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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

A PERSONAL STATEMENT ABOUT SPACE

By

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May 20, 1985

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wife Mae Teitelbaum, whose material, emotional and intellectual support made this work a realization, and to my daughter and son, Iliana and Juan Manuel, whose love and patience made my stay in Rochester endurable and pleasant.

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THESIS PROPOSAL

Space has been utilized and created by man through the ages for different purposes. Sometimes it has been for enjoyment, contemplation, or created for spiritual uplift, relaxation, status or economic speculation. In this process some people have gained many benefits while others have suffered stress, unhappiness and underdevelopment.

I have been a person who suffered the penuries of always living in cramped quarters. I have always dreamed of bigger spaces or flying through space. Confronting nature's expanses or the empty lot next to a skyscraper in New York City, I immediately sense the relief of open space.

For my thesis work I will use clay to explore my personal experiences with space as endured by me while growing up to adulthood. I will make small scale environments and large sculptures that will address this issue. I will use different ceramic processes and techniques that, together with texture, pattern, and color, will heighten the emotional impact of the work.

INTRODUCTION

One can imagine man enjoying the boundless space at the dawn of history. As the inclemence of weather and the danger of other animals accosted him, the security and comfort of the cave became his most precious space. As his family grew in size, the cave was not enough. He improved his space as time passed by creating new artificial ones that became his shelter. The utilization of space grew in sophistication with the accumulation of complex technology handed down from generation to generation through the millenia of years. The shrines and sprawling plazas crowned by a monumental temple of the mayan and aztec culture testify to the enjoyment, understanding and utilization of space in a way that baffles us today. The immense sense of grandeur that one senses from the top of a huge mountain overlooking a valley was well captured in this architecture to symbolize the power, grandeur and prestige of the rulers who believed themselves to be direct descendants of the Gods whom they represented on earth. The well utilized buttressed gothic arch in medieval times helped to achieve an uplifting space that was not surpassed until the use of steel in architecture. Steel allowed the technology of our time to utilize space in a new and innovative way exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water" house¹ where different planes intersect and where up and down and inside and outside space become intertwined. Organic, fluid and dynamic space became the new vocabulary.

Space is an abstract element perceived by the eyes, and by the body through movement. It affects our life in ways that could be as beautiful and pleasant as experiencing Niagara Falls, or as sad and unpleasant as being placed in solitary confinement in a repressive institution.

My experiences with space have had tints of both extremes- joyousness and sadness. I remember being soothed by the sprawling grasslands being swept alive by different moving patterns as the wind blew gently back and forth, with sideways swirls, on top of a quiet mountain. There was a beautiful cloudless deep blue sky as background. The space in front of me was immense, and it was heightened by the "loud" silence pervading every infinitesimal part of everything around. I experienced the sheer joy of space!

Around my third birthday my parents and I visited a friend whose backyard was different from any others I had seen. The doorway that led into it had a ladder of about six steps. The yard looked very deep when you looked at it from above. I went downstairs by myself when nobody was looking even though I was scared to death. I felt good being down, but halfway up the stairs I looked back and got terrorized at being halfway up in the air. Afraid to fall I started to cry. Someone stood in the doorway and encouraged me to continue which I did. When I got upstairs I burst into laughter and felt joy at having conquered that space.

I was left with a scar on my soul from living in a small crowded home of nine children as I grew up. In this space we were always bumping into each other or into things. I had frequent dreams at night

that while I was flying in the air I would get tangled in a myriad of electrical wires hanging from lamp posts in the streets. I still dream at night that the space wherever I live is much bigger and more ample than they really are and always uncluttered and sparsely furnished. Whether this dream is an educated one or a reaction to an imprint of earlier experience is very hard for me to assess. I do know that experimentation by behavioral scientists in the 1970's showed that when rats were made to live in overcrowded environments, they became nervous, ill-tempered and violent.

II. EXPLORING THE IDEA OF SPACE

These feelings about space have been haunting me for quite a long time. I decided to express these feelings in my work. My first sketches in clay were about spaces created by varied forms placed next to each other. Some of these forms were organic, others were sort of geometric. The idea of exploring these forms in a way that conveys a feeling of spontaneity did not come through, and always ended up with arrangements that were structures placed in space. Some of these structures gave the feeling of ancient architectural ruins, but this was not what I was looking for. (See illustrations 6-9.)

