The Exploration of spatial relationships through a personal iconography

Sara Koblentz

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE EXPLORATION OF SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH A PERSONAL ICONOGRAPHY

By
SARA KOBLENTZ

August 1987
APPROVALS

Adviser: Robert Schmitz
Date: 8/16/87

Associate Adviser: Leonard Urso
Date: August 10, 1987

Associate Adviser: Kris Nelson
Date: 

Special Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs: Philip Bonarth
Date: August 17, 1987

Dean, College of Fine & Applied Arts: Dr. Robert Johnston
Date: 8/24/87

I, Sara Koblentz, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address.

190-19C 71st Crescent
Fresh Meadows, New York
11365

Date: August 10, 1987
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DEDICATION

In Mimbres culture, bowls with "kill holes" were placed over the head of the deceased in order to permit the free passage of the spirit out into the Upperworld. It is a symbol of death, emergence and rebirth. In our culture today there are ritual and spiritual means of releasing the spirit in this life. Psychology has as its base the purpose of permitting the psyche to free itself from limitations. A person overcome with psychological blocks may be "dead" to life, unable to function.

My thesis has been dedicated to my father who spent his life helping others to reemerge from the black depths of despair to acceptance of themselves and to a return to life.
Before coming to graduate school my work in clay had undergone a major transition. In Portland, Oregon I had been a production potter for many years. I returned to New York City with the intention of developing an iconography of personal images in three dimensions. My idea originated through sketches done in watercolor. The actual transition from production pots to one-of-a-kind pieces was through a surface motif carved into wet porcelain clay. In New York I used low-fire clay with bright colored underglazes. My development has been an intuitive progression, where I am conscious of my states of mind, mood fluctuations and sometimes paradoxical personality.

I have long been interested in various subjects such as psychology, anthropology, mythology, metaphysics and astrology. They are all systems for understanding man and the human psyche. My personal iconography became a system for understanding my world and my place in it. The icons were images which had repeatedly appeared in my life and my work. They became reference points for me.

A question became paramount. Is this symbology just for me or is there a need for others to understand what I am doing? I think this question will always remain with me. My art is very personal, my way of seeing the world. But at the same time it was not meant to sit in a closet somewhere but to be seen. It is through its formality, subtlety or assertiveness of design and color that I wish to evoke responses in others.
INTRODUCTION

During my first year of Graduate school I was introduced to Mimbres pottery in a Ceramic History course. I felt an immediate connection to the interior spaces of energetic movement and complex designs. The hemispheric bowl form containing geometric compositions, mythical subject matter and a sense of space and life within, suggested a context for my own personal mythology.

This written thesis is a discussion of Mimbres painted pottery with a parallel presentation of the ideas behind my own clay work. Only the most relevant aspects of history have been explored.
PART I

MIMBRES POTTERY
HISTORICAL REFERENCE
The Mimbres culture existed within a 600 hundred year period from AD 550 to AD 1150 in the southwestern United States near the Mexican border. It was a time when compared to the rest of the western world life was comparatively harmonious, where the "world was viewed as something of an amiable cosmic circus." The Mimbres pottery painters depicted this world within the interior of small bowls. Each bowl was a fantasy world of intense vitality. I had thought of my original motif as a mandala, a symbol of my own ideal world. These too were mandalas. As Tony Berlant states in *Mimbres Pottery*, "A Mimbres bowl reveals the forces of nature through the vision of the artist.........and as the paint flowed from her yucca brush, she began to create not just a rabbit or an antelope but a model of the world."2:13

Mimbres Bowls which range in size from 9" to 13" in diameter and 3" to 5" deep were intended for utilitarian purposes. However a number of factors indicate this was not always true. J.J. Body points out in his description of Mimbres bowls in *Mimbres Pottery* how the exterior of the vessel is left rough and undecorated. The interior on the other hand has been given extreme attention. Here a smooth layer of white slip covers the entire surface and extraordinary care is given to the complex brushwork. He states:

*First number refers to the number of the reference in the Bibliography; those after the colon are page numbers.
The careful preparation of the surfaces to be painted and the
standardization of the shape, size, and proportions of these surfaces
suggest that many vessels were considered less as containers than as
surfaces on which to make paintings.2,76

Many of the bowls were buried with the dead below the living quarters of
their dwellings. Bowls, first having been broken with "kill holes," were inverted
over the head of the deceased. It is believed this was to enable the emergence of
the spirit to the Upperworld. Bowls with images of ritualistic practices and mythic
heros such as the Hero Twins, might have had something to do with the life of the
deceased, or good luck in the journey into the underworld. Other bowls with
scenes depicting activities of everyday life such as planting, weaving, and giving
birth could be events happening in the life after death.

