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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

FERTILE RUIN

by

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August 11, 1986

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E. Quackenbush

Date: 11.4.86

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
List of Plates	iv
Thesis Proposal	v
Thoughts On Work	vi
CHAPTER	
I. Development:	
Historical Influences	1
II. About Art	7
III. Contemporary Influences	9
IV. "Fertile Ruin"	12
V. Conclusion	16
VI. Technical	
Formulas	19
List of References	23

LIST OF PLATES

PLATES	PAGE
1. Fertile Ruin	17
2. Basket Planter	17
3. Detail of Basket Planter	18
4. Detail of Arch	18

Art (which is very similar to life) is more intensive than it is cumulative. Hard work will lead to ideas. Always make the work that you want to make. A path will present itself if the eyes and the spirit are honest, opened, and excited.

≡ Numbers in parentheses refer to numbered references in Bibliography; those after the colon are page numbers.

CHAPTER ONE

Development: Historical References

When developing my thesis, my ideas about art were very disjointed. I struggled to develop a clear understanding of my perception of what art is. With my thesis rapidly approaching and being more confused than ever, I feverously searched for clues. I found them in the Palaces of Knossos on Crete, Cretan and pre-Columbian pottery and 15th Century Italian icon paintings.

The city of Knossos was dependent upon agriculture and fishing. Throughout the palaces, decorative art reflects the involvement that the farmers and fishermen had with their environment. Pottery decorated with snails, octupi, reeds, fish, and birds bring the storage halls to life. Paintings and stucco reliefs depicting the underwater world, royal animals, and fertility goddesses ornament the walls. Columns used to form colonades and porticoes are all of wood. Usually

tapering toward the base, they allude to organic life which springs from the fertile earth. (4:53) Life and architecture overlap, thus, giving way to a celebration as vital as the lives once lived. Even today the art is honest, fresh and timeless. Just as the maker breathed, the palaces still breath and sweat while moisture passes through their walls.

At Knossos I learned that art can be all encompassing. All details must work together to create the whole. The inspiration of the art is often common to the maker's everyday. At Knossos it was derived from interactions with and the celebration of life.

Cretan storage urns and pre-Columbian pottery reflect similar inspirations. Although these pots were made on opposite ends of the world, they have characteristics in common. Both are decorated with everyday events. They are not presumptions. They are clay objects which were inspired by life and the culture in which they were made. Among these pots there is great variation, yet, the honesty to the

inspiration is consistent.

Cretan potters were inspired by the same environment as that at Knossos. Their pottery swells with life. Decoration embraces the full body form. In many ways these pots are figurative, yet, they have moved "...further away from their recognizable source, archetype, and meaning." (5:3) They are often narrow at the foot and broad through the shoulder. When performing their function as containers of liquid, their surfaces sweat as moisture evaporates through their walls. In a manner similar to the way in which body art tell s the story in Ray Bradburys' Illustrated Man, the figurative pot is painted with decoration that narrates the everyday life of its maker.

In order to find inspiration, the pre-Columbian potter referred directly to the world around him. Houses, fishing expeditions, animals, and sexual ceremonies are common subject matter in their art.

The pre-Columbian potter, however, did not regurgitate what he found in nature. Many vessels

are exaggerations of the original source image. Abstractions were made by manipulating proportions. "...through inflections and reference" the potters interpreted the world as they understood it. (5:3)

As Graham Marks wrote:

We see in a pre-Columbian favorite of mine, which also shows their wonderful sense of humor, a drinking/pouring container in the form of a man with an erection, whose penis is practically the same size as he is. The top of his head, which is open, appears to be the place one drinks from, but the artist has played a practical joke on the viewer by piercing the head repeatedly just below the rim, making drinking impossible. One then realizes he intends us to pour and drink from the penis. (5:3)

These pots tell stories about life. Because they reflect honest and sensitive perceptions of the environment they were created in, the vessels produced are much more vivid than their living counterparts. (6:43)

They form a bridge between the ways in which we consciously express our thoughts and a more primitive, more colorful and pictorial form of expression. It is this form, as well, that appeals directly to feeling and emotion. These "historical" associations are the link between the rational world of consciousness and the

world of instinct. (6:47-49)

Artists that are able to unleash their unconscious contents are often able to create works that trigger timeless associations.

The Italian icon paintings work within a much different format. Usually they are small and intimate. Due to the importance of the church, sacred Christian personages are commonly the subject. Often the painting itself is iconic. Usually the pieces were finished with a three dimensional architectural frame. The frame often took the form of an arch. The arch, like an opened doorway, invited the viewer to interact with the painting. Relics were often encased in the framework. The bones of saints ornamented like jewels do, luring the Christian bystanders. Using these visual tools, the sacred paintings took the form of a miniature temple and shrine, simultaneously.