Some clearer ideas started forming after more experimentation with clay. I wanted the forms to create space as experienced and felt through the body and soul. Even though I had experienced space in a very sublime way by growing up in the mountains of Puerto Rico, the feelings that started to form in my head were negative ones, that is, feelings that grow from the constriction of the body and the soul when space is very small. I wanted the work to speak of two kinds of opposite ideas and feelings, expansive and restrictive space; and the feeling that this experience of restriction leaves on the soul of those who lived through it. For these new ideas I started to use the slab roller and the clay extruder as a mechanical aid. I made some organic and geometric slab blocks of different forms and sizes. My intention was to arrange them in such a way that, together with the drawings on their

surface, they would convey the feeling of restrictive and expansive space in a dream like or perhaps surrealistic way. I felt the idea was good, but the time allotted to further develop this project was not enough, nor was there the studio space available.

For the next project I combined extruded coiled structures mounted on top of tall rectangular slab built blocks. The idea was to explore in clay the negative and positive spaces developed by M.C. Escher in his graphic work. Halfway through this work I felt dissatisfied, because I still was not getting to my own personal experience. Despite my admiration and great affinity for Escher's work, I sensed that I should project my own personal feelings in my work. I shifted then to work with only extruded coils of different shapes and sizes. The idea in this new work was to create a long legged latticed box where one could look through and see a long wrapped up shape in the inside hanging in the air. (See illustration 1.) Restrictive space was the subject of this idea. In my next piece I placed the wrapped up shape in a horizontal position on top of the structure. These new forms appealed somewhat to me because they addressed in an autobiographical way the feeling of oppression, repression and space restriction in a mysterious and evocative manner. However, they lacked the looseness and spontaneity that I would have liked them to have.

III. THESIS WORK

My final thesis work evolved out of my desire to give my work a fresh and lively look, and a directness that the previous work did not have. I built one sculpture, then another, then more... One of the sculptures had an undulating upward movement; others had a jig saw type of form. These works created a dynamic space relationship between them when they were placed next to each other. The space between them was activated by the negative and positive convolution that the form created on its way to the top, where the center of attraction was placed. I did not notice this interesting aspect of my sculpture until I made a second piece and saw how well they related to each other across space. These new forms started to have character and a life of their own.

Next I had to articulate the upper part of the sculpture in a way that related to the main form and at the same time express the idea of contrasting the expanse of space to a restricted one. I chose to build a little house at the top to contrast its flimsy security and precariousness to its restricted space. I also wanted to create the feeling of restriction in an unbalanced and shakey structure. I wanted them to give the sensation of a dream by putting an upside down little house on top of the other house. In this way I showed my mixed feelings regarding the house. "The chief benefit of the house... shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows

one to dream in peace." ² This is contrasted with my own past experiences in "which the hostility of men and of the universe accumulates" ³ inside the house and not outside the house as Gaston Bachelard wrote in his book The Poetics of Space.

On two other sculptures, either on top or under the little shelter, I placed a wrapped form which I had used in some of my previous experiments. The wrapped form symbolizes my dreams eager to fly off to the world of becoming- to the world of reality. That is why they acquire more importance than the security of the house.

Once the construction was finished, I started to think of ways that I could best glaze the work. I did not want them to have a shiny glaze. I had glazed two big sculptures previously and saw that the gloss was not appropriate. I noticed also a seriousness and heaviness in my last two sculptures which I wanted to transform through glazing. I thought that by putting more brilliant colors on the top, with some lively patterns reminiscent of quilted cloth, the overall look would change to a more cheerful and whimsical effect. I was very glad to say that this effect was indeed successfully accomplished by utilizing colored terra sigillata and matt glazes on the top part and using different variations of reddish to brown terra sigillata on the bottom.

The last two sculptures that I completed were the most successful of the four that I presented for my thesis show. The forms were simpler and more graceful. The placement of colors was sensitively applied so as to not make one surface compete with the other in color as well as in texture. This also enhanced the top part where the interest of the sculpture was centered. All this was positively assisted by the dexterity that I had developed in coil building as my experience

accumulated, and by my constant use of intuition and intellect in a balanced way. I was constantly checking so as to not let one predominate over the other. This was so because I had a specific amount of time in which to present my work. Planning was necessary when I was building my last two works. The way that I developed the clay form was by constructing without any premeditation as to which way I was going to go with the form; I had, however, a general feeling in my mind of what I was looking for, but not a definite idea. Once a segment was finished I would draw different ideas on paper in order to know how I would proceed in finishing the piece. I did the same for the glazing process. I did some previous drawings before I committed myself to glazing the big surfaces of those sculptures- too much was at stake. When most of the work was glazed, I would improvise here and there to give it a fresh and spontaneous look. This approach paid off very well.