Figurative images such as these were found on about 1/3 of the bowls found
in burial sites. Figures rarely appeared on sherds of bowls for household use.
Further, a large percentage of burial bowls show no sign of having been used.
From this perspective we see that not all Mimbres bowls were for mundane use.
Instead, some were probably made specifically for the ritual burial of the dead and
had a symbolic function.

SPATIAL ANALYSIS

In Mimbres Painted Pottery, J.J. Brody creates a careful analysis of Mimbres
bowl architecture used by the pottery painters. The bowls are organized into a
system based on the divisions generated by the surface decoration. Single or
multiple bands were placed just below the rim. The center was emphasized by either a framing device (band) or lines converging towards the center. The complex patterns defining the walls further segmented the space. The two, three, four, five, etc. divisions were integrated through interlocking and overlapping images so as to be read as a unified image.

INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS

Form

Through knowledge acquired from contemporary Pueblo society, and ethnographic analogy, Barbara Moulard has been able to interpret much about early Mimbres thought. In *Within the Underworld Sky* she postulates the bowl form itself was significant. She believes it serves as a "metaphor for the barrier between the Mimbres Underworld and Upperworld." She has observed that there were plain bowls used in burials as well as those with decoration. The creation of the "kill holes" changed their importance as a useful object to a ceremonial symbol. It was no longer meant to contain but was now an "open dome enclosure".

Line

All Mimbres decoration was composed of line; either parallel to the rim resulting in a circle or connecting two points. It is used to fill areas as fine-line parallel hatching, or as a framing device. Line is either thick or thin. Thick line is often a framing line and thin line for hatching. The style of hatching (wavy lines or straight) has been used to place bowls in a particular time frame and location.

Line also has symbolic value. It may mean either progression or restraint. A continuous line represents the path of life. Boundary lines such as four parallel
lines perpendicular to a path closes off the path to the dead. A circle, no beginning or end is a means to trap the spirits within.\textsuperscript{3}\textsuperscript{xix}

Color

The use of color is another matter of importance to understand Mimbres Painted Pottery. The use of a reduction fire (the elimination of oxygen in the atmosphere) to obtain a contrasting effect of black and white had become a prime objective of the southwestern peoples. There must have been a great deal of importance given to the resulting effects since it was a difficult technique to achieve. Consequently, according to Moulard, color was of significance. She states:

Color use in the art of the contemporary Pueblos is reflective of a cosmology that divides the world into six directions. Each direction is associated with a different color: yellow for North . . . ; white for East . . . red for South . . . ; Blue-green for West . . . ; Black for the Zenith and all colors, or a combination of black and white, for the Nadir . . . . Black and white and the combination of the two have definite associations with the spirit world and the above and below. The color white is symbolic of an underground waterway at the lower world level that houses the spirit of the dead for the Auni and Acoma. It was to this place that the first dead went after the emergence of the people from the Underworld. When black and white combine to form a checkerboard pattern (which they often do in Mimbres ceramic painting), they become symbolic of the Milky Way. The night sky and the Milky Way are the home of the Pueblo War Gods and the path of warrior spirits . . . . Not only are the colors of black and white associated with the
directions of the Zenith and Nadir, but they are associated with specific concepts and personages relating to death and the Pueblo Underworld realm of spirits.  

A comparison has been made between art from the Pueblos and the few polychrome vessels, wood and stone objects found belonging to the Mimbres. Similarities have been shown to exist in the color orientation and ceremonial nature of these. Since black and white have been shown to be of significance to the Underworld realm painted by the Pueblos it has been analogously applied to the Mimbres.

Both Brody and Barbara Moulard believe the geometric compositions of the Mimbres and Pueblos are a visual metaphor for a cosomological system as well. The structure of this includes four horizontal directions, the zenith, and Underworld (Nadir). A seventh place, the Middle Place, is thought to be the present home of the group.

Mimbres geometric compositions with reserved centers and quartered vessel wall decoration could at once embody notions of the four cardinal directions, the center and the vertical lines of the Zenith and Nadir. Likewise, bisected compositions could symbolize directions in opposition such as the above and below. Divisions of three, five, six, seven and multiples of these also conform to an ordering of the universe into vertical layers of the Nadir, Center and Zenith and the addition of four horizontal quarters.
Barbara Moulard goes on to discuss the importance of the center to the composition and to their cosmology. Most Mimbres bowls contain a pattern which defines the center. Further, the movement of line flows from the rim towards the center. The "kill hole" or point of emergence is placed there. At the same time the center is the "Middle Place" where the communities exist both physically and spiritually. It is where their ancestors sought to reach during their migrations, and is found symbolically and actually in Pueblo culture.
PART II

