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An Exploration of conscious and instinctive concepts within ceramic sculpture

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An Exploration of Conscious and Instinctive Concepts within Ceramic Sculpture

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

INTRODUCTION

This thesis report describes the driving force behind my ceramic sculpture, a pursuit of form reflecting conscious and instinctive concepts in art. Each piece, a created situation removed somewhat from the context of the visual and expected, calls attention to the processes by which the human species functions. The environments created program a controlled situation that evokes viewer response as they add to and heighten the illusions of real situations. The drama of these sculptural realities is further intensified by being life-sized.

An intention of the work is not to function as the object it visually represents, but to explore an overall concept of function vs nonfunction. The relation to everyday objects establishes a visual connection that leaves the viewer questioning the aspects of function. The pitcher with a rounded bottom only stands when placed on a grid table which holds it in place. (photo 1, pg. 2) But is it functional? The lack of glaze inside precludes traditional use but suggests an idea of a pitcher. The drama lies in viewing the work and reviewing the ideas suggested about the functionality of everyday objects. With this in mind a connection surfaces between objects and the environments for which they were created.

The images and assemblages created make restatements of traditional functional forms. These forms become statements of tables about tables, pitchers about pitchers, cups about cups, and containers about containers. Within these are secondary statements about each piece such as the spout, handle, bottom, top, exterior, and interior of a pitcher. Alone each item has individual meaning and when placed together relate to the overall environment.

PHOTO 1 - SQUARE BALANCE

The integrity of the whole is then ensured by a democracy of its parts. "The elements must produce forms, but without the sacrifice of their own identities. They should preserve themselves. Usually a combination of several primary elements is necessary to represent forms, objects or other things of secondary ranks. Planes by means of interrelated lines (i.e. the path of moving water bugs), or a spatial organization through three dimensional energies (fish swimming around in all directions)."[I]

SCULPTURE

"Sculpture is the art which has traditionally been one that survives."[II] Ceramic sculpture as a vehicle of and for ideas is not a new concept. My responsibility as a ceramic artist working with sculptural concepts, lies in being cognizant of what came before and to understand and sense the present movements in art. I can then extend this knowledge into objects of real matter that are affected by time, occupy and penetrate space, and convey some content. It is hoped that they further serve as a basis for examination and debate, and in doing so raise questions that may extend sculptural pursuits.

Within our existence there are associations that are common such as man's senses to matter and material, color, surface, sound, taste, smell and other factors of his environment. With these associations I can begin to comprehend and clarify the universality of sculpture as it relates to ceramic sculpture. I can then transmit an idea or message of what the work says or fails to say, intentionally or otherwise.

[I] Miller, Margret, ed., Paul Klee: Three Exhibitions, (New York: Monroe Wheeler, 1968), p. 11.

[II] Hunter, Sam, Isamu Noguchi, (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc.), p. 286.

Ceramics

"The attraction of ceramics lies partly in its contradictions. It is both difficult and easy, with an element beyond our control."[III] Within the realm of ceramics I consider myself an object maker, constantly working to clarify and extend my forms and ideas in relation to the world of ceramic sculpture.

"Nevertheless Noguchi is firing his pottery as sculptures, or at least they are being fired in a manner that captivates the fancy of a sculptor."[IV] As a potter first, I decided to try and adapt my sculptural ideas to ceramics rather than switch to another medium. Other materials would have been quicker and more adaptable, but the concept of using clay created a challenging situation, and a desire to make it work. I had to fit ideas to the material, and also to adapt the material to the ideas. The use of clay gave me an endless latitude for experimentation, important to the creation of dimensional expression.

Ceramic sculpture can transcend the mere representation of objects. An artist can create forms and ideas that take on significance for present and future viewers. The work can evoke an infinite moment.

Individual Expression

It is one thing to create a unique ceramic sculpture, but the ultimate goal should be to introduce a new concept of dimensional involvement that could alter the course of art. As a ceramic sculptor in the twentieth century, I am affected by a mechanized and increasingly technical society. I react to this trend by recognizing and assimilating universal forms, shapes, and ideas on a more simplified or primitive level.