Another aspect which helped me refine my ideas as well as my work was the constant dialogue with my work as well as with myself in order to establish priorities, weaknesses and strengths.

IV. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

I came to the Rochester Institute of Technology with a general knowledge of working with clay in a traditional way. Ceramics for me consisted of making functional ware with a crispness and with the precision of a machine. Soon I learned here in R.I.T. other subtleties associated with ceramic processes and techniques. One of my ceramic professors, Graham Marks, has a collection of ceramics in his office done by different visiting artists during workshops given at school. I was dumbfounded at first to see a big pot with a handle, thrown on the wheel, a little bit loose and lopsided. I suspected that the pot was there for some special reason. I was others there done by other artists with that same "look", which was very new to me. Later on, in my journey through ceramic history, I learned how Ken Ferguson⁴, the author of that big pot, had arrived at such a style of work. His fine sensitivity to the plasticity of clay has been influenced by the Oriental aesthetic where "beauty derives not from the victory of science or craft but from the sensitivity of every element of the process by which an object has been made....not from the conscious striving for intellectually held visual principles."⁵ These ideas spread in America in 1952 after the visit made by Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi, who brought with them the Zen aesthetic approach to art which "grew out of life and not out of design."⁶ From that aesthetic I soon learned to appreciate the tactile qualities

that could enrich a well formed ceramic object. I started to look at mistakes not as something inherently bad, but as something that might have some beauty of its own, or as a nice gesture that could give life to the work. These qualities, that Ken Ferguson has in his work, are not easy to come by. I have been aware of them, but could say that my work still has to go a little bit further in time as well as practice in order to arrive at a point where I could execute my work with such mastery.

I was very conscious of all this when I was doing my sculptures. However, I became too preoccupied with the technical aspect of my work, as well as being too conscious of my intellectual approach to art. Because of this, somewhere along the line some of those fine qualities of clay did not come out in my pieces as strongly as they should have had. Some of my technical preoccupations were the following:

- 1- How to build a nine foot tall sculpture without it collapsing in the wet or leather hard stage.
- 2- If the sculpture is that tall, some internal structure had to be constructed- which one, how and why?
- 3- The different kilns suitable for this work were a 24 and 32 inch electric kiln and a 48 inch gas up-draft kiln. Which kiln size would be the best to use taking into consideration that they were also going to be used by many more students?
- 4- If the use was limited to the biggest sized kiln, how big would the module have to be made if you want to handle the work by yourself since you may not have help handling big pieces in the future?
- 5- If a small module was chosen, how would they be fired then,

singly or doubly, taking for granted that the work might be built in four sections?

- 6- Which kiln would be best for a) firing the pieces with a minimum of warping, so that the pieces would fit well and b) firing the glazes, i.e. which kiln would offer a better firing at cone 04 oxidation glaze.
- 7- Which glazes would be the most appropriate for the finished pieces?
- 8- Should the work be bisque or single-fired?

I made this evaluation process after I had decided that I wanted to hand coil big pieces on a white stoneware body with 20% grog in it. I used this particular clay body (see appendix 1) for most of my projects during the last two years. I had used it for raku at cone 04, at regular oxidation earthenware temperature, and for salt glazing at cone 10. It works very well. I deduced, then, that it would work well in my new project. It did well. I like this white body also, because it lends itself well for utilization of bright colors.

I made the first sculpture in three sections of 32 inches and bisqued them in the updraft gas kiln. When I put the sections together there was a slight shift or warpage in some of the units due to an uneven temperature in the top and bottom part of the kiln. To minimize this problem of fitting the work after firing I did two things: first I paid attention to the even distribution of heat inside the kiln, and second, I diminished the module to 24 inches in height. The sculpture now could be made in four sections and fired together in a fitted couple. Now the problem of coupling was reduced to one union, and the

handling of the pieces by one person was solved. All the pieces were fired in this fashion and there was no problem.

The internal structure that I used was a vertical rib of clay about three to four inches in depth that I put from top to bottom of the sculpture, on both sides, and in front and back of the inside of the piece. Strips of paper towels were placed along the top edges of the finished sections. As soon as that section was hard enough to support the next part, I continued building upward until the four sections were completed one on top of the other. Each inner rib rested on the next bottom one.

I decided to use the 30 cubic foot updraft gas kiln because I learned to control the heat inside it by:

- 1- placing the pieces inside the kiln in a way so as to not interfere with the heat distribution.
- 2- use for my oxidation atmosphere a good air to gas ratio of 20 pounds of air pressure per 1/2 cubic ounce of gas for every one and a half hours.

