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Diamonds in the rough: A Journey of human spirituality

Holly Lynn Hoover

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DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH: A JOURNEY OF HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

By
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November 8, 1993
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my thesis was to express various aspects of human spirituality using sculpture as the vehicle for this expression. During the course of my exploration clay and glass each came to take on special metaphorical significance and it became crucial to include both materials within the sculptures. I wanted to create a “marriage of materials” wherein the clay and glass needed each other to make a complete statement. Various clay surfaces and glass processes were explored and will be described later.
The concept behind this thesis work sprang from personal experience. My mother died four years ago after suffering a very lengthy Alzheimer's-like illness. Watching her physical and mental decline was extremely painful for me, as I basically put my life on hold to help take care of her. The stress was so great, however, that for a time I became depressed and suicidal. My work has been born from that pain, but it is not really about my mother's death. It is rather about my own resurrection.

About a month after my mother died I had a profound spiritual experience. While still in a state of grief and severe emotional trauma I saw a flash of light which filled me and radiated out from me until I became one with it. I believe I had been given a glimpse of death as my mother had experienced it. In experiencing this "death" I also experienced resurrection. This experience was over very quickly, but it left me with greater peace and strength than I had ever known. It has wrought lasting effects on my life, my spirit, and perhaps most profoundly, on my art.

This resurrection experience is the reason I have been so driven to include glass in my work. Light fills glass and illumines it as I felt illumined by that spiritual light which filled me. Glass has come to symbolize all that is strong, good and beautiful within us. It is the spiritual element which gives us strength to rise above the struggles of life. Although my personal spirituality is
closely tied to my Christian faith and the presence of God in my life, there is a universal spirituality present in all humans. That sense of spirit is interpreted by each individual according to his or her own belief system. It emerges in different ways at different times in our lives, but it is always at the core of our being.

I have learned through my mother's suffering that life is full of contrasts and ironies. We all suffer many deaths and resurrections during the course of our lives. The old gives way to the new and the renewed. Joy often grows out of despair, healing out of pain, triumph out of defeat. It is some of these contrasts which I have tried to capture in my work through the use of contrasting materials.

Since glass came to represent the element of strength and triumph, for this body of work clay became the element of struggle and deterioration. Clay is of the earth, bringing with it in relation to my mother's suffering, images of dirt, burial and erosion. As I watched her decline physically and mentally, I felt that my security, strength and control were eroding away. I felt buried by despair. As feelings of hopelessness became more overwhelming, all those external things which had given me comfort--family, friends, job--were no longer adequate. In the end I was left with only my God and my self. My survival is a testament to the power of both.

The power of these experiences is also what drove me to pursue sculpture as my vehicle for expression. I felt my ideas about life and spirituality transcended time, space and humanity itself. They seemed too ethereal to be "contained" in a pot or vessel and needed a vehicle rooted in a tradition of monumentality rather than everyday functionality.
ARTISTIC REFERENCES

Although many forms and symbols make reference to the spirit, the pyramid was chosen as the vehicle for expression in this body of work. The pyramid is a very ancient archetypal symbol in many cultures, with strong connections to spirituality and the sacred. In some cultures it was the place of religious rites and sacrifices, where mortal met divine, where earth met heaven.

The most famous pyramids are those of ancient Egypt, and a childhood interest in archeology first attracted me to them. All ancient Egyptians believed in an afterlife and spent much of their lives meticulously preparing for it. Although the Great Pyramids are little more than grand and glorious tombs, many believe they are imbued with mysterious spiritual energy and power. Stories of mystical and unexplainable occurrences within the pyramids have been recorded by visitors and Egyptologists alike. Modern experiments with pyramidal forms seem to, in fact, confirm the presence of a certain energy within forms constructed according to precise mathematical proportions. (Flanagan 1973, 63ff) Whether true or not these stories add to the mystique of the pyramid as a spiritual symbol.

