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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

Personal Icons

By

Donna Nadine Bratcher

Sept. 29, 1988

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PREFACE

The intent of this document is not to reduce my ceramic sculpture to a list of reasons and definitions.

"Art manifests itself to us directly through image. Thus a verbal explanation of my work forces me to make general statements touching on some aspect or another of the work and can never be a detailed dissection of the content.(and should not be understood as such)" ¹

This papers function is to serve as an overview of the thought process behind the creation of my thesis work.

The past two years have been an exploration of both the technical and mental aspects of art making. I place intent and content foremost over all other reasons for creating and the written portion of my thesis will discuss why art exists, what my artistic intent is, and how my art addresses this intent. It has been a valuable experience for me to put my thoughts about art into a cohesive verbal format. The clarification and articulation of my reasons for creating objects of art, I am sure, will bolster and strengthen my future works.

¹ Judy Moonelis, "As if Looking Into a Mirror," Studio Potter, December, 1987, p. 12

PHILOSOPHY

For my own personal clarification, I separate art into three basic categories: Decorative art, Art, and Functional art. It is my contention that Decorative art communicates an aesthetic and deals with formalistic issues. Many contemporary artists have striped away the original primitive incentives from the act of art making. Modernism embraces the notions of freedom and autonomy to the point that art only answers to its own logic and laws. Modern art intellectualizes art to the point where only 'pure' aesthetic is communicated.

"Art can be merely decorative if we choose to minimize its quotient of feelings and personally invited truth and emphasize its form. But it can be a useful tool for coming to understand ourselves through careful inspection of how artists marshal their compositions, their figures, and their narrative devices..."²

Art communicates a human concept and deals with human issues. Granted art does concern itself with formal, aesthetic, and sometimes functional issues, but the primary concern of art is the representation of human issues.

² Robert Hobbs and Fredrick Woodard, Human rights/Human Wrongs, (The University of Iowa Museum of Art), p.

"The beauty of their art lies in the truth and perspicacity of their vision rather than in the richness of their colors and the harmony of their compositions. The beauty of their art is to be found in their acceptance of humanity and their refusal to gloss over what they perceived to be reality."³

Functional art, for the most part, communicates an aesthetic and deals with functional and formalistic issues. Functional art, I feel, can act as a support for either purely aesthetic or human issues depending upon the commitment of the maker.

Commitment is the essential word. Why I choose to address human issues through art is very elemental. I question how can I dedicate my life works to a thing as transparent and depthless as an aesthetic? How can I sustain a feeling of vitality in my work if life experiences are not at the center core of the issues addressed? I aspire to speak of a greater moral concern than beauty or the lack of it.

"We need to set aside the notion that art is concerned only with decoration or with ineffable pleasures, with pure delication of the senses, and with all those refinements that make it rarefied and separate from daily existence. And we need to focus on what Art does: it establishes identity, whether that identity be personal, societal, or political..."⁴

³ Hobbs and Woodard, p. 17

⁴ Hobbs and Woodard, p.7

I seek to compel the viewer to think. My art is not simple--it parallels life in this respect. The viewer must think to put meaning to the puzzle presented to them in my art--as they must think to make sense of the intricacies of life. Through my work I seek to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of the human condition. I perceive the unremitting dynamics and unpredictability of life and then create images that have their own cause and effect.

"I am a reflector of what happens to me personally. Subtly I am affected by politics, economics, and society."⁵

My art reflects and refracts life dramas.

⁵ Jack Earl, "A Correspondence," Studio Potter, December, 1987, p. 10

INTENT

Art is a visual dialogue between the artist, the medium, and the viewer. What art expresses to me and how much I value its content is largely a function of how it intersects with my personal experiences. My work is literally life, a way of fully inhabiting both the territory of my inner life and outer world. My work functions as a physical passage through which I gain access to prehension. The mind retains experiences and my art is an adaptation and reconstruction of these life experiences. I make use of the familiar image to produce the unfamiliar.

"As Surrealists, I use totally familiar objects in ways that remove them from the everyday world, which awaken old images in the viewer, from his past or the depths of his psyche, to deal with incongruity"⁶

I parallel my method of construction to collage and assemblage, because each work incorporates a number of parts that evoke psychological tensions in a surrealistic manner. I draw inspiration from collage artists such as Cornell, Conners, and Paris. The figurative, portraiture, and found objects included in my art puts the viewer at ease and allows them to examine the forms and eccentricities of the pieces on a more intimate level. Thus, my art invites the viewer to comfortably explore and question the reasons for its generation or exsistance.