It is clear to me that relics are narrative clues about another world or time. The painting is

an illusion of that world. Together they supply a transition from the everyday world into that of the artist's imagination. Similar to Alice in Wonderland and her adventures through the looking glass, I now realize that art provides a passage into, information about, and in the case of Knossos, may even suppply another world.

CHAPTER TWO

About Art

In our society we are confronted with many art sources. There is no cultural framework in which to work. Because America is the "melting pot" country, cultural influences that affect our lives are vast and diverse. On account of this expansive frame of reference and America's inability for cultural commitment, we have the freedom to create anything our collaged memories can come up with. In order to avoid investigations of the ancient traditions which "...spawn imitative and inadequate work, the true artist deals with honest, passionate concepts rather than with design and technique. A master is not a trickster." (3:31)

Ideas are inspired by memories. Some sources are easily recognized. Many are abstract. Although both have a significant value, abstract references are less temporal and can provide the art with timeless significance.

The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes oblivion, because of this he must remain close to the temporal surfaces. Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the "death principle"...Floating in this temporal river are remnants of art history, yet the "present" cannot support the cultures of Europe or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go places where remote futures meet remote pasts. (8:77)

In this unconscious, post-historic realm symbols are created. Symbols are not individual but collective in their nature (6:55). By tapping this source of universal language, the artist has the potential to speak to issues larger than one self.

CHAPTER THREE

Contemporary Influences

I have found that by flooding my mind with historical references, I am becoming more aware of my less temporal core. As a result, I have become conscious of things in my life which parallel the art I adore.

I am aware of the abundant world in which I live. Gardening is a passion of mine. My mother has always grown beautiful gardens and when I was small I grew mine within hers. Now I grow my own garden. I am never satisfied unless every inch of the ground is covered with leaves and blossoms. Predators provide me with an endless struggle. This grapple makes success more meaningful to me. Summer is my chance to indulge in a celebration of life and color.

Water supplies another fertility. I grew up at the ocean yet the complexity of the underwater world became obvious to me when I went scuba diving in the water surrounding the island of Bermuda. There, the

earth is at its most plentiful.

Schools of fish live in all depths of water. Shy fish hide in cavities, waiting to lunge at dinner as it swims by. Octopi cling to rocks. Sea slugs clean the ocean floor. Sea currents cause sand patterns to fill between the vegetation and rocks. The overabundance, which I love to create in my garden, seems limitless beneath the sea. My aesthetic sense has been inspired by this profusion.

The camouflaged aphids that feast on my rose bush and the fish that spies on his innocent prey remind one that life is not all joyful and giving. The existence of both good and evil were present in the Garden of Eden and are present today.

Gardening and scuba diving, in addition to personal romantic relationships, have made me aware of the struggle between honesty and manipulative deceit. In my art work I aim at creating a tense and vital universe, kept harmonious by the careful balance of oppositions, particularly those that refer to good and evil, honesty and dishonesty.

I established this push and pull with the use of contradictions. Friendly fish invite the viewer to interact with the pieces. However, on close inspection, snakes are hidden within the nearby foliage. Animated man-sized flowers are covered with irresistably tactile and colorful glazes. Their textures sometimes resemble that of sexual organs.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Fertile Ruin"

The installation format seemed most appropriate for fabricating this living cosmos. The organization developed as I built the pieces. I began with the large arch. Similar to the Italian icon paintings, it provided a passage into the vital world. Fertility goddesses were needed to inhabit that world. The planter established the decor of the installation's space. The dwarfed figure, Flora, and her small arch, made reference to a secondary, even more abstract world. Paper flowers incorporated the walls into the environment; thus, separating "Fertile Ruin" from the rest of the Bevier Gallery.

All of the pieces which made up my show were conceived individually. There was no master plan. I knew that I wanted to explore art as a means of understanding the world I live in. My efforts, however, were not as conscious of that as they were of learning from one piece and finding inspiration

in it for the next. As a result, some pieces are more successful than others. Here I will discuss the two most successful.

The large arch is made up of the upper arch and two supporting pillars. The arch is decorated with a combination of fish-like relics and floral offerings. Large fish flank the arch. The green lead glaze makes them look drippy wet, as if they just jumped out of the water and landed on the arch. Their facial expressions are happy and friendly. Lemons decorate the corners, suggesting the human delight for fish. Majolica flowers are arranged through holes in the arches surface. They are reminiscent of offerings made at religious sanctuaries.

The columns are divided up the middle. The interior of the columns resemble stone carved with hieroglyphs. The clay is left unglazed, referring to the surface of stone. Pictographs are reminiscent of cave paintings and graffiti. They allude to story fragments which were left behind by

people as they passed from this work into another. They also suggest a passage of time.