While communicating the idea of spirituality and spiritual triumph was important in this work, it was only half the message. It was important to also communicate the breaking down, the wearing away of life and our control of it. To help me examine this idea I again turned to ancient architecture and also to geology. I began to study the effects of time, wind and water on natural forms as
well as on ancient monuments. I became fascinated that stone, which seems so permanent and immutable, can lose its original pristine crispness and crumble into dust. A sense of time and timelessness permeates all great monuments, both natural and man made. One is awed and stilled by their ability to withstand time, yet one is acutely aware of their puny fragility as they have succumbed to time. Strength and fragility, wholeness and fragmentation, a connectedness with past and present all related to the messages about life and spirituality which I wanted to convey in my work.

Howard Ben Tre is a contemporary glass artist whose work has greatly impacted my “glass aesthetic.” His use of cast glass forms combined with patinaed metal first attracted me to the idea of combining glass with other materials. His forms are pure, simple and powerful. In his “Column Series” Ben Tre explores similar architectural and archeological issues, combining that sense of strength and monumentality with fragility:

They also allude to the classic columns of Greek temples in their delineation of form into base, shaft, and capital. . . .They look like architectural supports but they are made of glass, a fragile material that does not usually bear weight. (Johnson 1989, 25)

It is an interesting coincidence that I chose glass to symbolize an element of strength in my work as well.

William Wyman’s “Temple Series” spoke to me in a different, but equally profound way. Although his temple forms are not monumental in scale, the viewer projects monumentality onto them. Wyman’s treatment of the clay surface and form itself are simple, almost minimal, yet they evoke a strong sense of spiritual past. He provides just enough information to say “temple” and lets the viewer invoke his own vision of sacrality. In his essay “Neo-Primitivism and the Sacred,” curator and anthropologist Edwin L. Wade
discusses both Wyman's temples and Ben Tre's columns:

...all are archeological fragments of a phenomenally vibrant domain, past or future. They share a monumentality of perceived scale, elevating them emotively to the heroic and the sacred. All are objects of awe, not elegant as much as forceful. ...They are phantasms of deja vu. (Wade 1987, 272)
DISCUSSION OF THE SCULPTURES

*All That Remains* (figure 1) attempts to depict the contrast between our eroding life and the strength and triumph of our spirit. The clay is treated roughly to depict weathering and eroding. A scraper was dragged downward over the surface to give the feeling of mud sliding down a hill. It was fired to cone 08 then sandblasted and painted with warm earthy colors.

The glass in contrast has a very crisp, highly machined look. It is separated from the pyramid by a thin railing of clay. This gives the feeling that the glass is somehow placed on an altar, protected from the erosion of the clay around it. The glass pyramid which tops the sculpture is composed of four sections of quarter inch plate glass which have been glued then ground to fit together. The lamination lines draw the viewer into the very core of the sculpture. This stepping effect is echoed in the clay form—a step pyramid inspired by the Step Pyramid of Dzoser. While the viewer’s eye travels down the steps of the clay, it drawn more intensely into the center of the glass. In the end it is the inward journey which is the most prominent and the most memorable.

*Emergence* (figure 2) reflects the interest in rocks and geology alluded to earlier. The look of the clay rock is heavy and massive. It is pierced by a glass pyramid poking through it and separating it into halves. This was done to reinforce the idea that the power of the spirit is so strong that it can overcome even the most heavy and burdensome things in life.
Figure 1
The clay rock was slab built and slowly fired to cone 08 then glazed and re-fired to the same temperature. Quarter inch plate glass was used to construct the inner pyramid. Triangles were cut then beveled and glued with clear silicone. The glass surface was sandblasted to hide the glued edges.

*Anatomy of a Crisis: Black Series* (figure 3) really sums up my thesis and is the most purely autobiographical piece in the show. As we go through life things seem fine and smooth for a time, then something happens which causes us to feel that the ground has been knocked from underneath us. As the crisis deepens, more of the outward things which kept us grounded before are eroding and crumbling away. As this happens the strength of the inner spirit emerges and becomes more and more prominent.