6 A. Mogelon, Art In Boxes, (Laliberte), p. 77

I begin the creative process by communicating with myself and clarifying thoughts receiving codes of meaning that intervene between my imagination and reality. My art is particular and personal. The communal experience between myself and clay results in a work of art that pries into my life and feelings.

Personal visions, sensitivities, and experiences recombine with the experiences of the viewer in my art. The actual meaning of art is never definitive; it is a collaboration between the work and the viewer. Ultimately a work is completed by its audience. The content implied by my works differ from audience to audience. The viewer's divergent culture and life experiences have a direct affect on the translation of art. In art the search for the universal or collectively understandable image is false. The content will always be an individual interpretation.

"Things are because we see them...To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. Art expresses the temper of its age, the spirit of its time, the moral and social conditions that surround it, ..."7

Thus, the depth at which my art work is understood depends greatly upon the depth at which the viewer is "seeing" the work. The original expression is altered in varying degrees as the viewer attempts to utilize their personal, cultural, and intellectual dictionaries to decipher the visual symbols and cues presented to them in my art.

7 James B. Hall and Barry Ulanov, Modern Culture and the Arts, (McGraw-Hill), p.77

I believe that although we are all individuals with different personalities shaped by differing human experiences and values, we do have human emotion and human interaction in common. We all must deal with life physically and mentally. The fundamental physiology of the human species produces a common capacity for emotion. My art communicates with the viewer by tapping into 'universal' feelings or truths. All people have basic feelings that are nurtured by the society in which we exist. Because we exist we must coexist and thus, interact with other members of our society.

"Is not the human body for the present purposes everywhere so much alike that all races can be included in one species? Is not this organism wrestling universally with not dissimilar problems of space-time-energy?" ⁸

Through the use of ceramic sculpture I have portrayed basic human feelings, interactions, and relationships. (paternal, maternal, sibling, male/female, and society as a whole) My art work engages the human species, because it speaks of psychological dramas and primal human issues of emotion.

The symbolic imagery I use is a simple and direct vocabulary. The eclectic combination of objects within my sculpture may be bewildering to the viewer's first impressions, but upon closer inspection sparks of thought occur that, in turn, illuminate diverse facets of my artistic intentions.

"Those who do not see will rebel, they will try to understand and will end up by 'seeing'." ⁹

⁸ Harry Holbert, Man and System, (Turney-High), p. 481

⁹ Hall and Ulanov, p. 206

When an exchange of information exists between the artist and the spectator the visual dialogue is complete. When the viewer is spurred to wonder, think, and question I consider the work of art a success.

"As long as it can induce people to ask questions about why images are presented to them and in what form, art can still be said to have a political role--if only because it may help us tell a truth from a lie."¹⁰

¹⁰ Hobbs and Woodard, p. 226

METHODOLOGY

My art work has grown in tandem with my personality. A complex network of relationships intertwine to form an individual identity. My concept of self was formed early in life with interaction between me and my immediate family, but this concept only acts as a base and modifications are made as daily dramas affect me. Realities trickle into the naive world of a child and the grown up personality that results is mainly a product of the strength or weakness of the concept of self that was formed as a child.

"I never used to think that one's age, experience of suffering or joy got into the work. Now I am beginning to think that it does.

I no longer believe that life and art are wholly separable."¹¹

Internal, personal, private, and social interactions are life's dramas and how these encounters are coped with forms our personality. Societal norms are taught to us and are illustrated to us by art, religion, media, schools, institutions, peers, and our elders.

"...the reason why behavior, skills, attitudes, values, and prejudices are what they are is that they were learned in one particular culture instead of another."¹²

¹¹ Eleanor Munro, Originals: American Women Artists, (Simon and Schuster, Inc.), p. 23

¹² Holbert, p.11

Societal norms are a source of conflict because they incite judgmental attitudes within ourselves as well as others. Attempts to remain within the norm can result in the formation of a protective shell that suppresses emotions and masks true feelings. My art is an expression of these repressed emotions.

Our society is infected with materialism, self-ful concerns, and prejudices. The being of today is desensitized by the 'self phenomenon'. Members of our society have become self serving and family units, pairbonding, and peer groups have become secondary to self in the norms projected by our society. Human interactions have become mechanical and feelings have become numb from the lack of sincere interaction. Beings have become perceived as things, numbers, 2-D images without inner workings. My work is screaming that we have inner emotions, thoughts, and feelings.

All humans have their own ways of dealing with reality--their safety net or life line. My safety net is my art work. Clay functions as a mouth piece and is a way of finding expression outside of language. My art allows me to communicate thoughts that would otherwise remain internalized. Expression, with all of the pleasures it entails is displaced pain.