The kiln fired the night before with just the pilots. The next morning the gas air pressure was increased until it got to a maximum volume of 90 pounds of air to 2 1/2 ounces of gas and reached a temperature of 1920 F or cone 04. If the top part of the kiln got too hot, the flame from the burners was made shorter by increasing the amount of air and also by opening both spy holes on the side of the kiln.

In the glazing process, I made many tests for both bisque and bone dry work. I wanted to combine matt and glossy glazes. The result of this combination on the small test tiles was good, but when I tried

them on a big sculpture the overall appearance was not good. I decided to test terra sigillata. This type of slip worked fine on bone dry ware. On bisque ware it chipped off, and I had already bisqued the first of the four sculptures. To remedy the chipping, a test was done by adding 10, 20, and 30% of frit #3124 to the slip made of Jackson and Calvert clay. The 30% addition of the frit to the slip gave the best result. The top part of the sculptures, as well as the work which has the brown stripe running along its surface was painted with this fritted slip. I prepared other colors by adding stains or oxides to this fritted slip. I painted one sculpture green by adding 6% of dry green chrome oxide, excluding the frit, added to Jackson ball clay, which is white after firing. The overall result of the four pieces was very good and I was happy to conclude that chapter of my work in such a positive note. (See illustrations 2-5.)

V. AFTERTHOUGHTS

I was a self-taught potter who was doing small functional work before I came to the College of Fine and Applied Arts at R.I.T. The images that I drew on my ceramics were of people living in a rural tropical place. They had a decorative festive look. This was not enough for me. Two things were happening to me at this point in my life. First, the level of craftsmanship and ceramic knowledge that I had up to this point although fine for what I was doing, was not enough to help me develop and project ideas that had other kinds of concerns- that of a social commitment. This was my second preoccupation which I wanted to define and commit myself to. I was sensing that as a responsible social being I had to do something that transcended the mere aesthetic experience.

I was living on the outside of a small rural town and I had no contact with people doing ceramics. Learning to work with clay by trial and error takes too much time, energy and frustration; and I was curious about pit firing, stoneware, porcelain, salt glazing, raku and kiln building.

Having done all this at the Rochester Institute of Technology leaves me with a great sense of satisfaction, but also with a responsibility on my shoulder. I feel as if I am just starting to walk, but I want to run with stamina and resistance once I return to my beautiful land of Puerto Rico. I want to be true to myself and my craft. A sensi-

tive human being cannot go about his or her daily living obliterating or ignoring what goes on around in his environment and the world. We live in an ecosystem where anything that is done wrong in one place will adversely affect someone or another place, be it physically, morally, psychologically, or politically. I am still sensitive to the fact that my work may be acquired by someone who simply uses it to decorate his(her) space in order to heighten his personal worth, prestige, and power, and yet this person may be responsible or condone policies that adversely affect someone or some place on this planet. Art for me cannot work in a vacuum. It has to have some meaningful content and not passively decorate someone's space. The artist

...must make value judgements. In order to make value judgements he must have an all-pervasive personal code of values or ethics. In order to use this code of values he must make choices. In order to make choices he must be aware of the alternatives. 7