With this expression my uniqueness contributes to the cumulative knowledge and extension of ideas and form. It is important to determine and utilize what is valid and significant as an indiviual, because it reveals my relationship to the civilization in which I live.

[III] Ibid., p. 206

[IV] Shuppan-sha, Bijutsu, Isamu Noguchi 1904, (New York: Wittenborn and Co.), p. 2.

PHOTO 2 - I BEAM WRAP

Intuition

As artists we can expand our own understanding through experimentation toward what we believe are universal absolutes. With this in mind, sculpture should initiate a response by the viewer that is instinctive since the work evolves partly from the intuitive process. I may not consciously employ universal forms in my work. My experiences and concerns, in fact, my very being, must come to bear on my form of language. The ideas, concepts and communication involved in my sculpture are perceptible facts that should be addressed.

The intuitive approach usually results in a more accurate expression of the sculptor's real intent than any contrived system of order. The end result may be ordered, but the creative spirit that led him there usually is not. Intuition remains indispensible. To try and replace the intuitive nature of the ceramic process with a soley objective process, would merely be the intellectual armature for an intuitive vision.

Art then is a combination of this intuitive process and concrete reality. On a conscious level ideas can be chosen by drawing upon these subconscious parts, the idea, whatever it may be, is the culmination of the subconscious and the conscious world.

Geometry

Concepts from geometry evolved on a purely intuitive level. "...straight and uniform curved lines, and the forms resembling circles, rectangles, cubes, spheres, cylinders, 'supply the solid structure upon which we construct the products of our imagination.' To go further they constitute our category of vision."[VI]

[VI] Brest, Jorge Romero, Beyond Geometry, An Extension of Visual-Artistic Language in Our Time, (New York: Presented by the Art Gallery, Center for inter American Realtions), p. 7.

Surrounded by geometry from our beginning each of us develops an unconscious awareness of man-made and natural geometric patterns. Primitive man saw geometric shapes, the sun, moon, rock and certain crystals which geometry later described. Logarithmic spirals are the basis for many forms in nature and in the architecture of man.

My sculpture strongly reflects geometric concepts. I did not intend to make a sculpture of squares when I designed, 'Square Balance'(photo. 1, pg. 2). I was concerned with each part relating to the next and to the overall design. Intentionally or not, geometric forms can always be found in sculpture.

ART INFLUENCES

Constructivism/Cubism

Two concepts I explored were constructivism and cubism. The first, constructivism, is a construction of mass and space that almost becomes a symmetrical exercise in design and purity of form. The simplification is in the use of planes; transparent, repeated, overlapped, interlocked, and combined, with the distribution and organization of spaces. I used this simplification in my designs. In 'Square Balance'(photo 1, pg. 2), the planes are repeated, overlapped and interlocked. The negative spaces connect creating more interrelationships. This constructive approach of manipulating planar surfaces activates the viewer to exercise a clear visual closure of the unstated forms and complete the image.

The additive process of building sculptures is a constructive attitude which has its roots in cubism. "Julio Gonzales, speaking of Picasso's 1908 cubist paintings: 'These paintings-all you would have to do is to cut them apart, the colors being only indications of different prerspectives, of inclined planes from one side or the other. Then you could assemble them according to the indications given by the color and find yourself in the presence of 'sculpture.'"[V]

[V] Ashton, Dore, Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views, (The Viking Press, 1972), p. 60.