Frustration is the root of my inspiration. Frustration in my attempts to make sense of the myriad of profound situations presented to me just because I exist. Interacting with the environment and the individuals within that environment creates a network of complexities and my art work facilitates my making sense of the world I live in.

"...primitive societies...valued art for its magical powers... sculptures are intended as 'houses' for the spirit, to achieve some control over them."¹³

My art echoes this primitive urge to create. The symbols and forms I create are a 3-D journal of my personal attempts to understand and gain control over life's inexplicable mysteries.

My art work communicates my own personal ideas and concepts about the world, the universe, and humankind's posture in the scheme of things. The imagery I utilize is drawn from past, present, and personal happenings. The internal elements of my work narrate inner mental conditions of either turmoil or serenity. Other portions are sculptural representations of external physical realities. Certain passages within my sculpture possess a religious or magical quality and represent a portion of my inner being.

"...my work embodies more than one message. In the midst of deep emotional upheaval, I try to remain neutral; yet the work is a challenge, an edification, a release.

But most of all, it is me."¹⁴

The introspection provided to me by my ceramic pieces is a therapeutic force and has a healing function that surpasses any other form of self analysis.

¹³ Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (Thames and Hudson), p.5

¹⁴ Winnie Owens-Hart, "African American Women," Studio Potter, December, 1987, p.19

"As symbols, works of art communicate both consciously and unconsciously. Instead of imitating life, art directs it. Art provides us with models, with attitudes and, most important, with distinct sensibilities that become new ways of seeing, touching, hearing, and even smelling and tasting the world around us. Art instills in us a unique vision and new possibilities. It provides us with believable intriguing identities."¹⁵

The act of making art facilitates my coming to terms with individual truths by putting me in touch with personal feelings and the realities within them. The structure of my identity is revealed to me through my art work and in turn my concept of self is strengthened.

"Art is a mask which unveils reality; it is a conduit through which we can feel--if we're willing to take the chance...It's a mask that we wear when we truly wish to understand..." ¹⁶

The human image is dominate in my work. The face is used as a container. The concavity of the brain, formed in clay, houses intimate moments in an allegorical world. The mask itself is a metaphor for external reality. It speaks of the pain, anguish, and confusion felt when confronted by the incongruences of the physical world.

¹⁵ Hobbs and Woodard, p. 11

¹⁶ Hobbs and Woodard, p. 17

I draw inspiration from those artist who have similar stimuli: Matisse, Brancusi, Moore, Giacometti, Noguchi, Westerman, and O'Keeffe. These artist have a sensitivity to the organic and primitive form. The pit fired technique, by which the clay masks are fired, reiterates aesthetically thoughts of primitivism and harks back to the primitive emotions that I wish to spark in the viewer.

"...the piece takes on that ancient quality, an otherworldly feeling, like something dug up from the ground. Clay is appropriate to this feeling,...It's one of the oldest things ever found, from the oldest cultures. That's a fascinating tie to the past."¹⁷

The smaller units of my ceramic sculpture have a mute quality like many primitive shrines and structures. The internal events are unveiled by apertures opening onto provocative interiors. The stage is set and each prop selected plays a particular role in the personal drama they portray.

17 R.M. Quinn, "Fox Joy McGrew: Fantasy and Form," Artspace, Winter 1987-88, p. 20

Each assemblage is symbolic of the thought processes that are evoked within me by the realities of life, people, individuals, interactions, conflicts, and boundaries.

ladder=escape

ropes=bind

eyeglasses=see

buttons=hold together

masks=reveal or hide

chairs=support

The symbolic associations listed above are simple, but allude to a more complex meaning that could be formulated by the viewer.

In conclusion, my work allows the viewer to explore my consciousness in a voyeuristic manner. The pieces are fragments of memories and it is my intent that the viewer will attach their own personal interpretation to the different components placed before them. The allegories I create are compound images and carefully selected symbols that call upon the viewer's trace memories, thus allowing the viewer to relate to the icons placed before them.

My work is a melling of primitive aesthetic, contemporary issues and personal feelings.

POEM

END OF THE CHAPTER

Empty and hollow,
A void within.
Cries echoing,
Rebounding off an empty shell.

Where there was warmth
On my right side,
I hear that echo
Crying in me.

Where there was warmth
On my right side,
I hang my head.

Where there was warmth
Surrounding me...
There is no more.