MY WORK

BLACK BOWL SERIES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Divisions</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 divisions</td>
<td>Yin/yang opposition of images. (fig. 1-3, 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 divisions</td>
<td>Same image. Central axis either a circle or point at which lines meet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 quadrants</td>
<td>Same image around a central axis. (fig. 6, 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images in constant movement</td>
<td>Around a central axis. (fig. 11, 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 quadrants</td>
<td>Same image in opposing quadrants. Image reversed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Radiating outward. (fig. 12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART II

MY WORK

BLACK BOWL SERIES

The Black Bowl Series, small stony black, 4" in diameter x 1" deep grew out of a state of inner turmoil. Like the person who withdraws into self when confronted with insurmountable obstacles, I withdrew my images into the interior of a bowl. The bowl was no longer just a useful object. It became the world, the space and surface which I would explore. The rim would be the overwhelming obstacle, the limit which I would have to accept and work with.

SPATIAL ANALYSIS

Previously I had used asymmetry or a random arrangement of images in my work. I now began to think in terms of symmetry and balance. In this imaginary space there would be order and harmony. The rhythmic movement of a patterning system was more dynamic. Through repetition, opposition, contrast and a juxtaposition of images, continuous motion and an inner balance could be achieved. Brody's analysis of Mimbres design patterns became the reference for my own pattern making.

The first series of pieces on which I carved my images were thought of in terms of a yin/yang opposition. The surface was divided in half with each side containing the same images but placed in opposing directions. The images covered the entire space up to the rim. (fig. 15) A variation on this was to make a broad band extending from the rim with the images placed within the ring. I next worked
with dividing the platter into thirds, again without the use of a rim band. (fig. 14)
A later division of fourths took several variations. One variation contained the
same size image used in all four quarters and another in which diagonally opposing
quadrants had the same size image. (fig. 5,9,13) The most recent pieces are center
oriented. The central area is a circle or a point at which lines converge. (fig. 4,5)
The images radiate outward from the center or inward towards the center. (fig.
6,12) Although the images are distinct and separate entities, when viewed together
they create a unified pattern.

INTERPRETATION OF IMAGES

The Bowl Form

The interior of a bowl form evokes a sense of a place, an interior private
space. It has walls for containment, protection, confinement and limitation.
Metaphorically, it may be a psychological space where we hold our inner thoughts
and feelings or a metaphysical space containing invisible and spiritual phenomena.

Curvilinear Line as opposed to Angles & Edges

Life is full of "hard edges"; the unexpected turn of events which can create
disruption and turmoil. Here I chose to use curvilinear lines. I wish to soften
these events yet move forward despite the circuitous route life often takes. The
refinement, smoothness and consistency of the line indicates a personal need to
have control over my destiny.

Color

Within a culture a particular color often evokes a similar response among
people, in a very different culture it may have an altogether different meaning. My
use of black refers to an unconscious state and paradoxically to black holes of depression. The cold stony quality may evoke feelings of alienation, and isolation.

In addition to the black surface, a black clay body was used. Here it is symbolic of the essence of; a need to understand the intrinsic nature of something; a need to understand the self.

A pearl luster which reflects all the colors of the rainbow is an indication of Hope and a "dawning reality".

Circles and Projections

Circles and projections refer to polarities. They are the opposing forces within, needing to be integrated to achieve a state of harmony.

The Figure

The figure is myself, since it is my world and my place in it that I am seeking to understand. It is also an indication of conscious awareness. The figure is bare, unencumbered by cultural and societal associations and limits; free and open to new insights in the search for truth.

Division of the Bowl Surface

Dividing the bowl’s surface into segments was a system for creating order and balance. On a material level, it is an organization of the bowl’s space, defining the rim, center, and walls. The bowl’s natural symmetry and form are indicated. Metaphorically, it is a means for defining a world where all options are possible.
The Center

"To leave the circumference for the center is equivalent to moving from the exterior to the interior - from form to contemplation, from multiplicity to unity." 10:39

A Short Interpretation of the Bowls

The images contained in the bowls went through several phases, although they were sometimes done simultaneously. At first they were purely abstractions. Next the abstractions incorporated the human figure and lastly only the human figure is present.

In the first phase, complete abstraction was composed of both curvilinear and geometric forms in a yin/yang duality. (fig. 1,2,3) It was an exploration of the integration of opposing forces within the human psyche. However clarity and knowledge of their existence remains in an unconscious state. The next phase contains intertwining and overlapping curvilinear forms and a repetitive representational image around a central axis. (fig. 7-9,13) Here I am again concerned with integration. Conflict exists between the unconscious world and the physical present. At this point there is the beginning of awareness. The center is the unifying source which keeps these energies in balance. In the last series, a repetitive representational image either radiates towards the center or away from the center. (fig. 6,12) The directional movement of the figure inward towards the center is related to the mind turned inwards to thought. In the extreme, the mind becomes caught within a circle of thought. Depression or other psychic disturbances result. The figure pointed outward is moving towards active
participation in life but with the knowledge and guidance by a source. Now one is also fully aware and accepting of one’s ultimate responsibility.
"Day is night when
Daddy comes home."

