Narratives on clay

Moi Dugan

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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

Narratives on Clay
by
Moi Dugan
July 25, 1993
Advisor: Richard Hirsch
Date: 8/20/93

Associate Advisor: Robert Schmitz
Date: 8/16/93

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Date: 9/22/93

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Date: August 8, 1993
The intent of this thesis is to develop a cohesive body of work that makes use of a narrative that is rooted in my personal experience and investigation. The work will reflect a direct relationship with historical references, especially those of the primitive cultures of Africa and Japan. The forms will incorporate personal symbolism, iconography and humor with a sense of animation. The selection of material, form and process will be utilized as appropriate to each piece.
I

Introduction

Before studying at The School for American Craftsmen, I was an elementary school teacher with a background in studio arts. This training consisted of four years of printmaking, design and drawing and one year of ceramics. My intent in working toward my Masters of Science for Teachers was to obtain my required degree for permanent teaching certification in New York State. I hoped as well to obtain better knowledge of the process of working in clay, both thrown and hand built, and to learn more about firing and glazing to aid teaching ceramics in the classroom.

As it turned out, my objectives for pursuing a Master's degree eventually were superseded by a total submersion in the world of clay, which became a passion that would engulf me for many years to come. I lived for my life in the studio in both a working and interactive sense and began to feel a need for more than that one year of study. I was accepted into the Masters of Fine Art program much due to (I think) my hard work rather than my existing work, as well as the confidence my instructors had in me.

Through a diverse selection of courses, I became exposed to many different types of artwork, ideas and influences. I studied painting, film, architecture, glass, printmaking and art history, when combined, taught me how individuals expressed themselves through different media. This knowledge, along with encouragement from my ceramic and painting professors, solidified confidence in my own artwork. This gave me the courage to utilize inner thoughts as a vehicle of expression in my work.
without fear of judgment. While working and investigating, I actually made pieces that reflected my personality and creativity, as well as demonstrated the craftsmanship that I was gradually acquiring.

Eventually, my thoughts and ideas were transposed into narratives through the use of painted slip decoration and relief work. I worked on a variety of ceramic forms that started with hand built organic sculptures and that evolved into functional wheel thrown pieces intended for everyday use.

It was not until my work, rather than the degree or grades, became most important that I was able to start on my thesis project. I still had a long way to go before my technical and creative development meshed, but when they did, I was able to focus on a body of work that would become my thesis show.

This written thesis documents the evolution of my work through those two years of graduate school. The journey itself was the springboard that has enabled me to express myself through painting and clay, and to develop a style of ceramic work that I feel confident in creating and exhibiting.
II
Evolution

“Before you start any work in clay we want you to propose a thesis to us on what your work is about.”

“A what?”

OK. I was the first to admit that I started at R.I.T. with a rudimentary education in clay but on the first day of class I had to decide what the idea behind my work was about? I just wanted to throw pots like I had during the summer session, as well as for a year at S.U.N.Y. Cortland. No one had ever asked me what my pots meant. They had just looked at them in terms of aesthetics and craftsmanship, maybe commenting on a really nice glaze or texture or interesting trimmed foot. This had become my way of critiquing pots too.

This proposal did not intrigue me, it stumped me. For weeks. It was the one concept of making artwork that would haunt me throughout my days at R.I.T. The other graduate students had their own ideas of what was behind their work because they had already been making work for years. Here I was an M.S.T. student, with a part time graduate assistantship and I didn’t even know how to load a bisque kiln. Feeling very inadequate I started at the beginning: with materials.

To be an elementary art teacher, I needed to learn about low fired materials. As my previous experience was throwing pots with high fired clay, I started working in earthenware. A second year student, Oud, from Thailand, took me under her wing and advised me on slip and glaze formulas. I eagerly batched and experimented with these. I had worked
with salt slips during the summer with Kris Nelson, decorating greenware with brushwork and incising with tools. I used this same technique on some test pots and liked the results of bright colors that the mason stains provided.

I realized too that I had never hand built pots and that it was a skill I should work on before teaching in the classroom, so I began slab building a series of oval platters. I decorated them with underwater scenes that depicted a near drowning incident I had as a child. This theme came to being after much discussion about why I enjoyed working with fish and water scenes in my painting class. My accident was not a frightening one, more of an outer body experience. It was in another world, underwater and still very vivid. The pieces were somewhat like turkey platters and the form had little to do with the content (which I was told at my first critique). I was beginning to understand the concept.

Continuing with hand building, I sculpting coral reefs, fish and underwater foliage, using slips with tropical colors and clear glaze. My intent was to create an underwater environment with a pleasant atmosphere. The pieces ranged from ten to fifteen inches in height and diameter and I was enjoying the sculpting process.