Christine Viscardo

PHOTOS

- a. "one"
- b. "Perforated"
- c. "Silent Insider"
- d. "Inside-Out"
- e. detail
- f. "Doors too small to exit"
- g. detail
- h. "Great Expectations-Loss of Sight-Back to the Buttons"
- i. detail





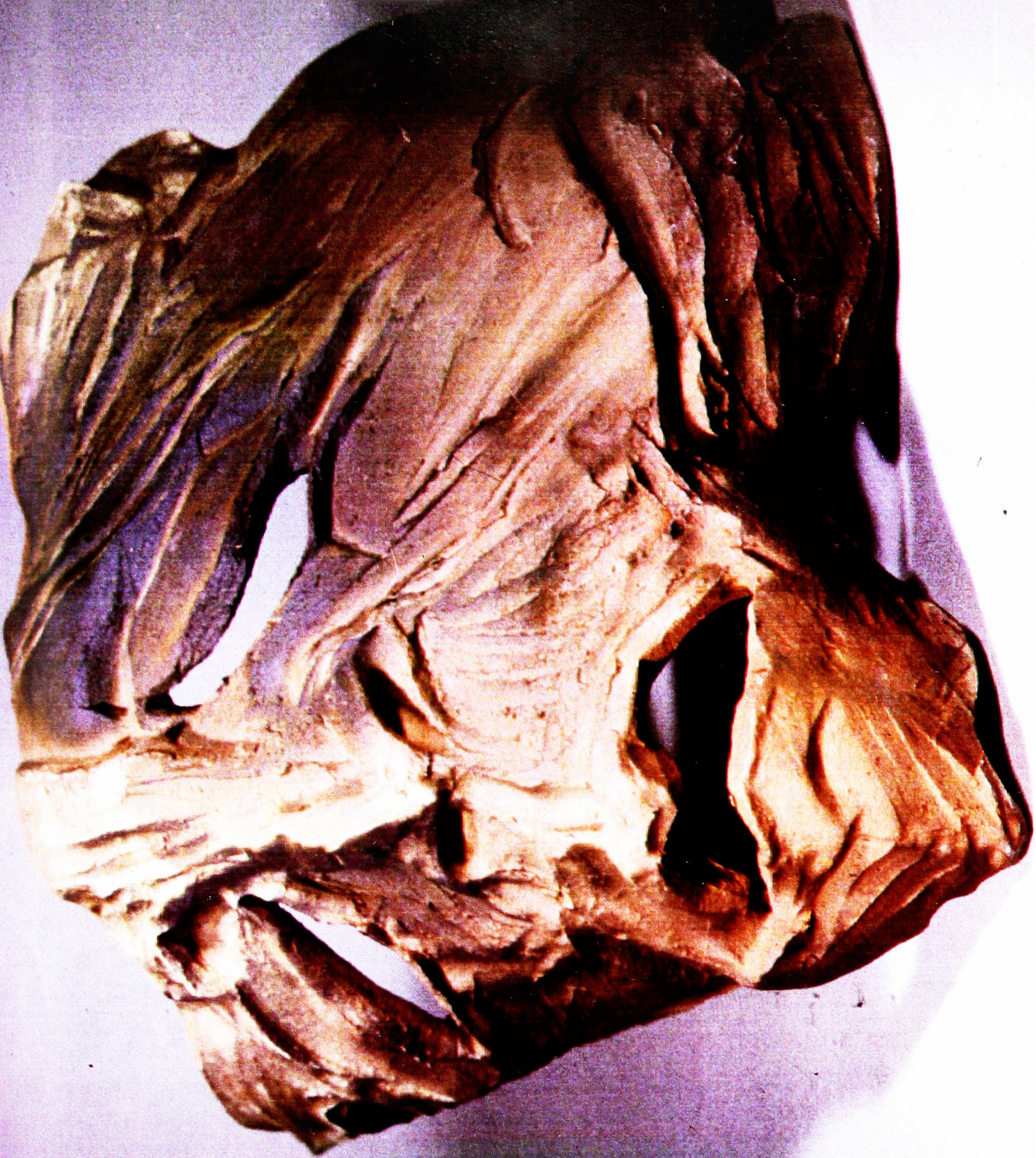














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APPENDIX

FORMULAS

Red Orange Earthenware C/04

Hawthorne Fire Clay	15
M&D Ball Clay	15
Redart	25
Silica	15
Grog/Course	10
Grog/Medium	10
Kyanite	10
Petalite	2 gallons
Sawdust	2 gallons
Nylon Fibers	1 cup

White Earthenware C/04

EPK	25
Tile #6	15
Talc	10
Nepheline Syenite	20
Hawthorne Fire Clay	15
Grog/Course	10
Grog/Medium	10
Petalite	2 gallons
Sawdust	2 gallons
Nylon Fibers	1 cup

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