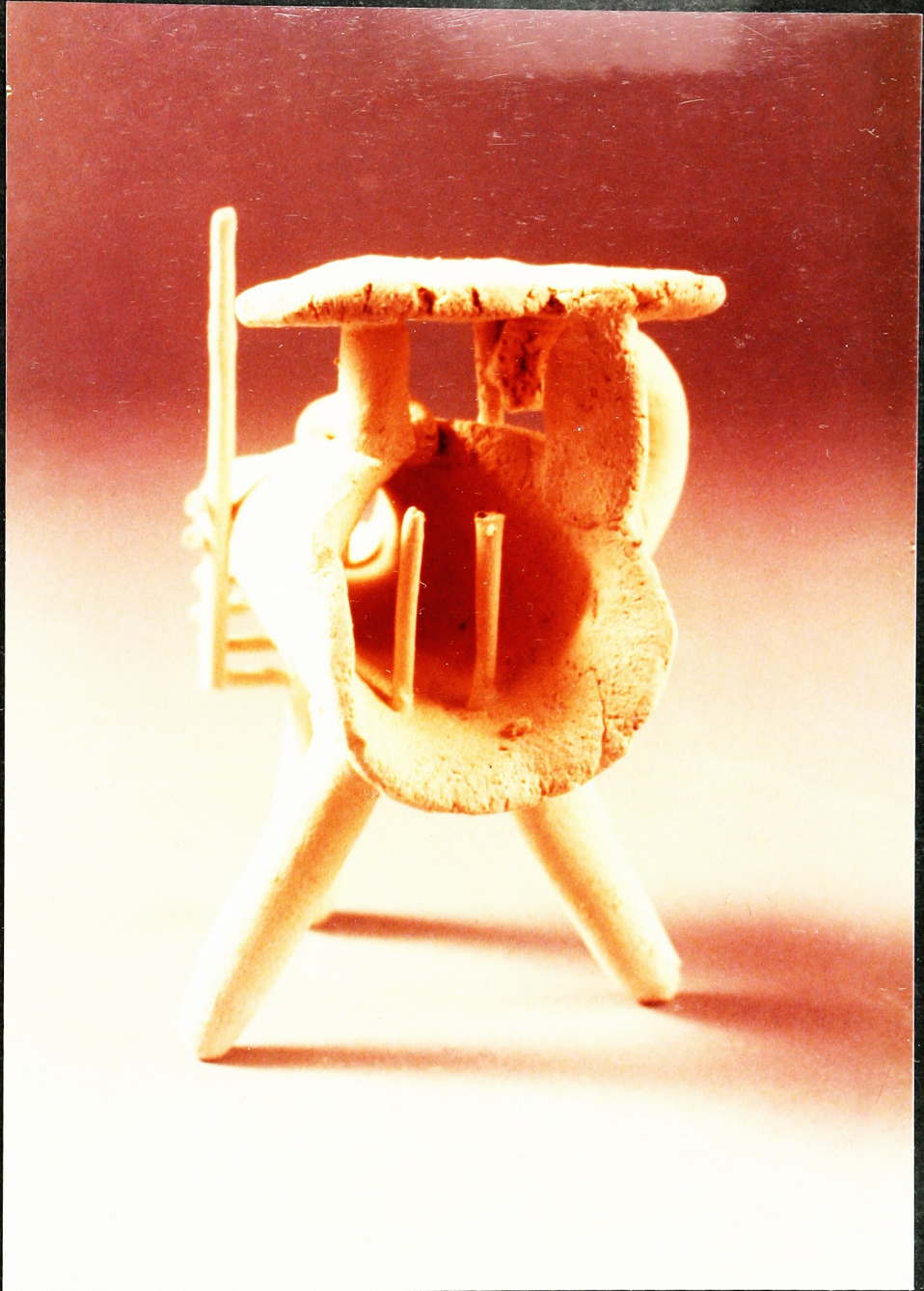


















VI. FOOTNOTES

1. Frank Lloyd Wright, Kaufmann House, "Falling Water," 1936, Bear Run, Pennsylvania.
2. Bachelard, Gaston, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.6.
3. Ibid., p.7.
4. Kenneth Ferguson teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute where he developed its ceramics department. His pottery, as Garth Clark states in his book American Potters (p. 40), is enlivened by an underlying eroticism. The manner in which the forms tend to slump in the center, the rudely protuberant spouts, creased and loosely formed, create an anthropomorphic quality that is exceedingly intimate.
5. Clark, Garth, American Potters, (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981), p.20.
6. Ibid.
7. Jay, Bill, Negative/Positive, A Philosophy of Photography, (Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co, 1979), p.27.

VIII. APPENDIX

CLAY, TERRA SIGILLATA AND GLAZES

Higby's Raku Body

A.P. Green Fire Clay	100
Jackson Ball Clay	30
Talc	30
Fine Silica Sand	20

Terra Sigillata #1

Calvert Clay	30
Water	70
Calgon	5

Terra Sigillata #2

Jackson Ball Clay	30
Water	80
Calgon	5

First dissolve the calgon in the water and then add the dry clay. Ball mill for at least six hours and let it set for twelve hours. Decant the clear water and siphon off the first two thirds for use.

For different shades of brown mix terra sigillata #1 with terra sigillata #2 in proportions of 1:1, 1:2, and 1:4. For blues, yellow and pink , add six grams of Mason stains to the terra sigillata #2. The Mason stains were the following: teal blue, praseodymium yellow, and alpine rose. For green use six grams of green nickel oxide.

Satin Matt Glaze cone 04

Lithium carbonate	27.0
Kaolin	14.1
Flint	55.9
Bentonite	3.0
Copper carbonate	4.0

Transparent Fluid Gloss Glaze cone 04

White lead	46
Feldspar (soda)	30
Silica	12
Whiting	6
Kaolin	2
Bentonite	1
Praseodymium yellow	10

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bachelard, Gaston, The Poetics of Space, trans Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969),
2. Clark, Garth, American Potters, (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981).
3. Jay, Bill, Negative/Positive, A Philosophy of Photography, (Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co, 1979).