I continued along the same sea theme, creating large conch shells that were inspired by the conical form of wedging. These pieces were quite literal and they were ornamented with small sculpted sea creatures with beach scenes hidden inside. At this point, I was relying on photographs and diving magazines for inspiration as well as advisement from my professors, Bob Schmitz and Kris Nelson.

Bob had suggested magnifying the pieces. I liked the idea of creating a life-size composition; one that could transform the viewer from
land to sea, and create a mood of being underwater. I began to imagine walking on the ocean floor between large sea plants and fish, and soon my studio space became alive with five foot tall coil built kelp. Outside the exercise in magnitude, the forms made sense to me and gave me a wonderful surface to embellish upon.

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I painted fish swimming in schools, shells and other sea life on these life-size sculptures and used clear, amber tinted and copper blue glazes to achieve the depth of color that one sees under the sea. Along with the conch shells and some tile pieces I had made, that quarter I finally started to feel that my work was coming together.

As I was becoming more confident in my work through lots of trial and error, I was also delighted to be firing on my own and was destined to start a series of work that was solely based on my ideas (not those suggested by Bob or Kris) and that relied on some research and explorations of a new type of construction.

It was at this time that I attended a two day workshop featuring Rudy Autio at S.U.N.Y. Brockport. I knew his work from ceramic books and magazines and I liked its dreamlike qualities. Attending his workshop was a nice break from the studio and watching him work was enjoyable. It was great to hear him talk about what was going on in his head as he finished his pieces.

He sculpted stoneware which he incised with his design of women and horses with a bricklayer's trowel, then he covered the piece with a whitewash of gesso-like slip. The incised pattern was evident through the slip and he then proceeded to fill in areas with colored slip much like a child would color between the lines in a book. The images came alive! Mythological sirens and tempests of stallions danced on the pieces.
while Rudy's fantasies and dreams were carved and painted before our eyes.

Listening to him talk about his work made me realize how much gut feelings have to do with making one's work sincere, individual and true to self. I went to N.C.E.C.A. in Syracuse following that workshop and paired up artists with their work, seeing what personality came through in their pieces. I was devoted from then on to have my work become me, with my personality shown in each piece. I immediately began seeking out methods through the narrative to do so.

My first attempt at such a feat was through a group of work I called the pyramid series. With a love for Egyptology and hieroglyphs, I was clued into narratives and symbols that were used to tell a story or relay a message. I began slab building three-sided pyramids; three as opposed to the standard four sides as three is a spiritual number. They stood on three legs which is a strong structure and also followed the form and symbolism, and I began painting narratives of my life on them.

Some of the stories portrayed my existence in the S.A.C. circle of friends I had become so involved with. One narrative depicted playing frisbee at lunch, another was a Friday happy hour at a local club and another was about a dyna-blend party at my house. The figures were animated, with hieroglyphic tendencies. As the forms themselves became more animated in stance, so did the story lines.

I began using dream sequences and experiences in Africa during my time in the Peace Corps as themes. I was not very vocal about the meaning of each piece, and I started enjoying other's responses to the work. In my head I had my personal story written but others created their own story line through the images and symbolism.
My craftsmanship was becoming stronger as well as my ideas and confidence. It was at this time that I felt a need to continue studying ceramics for at least another year. I was encouraged to apply for the M.F.A. program and was pleasantly surprised to be accepted for the following school year.

I worked in the studio that summer with Peter Beaseker and with wood fired porcelain. Gearing up for the following year, I ingested as much information as possible from historical books and current publications. I felt ready for the fall quarter with all the information I had taken in, but as it turned out I ended up a little disoriented because of it. In hindsight, I should have concentrated solely on earthenware instead of jumping into high fire once again. I did not know how to begin working again.

That fall Rick Hirsch came in as new faculty and guided me through the preparation that I needed to propose my thesis work. I knew that I would use narratives as a foundation for my ideas and rely on historical references such as Joman pots, African forms and Egyptological symbols, but that was about it. I could not envision the body of work I was to make. I don't think Bob or Rick could either.

I muddled through that fall quarter with little inspiration and a few personal issues that ended up between me and my work. I was still hand building; coil building ceremonial cups and vases in the Joman vein with subdued colors and narratives, but I just did not feel a connection to my work like I had the previous year.

During Thanksgiving recess, when the faculty was not around, I started throwing items for an upcoming craft show. I had not used my potter's wheel for a year and a half, and I immediately fell back in love
with the process. I threw about fifty small bowls and went wild decorating them with lively colored slip, using slip trailing and sgraffito, and wrote little messages inside of them. It was such a freeing experience to have fun with work rather than critiquing every step and analyzing it. It was also great to be creating functional pieces again.