To portray this idea, the first pyramid in the series was made entirely of clay and covered with sigillata. The surface was finished rather smoothly and the sigillata burnished slightly. Each subsequent pyramid saw its clay portion become more cracked and less pristine. The portion of clay decreased while the portion of glass increased. At the end I finished with a pyramid that was totally glass. While we live we are never completely spiritual. Because we are human we are always tied to the earth, and the pyramid of glass was included to visually balance the first pyramid of clay. The surface of the glass pyramid was not polished and some pits from the mold were left in to remind us that we are never completely pure in this life.

These pyramids were fired in molds, with green clay and glass firing together in the same mold at the same time. A basic sculpture clay was used. The glass used was Vistabrik, a commercial architectural block glass. This firing procedure allowed the glass to fit the contour of the clay elements, eliminating a lot of tedious grinding. Firing clay and glass together is not
Figure 3
something which has been done extensively and it is a process I want to pursue in further work.

Anatomy of a Crisis: Series 2 (figure 4) is a smaller version of the previous piece, consisting of five small pyramids set into their own clay base. The idea for this variation came when I was researching the pyramid as spiritual symbol. Barbara Walker, in *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* writes:

A plain upward-pointing triangle, or one side of a pyramid, often appeared as a symbol of fire . . . . The Greek word *pyramid* meant a spirit, thought, symbol, or idea of fire . . . . Another meaning of the triangular pyramid shape was the cone-like heap of ashes on the altar or hearth... (Walker, 340)

As I felt my life had risen out of the ashes after my mother's death it seemed appropriate to explore pyramid as fire symbol. To do this I employed Raku and smoking techniques to fire the pyramids as well as the base. The pyramids were glazed with a dry copper engobe. The glaze was left “as is” on the first two pyramids and sandblasted partially off the second two. As with the previous series, the proportion of glass increased as the clay decreased. The glass pieces for this sculpture were cast in molds then ground to fit the clay parts. The effects of the Raku and smoking would have been lost if I had used the same procedure as *Black Series*. The overall effect of this piece is a preciousness that has a message in itself, but the feeling of pyramid as sacred monument is lost.
Figure 4
CONCLUSION

For the most part I am very pleased with this body of work and especially pleased that it seemed to communicate to so many people the message I intended for it. I am particularly fond of *Anatomy of a Crisis: Black Series*, and have emphasized that I hope to continue researching the firing process begun with this piece. This sculpture seems to be the most resolved, with content and treatment of the materials well integrated. The three other sculptures have elements which work, but for the most part, work with a lesser degree of finish than "Black Series." This work is only the beginning for me and I look forward to continually perfecting this marriage of materials and ideas in future work.
SCULPTURE CLAY (used in all pieces)

30 lbs  Hawthorne fireclay
30 lbs  Foundry Hill Cream stoneware clay
45 lbs  kyanite
15 lbs  EPK
25 lbs  Redart
25 lbs  35 mesh grog
50 lbs  100 mesh grog

This recipe was dry mixed and added to reclaimed clay which had been used for Raku. There was 10-12% talc in the Raku clay, so this body probably had an estimated 3-5% talc content.

water of plasticity: 21%
wet to dry shrinkage: 5%
shrinkage to cone 08: an additional 1%

REFRACTORY MOLD BODY (used in Anatomy of a Crisis: Black Series)

30 lbs  EPK
30 lbs  Hawthorne fireclay
30 lbs  medium to coarse grog

water of plasticity: 18%
wet to dry shrinkage: 5%
no additional shrinkage to cone 08
MODIFIED "CRUD" GLAZE (used for Emergence)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>glass cullet</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>lithium carbonate</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barium carbonate</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redart</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flint</td>
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Fire to cone 08

BLACK SIGILLATA (used for Anatomy of a Crisis: Black Series)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redart</td>
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<tr>
<td>red iron oxide</td>
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<tr>
<td>manganese dioxide</td>
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<tr>
<td>cobalt oxide</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Ball mill four to five days. (Fired to cone 09 this sigillata did not flux properly, even with a pinch of Frit 3110 added as a fluxing agent.)

DRY COPPER ENGOBE (used for Anatomy of a Crisis: Series 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gerstley borate</td>
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<td>talc</td>
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<tr>
<td>neph sy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>copper carbonate</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
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Apply thickly.
REFERENCE LIST


