person may act out as being tough and abrasive and unaffected by situations around them. Yet in reality they are truly warm, happy and compassionate on the inside.

The opposite also holds true. Some people act happy and carefree all of the time. They may say very positive things about life but are truly torn apart on the inside with indecision and self doubt.

I, as most people have, have been at both ends of this spectrum and every point in between. I have chosen to describe myself metaphorically with the boat as the key player. In every piece the boat is meant to have the lead role in the scenario.

I concentrated on working on a series of pieces at once. This seemed to maximize my use of time. The smaller and most intimate of my pieces is the Rogue River Series and the Rogue River Artifact Series.

The Rogue River Series was constructed by throwing the basic form of both the boat and its base and then carving them while leather hard. After the pieces were
bone dry I sprayed sigillatta to the entire surface and bisque fired to cone 06. After the bisque firing the underglaze was applied with brushes, sponges and a spray gun. The second firing was also fired to cone 06.

Rogue River Series #5 (Figure 15) is set as if it were in slight motion on its' base. There are two hues of green used to define the rails. The surface of the boat is layered to promote the idea of different layers of paint being applied to the boat throughout time. The base is carved and layered with color to look like reflections look in the early morning on rippled water. I have many layers to me which make up who I am as a person. This piece does not show but two layers. It depends on how well you know a person as to how many layers you can see. This piece describes me in the context of not showing many layers, being off-standish and quiet. The inside also reveals layers as do I. Few people really know what is inside a person spiritually.

Rogue River Series #7 (Figure 16) is also in motion but on more tranquil water so the base is textured quietly. This to me was a mid-afternoon scene on a sunny day with no wind. This piece is mostly a description of my day to day interaction with people. The outside reveals a layer of my personality. The inside is basically just one surface. Similar to how I deal with most people, not giving too much information away about myself. The rails are refined on this boat as I also like to keep myself looking refined when possible. Setting the scene to be a sunny day with no wind is how I like to present myself. I like to think that nothing can bother me or rock my boat.

Rogue River Series #9 (Figure 17) is the depiction of rough turbulent water. The boat is off center on the base and the base itself is choppy and uneven. This piece is in opposition to Rogue River Series #7 by showing that I can be disrupted and knocked off center. When looking at this piece the viewer can almost imagine that the boat took a step back off its' base. I am easily intimidated if looked at for too long. What seems to me as being overanalyzed may just be inquisition. So for me, this
piece shows my discomfort and uneasiness in awkward situations.

Rogue River Series #10 (Figure 18) is nearly a half moon in shape and is on a peaceful base as a reflection of it. The yellow rails on a formal level delineate where the inside and the outside begin and end. This delineation also represents my emotional persona. I have outward emotion that people relate to in everyday interaction. I also hold internal emotions that I have to deal with on my own at different levels. That yellow line is the point at which most people stop and are never permitted to go past. The area beyond the line is only entered by a very few. After passing that line, the few that have may wish that they had never done so. Similar to the existence of time and the past. By which after passing a point in time there is no going back.

The Rogue River Artifact Series was made by casting molten glass into a pressed form in sand. My sand mixture was very non-scientific. I used sand from the garden store and dirt from the kiln room mixed all together with some water to pour glass in. To make the imprints in the sand I used clay pieces from the Rogue River Series. When the molten glass was poured into the sand it low-fired the mixture and made the imprinted form into an actual form. The sand form that was made by the casting process was then placed on top of the glass.

Rogue River Artifact Series #3 (Figure 19) is elegant with an appearance of being from some other time. The boat form is set in motion by having the front slightly up from the horizontal plane. Rogue River Artifact Series #5 (Figure 20) is entirely on a horizontal plane which makes it solemn and quiet. Part of the upper rim or rail is extraordinarily thick in comparison to the rest. To me, this sets up the notion that the boat has survived through time and fallen apart yet miraculously still floats. At times my own inner spirit is vulnerable to outside forces and also fragile in a sense. The Rogue River Artifact Series pieces are fragile, vulnerable and intricate as is the human spirit of most, as is my own - at times. These pieces look how I feel on occasion.
The texture and spontaneous outer form is exciting and interesting to look at on these pieces. I simply set up the right situation and left the rest to chance. This holds true for the way I try to lead my life. I do the best I can for my situation at hand, point myself in the right direction and then hope for the best.

Man and Nature #1 and #2 were made by using cardboard to create the basic form and then packing the clay into it all at once. After the clay reached the leather hard stage I carved and paddled the clay to what I wanted. The bases were wheel thrown and altered to fit the boat forms afterwards. The sigillatta and underglaze were applied in the same manner as the Rogue River Series.

Man and Nature #1 and #2 show how man can overpower nature and even take advantage of it at times. Man and Nature #1 (Figure 21) is big, bulky and stable. The color is bright and staggered or varied on the outside to elude to the water reflecting back on the boat. I have also felt grand in scale, big and bulky, unstoppable. This piece is like an unsinkable utility boat. I have an attitude at times that I can go anywhere, do anything, in anyway I choose. Man and Nature #2 (Figure 22) is long, sleek and set in motion. I left the outside the way the cardboard made the clay to reveal the process of its construction. The inside texture of the piece was imprinted with my index finger repeatedly. The rails of the boat were shaved down and burnished to make a precise line. This piece further exaggerates the boat, or me, being able to conquer any situation. The ribbed outer structure is impervious to wounds. The inner pattern is a back-up mechanism to act as an indestructible honeycomb structure. The clean rails are like a clean shave and haircut - the final touch. Being indestructible is in a sense a myth. I, just as anyone, can be brought to my knees in writhing pain if the right situation arises.