I had fully intended to keep these pieces hidden from view when the faculty came back from vacation: they were sticklers for staying on track and not jumping around with ideas, form and process. Somehow they were unearthed and to my surprise Rick, Bob and John Dodd (my associate advisor), were very excited (relieved) to see new ideas being formulated. From then on I worked on the wheel. I created functional and sculptural forms which I could embellish with my narratives, and began on a body of work that would become my thesis show.
III

Inspiration

Before I elaborate on the actual pieces that comprised my thesis show, I would like to refer to the many outside influences, both historical and contemporary, that have given me inspiration for my work.

Historically in ceramics, many, if not all cultures have used artwork in a symbolic or narrative manner. As far back into history as has been recorded, man has used imagery to portray stories or messages. I have always been drawn to the most primitive of these images, especially those figurative works found on cave walls and pottery shards. Man needed to leave his mark, tell what was happening in his life, in his village. Simple gouges on rocks, and later etchings on ceramic objects, some early pieces even experimenting with color, are all fascinating to me. Hieroglyphs too have always interested me, and the messages on my pots reflect a primitive style, showing my primal roots.

Not only has mark making influenced me in making work, so have historical forms. Greek amphora, Mycenaen funerary urns, Mesopotamian columns and Mimbres bowls are forms which I have studied extensively through ceramic history and have sought out in books and museums. Looking at them has taught me how form follows function.

I think that the process of the form making is as powerful as the forms themselves. I love the concept that the first pots were probably created by ancients who would smear clay inside of baskets, perhaps to transport fire in. This partially baked the clay and would keep the form of the basket, which then could then be used for other purposes. The hearth theory, which is more likely than the basket theory, suggests that
because fires were difficult to build and maintain, pits were lined with clay for insulation, thus the clay was hardened. Primitives eventually caught onto the idea of firing clay this way and used a variety of ways to form utilitarian vessels. Pinch pots, coil building, molding, and paddle and anvil methods came long before the potters wheel. This series of events somewhat parallels my sequence in making clay objects; working first by the most primitive means and eventually using the more modern technique of wheel throwing.

My more updated resources for inspiration include: the painting and ceramic work of Pablo Picasso, which I love for its bright color block patterns; West African pottery, for mark making with a variety of tools; lappas, which were the brightly printed cotton wrap-arounds I wore while in the Peace Corps in Liberia; and architectural firms in the South like Florida's Arquitectonica, who has been designing lego-esque buildings that are humorous and that use childlike building block construction and primary colors.

Some contemporary ceramic artists I have come to enjoy and whose work I have sought out include: Akio Takamori and Rudy Autio, both for their use of the human form and fantasy in sculpting and slip painting their work; Virginia Scotchie for her use of low fired colored slips and glaze, as well as texture in her vegetable assemblages; and Everett Busbee whose brightly glazed animal sculptures have shown me a humorous side to ceramic art.

These sources combined have been influential in my thesis pieces and my work today. These influences have strengthened the way I use form, color, design, humor and animation throughout my narratives.
IV
Thesis Show

My thesis show consisted of eleven pieces, wheel thrown and hand built. Each displayed its own narrative, its own little facet of my life. This is my artist's statement that accompanied the work:

"The narratives that I use on my ceramic forms represent a celebration of life. They also reflect the opposing forces, good and evil, highs and lows and alternating cycles found in life.

I paint what I feel, drawing from the past and present. The states depicted in my work are derived from facets of life that I have personally experienced and though these narratives are personal, I use symbolism and nature as metaphor to illustrate these feelings and events universally.

Not all aspects of life are pleasant or easy to deal with but our struggles yield strength and growth. Each piece shown here speaks of a part of this life and celebrates it."

In the following paragraphs, I will describe the process in making each series and include some information about the narratives as well. The numerals preceding the titles coincide with the plate numbers for easy reference.

The Tower Series - each of these three pieces was an assembly of wheel thrown parts, with relief designs applied. They were sprayed with a base coat of white slip, then colored slip, with the images brushed on using colored slips, outlined in black and accented with sgraffito. The series of three is spiritually significant to me and each story is set
underwater or above water, but one includes both. This symbolizes how we can feel settled with our feet on the ground, or submerged with too much to handle, or feel a little of both at one time. Mesopotamian columns were in my head at this time, and each piece conveys its own story line.

1. “Subterranean” 18”x9”x17”
   This piece shows tumult in one’s life and exemplifies the chaos that can cloud your head when depressed. One single diver has to confront the whirlpool and either make his way out or not.

2. “Swimming While Asleep” 18”x9”x17”
   This is a celebration of finding the right partner in life. The couple dreams peacefully while sleeping in after a night of closeness and bliss. The ever present dog is also there, and night and day are depicted by black and white.