A child's first words,
An observed reality.

Life is night when
Father leaves.

A Daughter's pain, but,
A dawning reality.
My work began using porcelain. A smooth textured surface was needed for carving. Groggy, large particled clay would have left pits and destroyed the subtle elegance. A celadon glaze which pooled in the deep recesses, created a variation of color intensity and a sense of the watery deep. I wanted to instill them with a sense of history and permanence and again a celadon glaze was part of the ancient Chinese tradition.

About midway through the year I realized that celadon was a beautiful but too easy solution. I wanted to raise the pieces above the everyday realm of experience. At this juncture I did two things. (1) I altered the scale. The 16 inch platters became small bowls, 4 inches in diameter, and (2) I developed a black medium firing range clay body in which to carve directly. The surface would not need a glaze but be wrapped in a thin coating of terra sigillata of the same color to impart a satin sheen. An extreme subtlety of black on black was achieved. Here I added a variation. I accented the figures with a white terra sigillata creating a dramatic contrast. Next I further played with variations in the surface. First I shifted back to black on black, but this time burnishing the areas which were carved away. Here the subtle contrast was between the rough unreflective surface, and the smoother burnished areas. In my last pieces I again returned to high contrast. I used a mother of pearl cone 018 luster over a white cone 04 semi opaque white glaze.

The figurative images which I began to use originated in the figure classes that I had attended during the year. I had the fortune of often being the only
student at the session. As a result I was able to position the model as I desired.

At first I rendered many female figures within bowls and in a circular format on paper. However something else was needed. The figures needed to be transformed from rendering to a more abstracted line drawing. The drawings of Matisse were my source for this. John Elderfield states that to Matisse the figure is decoration. Matisse expresses a freedom of drawing in his use of the arabesque. The arabesque was characteristic of my curvilinear motif, it could be carried through into my drawings of the figure and create the transition from abstraction to figurative decoration. A repetitive image was created through the use of a template. The template was a copy of an original drawing which I was then able to reduce or enlarge on the copying machine to create templates at various sizes. An outline of the template was scratched into the leatherhard clay and the interior lines were drawn freehand. The figure was integrated with the abstract motif with fine sgraffito lines. After this, the larger areas were carved away to create a variation in surface and for the figures to become more prominent.
# Clay and Glaze Recipes

## Black Clay Body Recipe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tile #6 Kaolin</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Om4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custer Feldspar</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silica</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason Stain 6616</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Add Mason Stain to dry mix.

Fire to Cone 3

## Terra Sigillata

(from Judy Salomon)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Quantity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 Cups Water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Lbs. Grolleg</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Grams Calgon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Black) 5% 6616</td>
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</table>

Ball mill for 24 Hours.

## Jade Green Celadon

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Soda Spar F4</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barium Carbonate</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Iron Ox.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Amber Celadon

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Custer</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiting</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neph Sy.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolomite</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball Clay</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Iron Ox.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

I believe the work I have done has successfully fulfilled what I had set out to accomplish. That is, to explore the space of a simple form through the use of a personal imagery. I have continued the development of and transformed this imagery, touching the past and present with a sense of the future.

The process has enabled me to see more clearly what has always been most important to express in my work; to convey a very personal and underlying sense of the spirit. Changes were made along the way in order to emphasize this essential.

I conclude my work at a new level of understanding, a point of departure for further exploration.


Related Bibliography


PHOTOGRAPHS
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 1
(4" in diam.)

fig. 1
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 2
(4" in diam.)

fig. 2
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 3
(4" in diam.)

fig. 3
BLACK BOWL SERIES

NO. 4

(4 1/4" in diam.)

fig. 4
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 6
(4 1/4" in diam.)

fig. 6
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 7
(4" in diam.)

fig. 7
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 8
(4" in diam.)

fig. 8
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 9
(4" in diam.)

fig. 9
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 10
(4 1/4" in diam.)

fig. 10
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 11
(4 3/8" in diam.)

fig. 11
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 12
(4 3/4" in diam.)
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 15
(13" in diam.)

fig. 13
CELADON PLATTER
NO. 1
(16" in diam.)

fig. 14
CELADON PLATTER
NO. 2
(15" in diam.)
BLACK BOWL SERIES
NO. 8
SIDE VIEW

fig. 16