The post's exterior resembles wiggling flower stalks. They worm their way up the sides of the columns and, at eye level, support generous blossoms. The blossoms are gifted with stamens which are shaped like lively penises. The glazes reiterate the qualities of the flower parts. Green wet and drippy lead glaze coats the wiggling stems. The blossoms are glazed with a matte acid yellow. A pink surface with the texture of scrotum skin glazes the flowers' almost human sex organs. The flowers are wildly suggestive of man-eating plants, yet, the glazed surface is irresistably tactile. Here, the metaphorical suggestiveness of ceramic shapes and glazes, simultaneously enhance the literal meanings and stimulate memories.

Not only to articulate the shapes but also to integrate the significances of such vividly suggestive plastic forms is the principal aesthetic aim of the ceramic artist. Therefore the ultimate expression of an entire first-class compound pot (sculpture) can become a complex aesthetic experience,

coordinating and combining into a single whole meanings and responses which may originate in particular ranges of experience that are not associated with each other in everyday life. Some pots (sculpture) may thus even produce a sense of dream or surrealreality, an intuition of connections between our experiences of sensuous realities..." (9:121)

Another piece which succeeded was the basket-planter. Its form resembles that of a boat. Fish angled diagonally, emphasize the boat's thrust. They appear to emerge from the planter's surface. The heads and tails protrude three dimensionally, but the body is flattened into the vessel. The rim is made up of flowers, spiraling waves, and a snake. The snake is camouflaged by the flowers. At first he appears to be the rim which has slipped off of the pot but on closer inspection he is indeed a snake.

This piece represents an ecosystem. When planted the vessel is vital. The form is up reaching, the fish are moving in and out of the form, the living plants and the ceramic flowers are lost amongst each other.

CONCLUSION

The overlap of my love for life and passion for art, inspired my thesis installation. The installation as a whole was not taken as far as was each piece individually. In future work, I plan to expand on this installation to the point where the walls are as alive as the sea, figures breath and the ground is florid. Ideally, my ideas would be manifest in a garden niche where the sculpture could embrace the life of the fertile earth.

Without hesitation I will continue to clutter my work with variations in surface and form. My instincts tell me to agree with Philip Rawson:

Vitality is virtually a synonym for variation.
(9:122)





PLATE THREE



PLATE FOUR

FORMULAS*

SCULPTURE BODY

RED ART	50
FIRE CLAY	15
BALL CLAY	5
TALC	10
GROG	10
SAND	<u>10</u>

Plus: One handful nylon fibres with every 200 lbs.
4 cups FIBROUS WALLASTONITE

TERRA SIGILLATA

CALVERT	675
JORDON	675
H ₂ O	3 QTS
CALGON	15

:ball mill for 6 hours, let settle 24 hours then
use top one half of mixture

WEISER'S RED ORANGE TERRA SIGILLATA

YELLOW IRON	202
GOLD ART	1148
H ₂ O	3 QTS
CALGON	15

*ALL FORMULAS PERTAIN TO CONE 04-05 OXIDATION FIRING

NO PINHOLE MAJOLICA

FRIT 3124	70
KENTUCKY BALL	7
ZIRCOPAX	10
FRIT 3110	10
BENTONITE	5

SLIP USED UNDER NO PINHOLE MAJOLICA

RED ART	96
FRIT 3124	4

BETTY'S TANG LEAD

WHITE LEAD	63
WHITING	6.1
KAOLIN	8.5
FLINT	26
BENTONITE	2

:For colors mix 2 parts glaze with 1 part oxide
or stain

NEIL'S LEAD

WHITE LEAD	40
KONA F-4	18
FLINT	15
BARIUM	15
WHITING	4
KAOLIN	4
LITHIUM	4
ZINC	5

:For Turquoise use 5% CuCO_3
For Pink use 8-10% Alpine Rose Stain and 2 Lithium
For Yellow use .75% Yellow Lead Chromate

LITHIUM BLUE #1

LITHIUM CARBONATE	25
KAOLIN	14
FLINT	55.9
BENTONITE	3
CUCO ₃	

WATER BLUE #1

FRIT 3110	76.3
COLMANITE	5.7
KAOLIN	7.1
FLINT	10.0
CUCO ₃	6.0

:Works best of John Gill's White Slip

JOHN GILL'S WHITE SLIP

EPK	25
TENN BALL	25
TALC	5
FLINT	20
ZIRCOPAX	5
BORAX	5
GERSTLEY BORATE	5

DENSE WHITE SLIP

KAOLIN	25
BALL	30
FRIT 3124	25
TALC	5
ZIRCOPAX	10
FLINT	10

BLACK SLIP

RED ART	85
FRIT 3124	15
BLACK MASON STAIN	4%
MANGANESE DIOXIDE	4%
BLACK IRON OXIDE	2%

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