3. “City Submersion” 17”x8”x16”
   Love the city/hate the city, is the basic premise here. The tall animated skyline can be fun or overwhelming, but there’s always a place to escape to. In this diver’s case, it’s in for a swim where the water blankets out the loud noises from above.
**Hand built Platters** - this was a series in which I was thinking about the festive occasions when we entertain large groups of people and feed them well. The average person rarely takes notice of serving dishes, but if they looked closely at these they may well be surprised at what they found. These are a little heavy so it would take a little doing to explore the entire surface. Tall feet were attached and I tried to make sure that the viewer could see most of the information, if so inclined.

The initial shape was press molded, then altered, sculpted, and incised. Handles were added to aid in serving and they also gave added surfaces to be incorporated into the design. The colored slips were brushed on, outlined in black and sgraffito was used to add depth and definition.

4. “Server with Ladder and Stairs”  6”x13”x3”

In a school of fish, one makes a move and all the others follow. An individual has to make his own decision on which direction to take when encountered with a situation. The mermaid here is wrapped around the base, comforted by the many options she could use if she needed to escape: highway (exploration), ladder (up and down/intercourse) and stairs (moving up-progressing), but for now she is content undersea, and laughs at the manipulative group circling around above her.

5. “Server with Angel Fish”  5”x13”x4”

This narrative is pretty straight forward. From above the viewer sees an angel fish swimming in the water, while hidden underneath, the diver and mermaid are making love. The diver holds an arrow, obviously phallic.
6. "Server with a Message"  6"x12"x18"

The message is inscribed: “She saw the serpent despite his crafty camouflage - After the kill she swam peacefully away.” While the diver above is fooling with two (who should both know better - a fish’s eyes are always open and at perpetual attention), the mermaid below is fantasizing about the lesson she should teach the snake who has betrayed her.

Wheel thrown work - these last five pieces are totally functional and with the exception of the bouillabaise server, all have remain unaltered. I liked working with these bowl and platter forms. Besides the inside/outside possibilities for decoration, the bowl form represents life cycles; the circle as an uninterrupted flow, with no beginning and no end.

7. “No Parachute”  4"x18"x3"

Flying through the air the diver is terror stricken to be without a parachute. This piece is about the fear of failure and misfortune looming ahead. How did he get out there in the first place?

8. “Outsider”  4"x18"x3"

The poor outsider receives little sympathy from the group of friends. He got the fish he wanted, or did he? She is obviously better off - the star in her hand shows she’s found a gem. The others support her decision.
9. "Bouillabaisse Server" 4”x11”x4”

The sides of this server were thrown, then attached to a base and altered to create a wavelike watery band. The fish inside are in a compromising position (a little surprise when you finish the shellfish)!

10. "City Bowl" 7”x10”x6”

Inside the bowl, the fish and mermaid float in the tropical water. Outside the bowl, geometric buildings take over the skyline. This piece is obviously dealing with organic and inorganic issues.

11. "Swimming Bowl" 8”x10”x7”

The mermaid swims around the outside hunting for fish, while inside, the diver waits to be found.
V

Conclusion

Five years after my thesis show I am still making pottery, using the same techniques outlined in this document. I have found over these past few years that my decoration has strayed from the narrative format and has become more painterly in the patterns that encompass each piece. I suppose the need to let my aggression out through my work has subsided, as my life has settled down measurably since that thesis year.

I still make each piece one-of-a-kind, to stand on its own or to become part of a set or collection. I have lately been concentrating on more complex forms such as teapots, creamer and sugar sets, large coffee bowls and saucers, and have been working on larger pieces such as birdbaths. Many of my designs are now inspired by nature such as plants, flowers, fruits and vegetables, but I still use the images that became so endearing to me in graduate school: mermaids and divers, cityscapes and fish.

The time I spent at the School for American Craftsman definitely served me well. With the encouragement of the faculty I have continued creating and marketing my work by selling wholesale to galleries and doing a variety of craft shows. I still have the option of going into the elementary classroom and am glad to have pursued my M.F.A. The extra time spent on my work that thesis year and since has enabled me to refer to myself not only as a potential teacher, but also as an artist.
### VI

**Studio Notebook**

#### Red Earthenware ∆06-04

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#### Oud's Slip ∆06-04

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**plus:**

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List of Plates

1. "Subterranean"

2. "Swimming While Asleep"

3. "City Submersion"

4. "Server with Ladder and Stairs"

5. "Server with Angel Fish"

6. "Server with a Message"

7. "No Parachute"

8. "Outsider"

9. "Bouillabaisse Server"

10. "City Bowl"

11. "Swimming Bowl"
BIBLIOGRAPHY