Nature and Man #1 (Figure 23) was made with the cardboard method for the base and the boat was thrown and altered. I used sigillatta and dark underglaze for
the base to make it look gloomy and uninhabited by life. The boat was glazed bright yellow to show how man in general glorifies his existence yet in reality is rather insignificant. The reality of it all is that the attitude in Man & Nature #1 & #2 can get a person in deep trouble. Nature & Man #1 is often how I feel. Feeling alone, insignificant and in the middle of nowhere is probably common for a lot of people. Also, carrying on in a manner of arrogance can land a person in an existence of being all alone in a big body of water.

"My predicament is dawning on me. First it is a trickle, then a torrent of realization: I am going to drown today. Probably in the next few minutes."

(O'Connor p.23)

This type of reaction has come to me at times after doing something ignorant. Being fortunate enough to live through it to tell about it is crucial. There is an adrenaline rush from adventure that I enjoy. Respect has to be given to nature while standing on the edge because if you mess up - you die. There is no such thing as second chances.

All of these different methods of construction worked well together. As I was making these pieces, the pieces themselves gave me the ideas of how to make the next group of pieces. Making the boat and the base relatively the same size gave me the idea to make a large powerful boat with a small base. Then I reversed the roles and put a small vulnerable yet arrogant boat on the larger base. These different scenarios were a way of looking at the same basic idea in various perspectives.
Conclusion

This thesis was very exciting and enjoyable for me. My plan of attack was to allow the work to evolve into whatever it was that it needed to be. I grow, change, evolve into something different each day I add on to my life. I did not have anything calculated or planned out at the beginning and more or less just took part in the evolution of the idea.

I feel that hard work is what made my work be successful. With success there are failures. With hard work, pushing through mistakes and difficulty becomes more likely to happen.

In the future I plan to make pieces that further exaggerate the interaction of the boat being dominated by the forces of nature.

"Man by nature is a damn mess."

Norman MacLean  A River Runs Through It
Figure 1: Prow of the Viking ship the Osberg; 950 A.D.
Fig. 12. Haniwa boat (from Saitobaru Tumulus, Saito-machi, Kōyu-gun, Miyazaki Prefecture).

Figure 2: Haniwa boat

Figure 3: Ancient Mesopotamian toy boat; 7th century B.C.
20. Clay model of a Mesopotamian rivercraft, probably a coracle, ca. 3400 B.C.

7. Model of a reed boat, ca. 3100 B.C.
Ritual ceramic bowl, with raft model, from the Peruvian pre-Inca coastal civilization Mochica III, about 600 to 800, now in the museum Sima-Miraflores.
Figure 7: Egyptian Funerary gift; 2000-1700 B.C.

Figure 8: “Norican Sky Rider” Celtic ritual piece; 660 B.C.
Figure 9: Claude Monet "Houses in the Achterzaan"; 1872

Figure 10: Claude Monet "The Zaan Near Zaandam"; 1873
Figure 11: Claude Monet "The Mill 'De Roozboom'"; 1873-74

Figure 12: Claude Monet "Lavacourt"; 1880
Figure 13: Eugene Boudin "Trouville, The Jetties at High Tide"; 1890
Figure 14: Gustave Caillebotte “Sailboats in Argenteuil”; 1888
Figure 15: Rogue River Series #5; 6 3/4" X 4" X 4 1/2"; 1996
Figure 16: Rogue River Series #7; 7 1/2” X 4” X 5 1/2”; 1996
Figure 17: Rogue River Series #9; 7 1/2" X 4 1/2" X 4" ; 1996
Figure 18: Rogue River Series #10; 7 1/2" X 4" X 6" 1996
Figure 19: Rogue River Artifact Series #3; 9" X 5" X 5 1/2" ; 1996
Figure 20: Rogue River Artifact Series #5; 11" X 7" X 8"; 1996
Detail: Rogue River Artifact Series #5
Figure 21: Man & Nature #1; 31" X 23" X 13 1/2"; 1996
Detail: Man & Nature #1
Figure 22: Man & Nature #2; 45 1/2" X 11" X 19"; 1996
Detail: Man & Nature #2
Figure 23: Nature & Man #1; 45” X 12” X 12”; 1996
Detail: Nature & Man
Technical Information

Red/Orange Sculpting Body  Cone 04

Red Art  32.3  50
Foundry Hill Cream  16.1  25
Hawthorne Fire Clay  12.9  20
Mullite  9.7  15
OM4 Ball Clay  9.7  15
Medium Grog  16.1  25
Fine Grog  3.2  5

Sigillatta Recipes

Red/Rust
50 Red Art
50 Red Iron Oxide

Buff
OM4
Add: 10% Rutile

Gray
OM4
Add: 20% Cobalt Oxide
20% Red Iron Oxide

Black
OM4
Cobalt Oxide  30.75%
Red Iron Oxide  30.75%
100.00

Gray/Blue
OM4 Base
Add: 5% Rutile
2.5% Cobalt Oxide
2.5% Chrome Oxide
2.5% Copper Carbonate

Blue
OM4 Base
Add: 10% Cobalt Oxide
10% Rutile

Green
OM4 Base
Add: 10-15% Chrome Oxide and a touch of Red Iron Oxide

Amaco Underglazes

Black-------------Lug-1  Aqua--------Lug-26  Maroon-------Lug-56
White-------------Lug-10  Blue-Green--Lug-42  Yellow------Lug-61
Medium Blue------Lug-26  Dark Green--Lug-43  Orange------Lug-65

I used these underglazes randomly and mixed different colors to taste.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