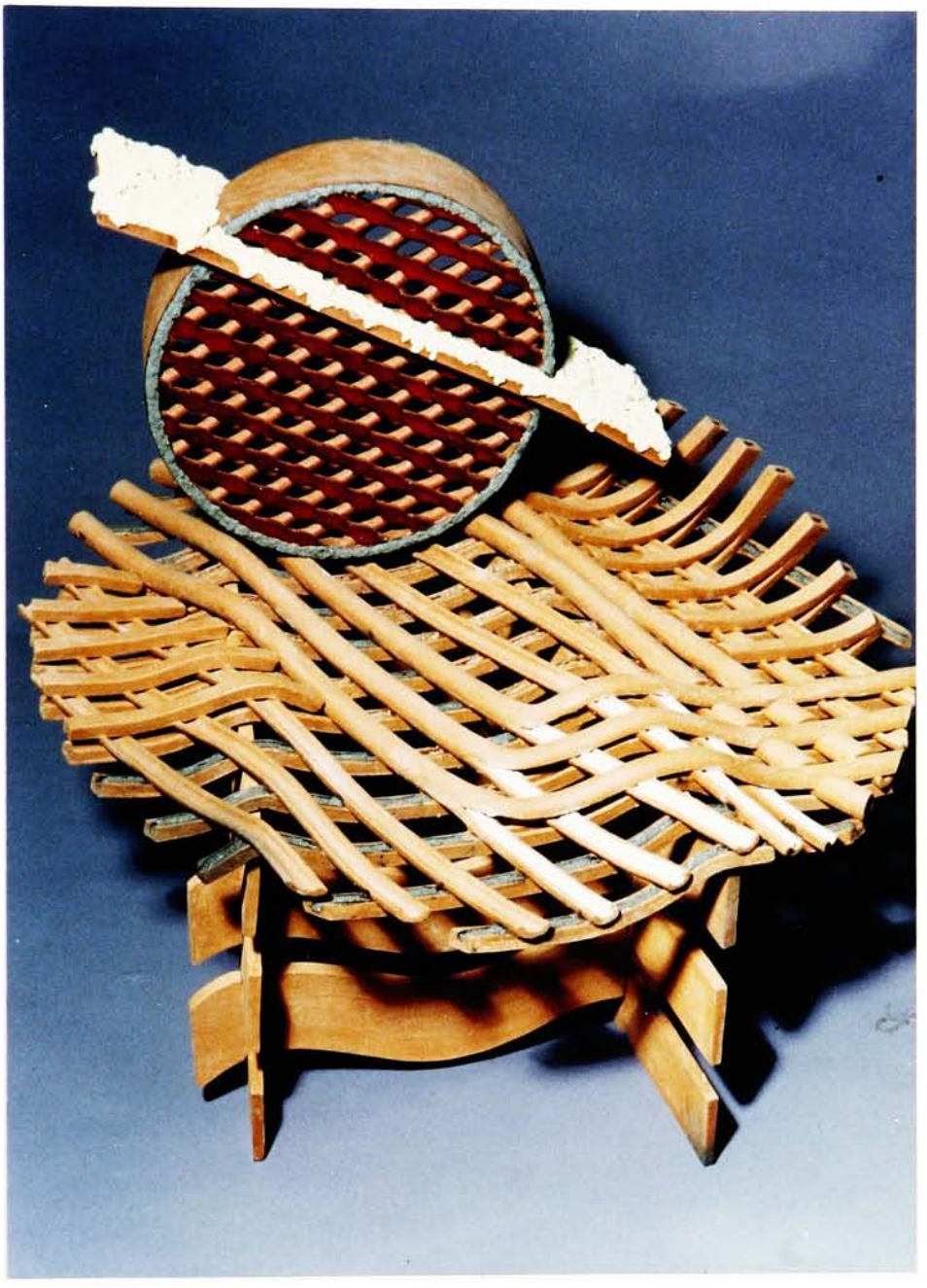

PHOTO 3 - TRANSPARENT RIPPLE

Cubism and constructivism were a point of departure as impressions of machines and technical objects became apparent. While working at a sheet metal factory I became interested in the inner structure of machines. Each part has a life of its own in design and function, and must also relate to the overall working system. I began to concentrate on machine-like abstractions and compositions of contrasting tensions. These were constructed by opposing lines, areas, three-dimensional forms, and color contrasts.

Kineticism

When approaching kinetic sculpture, such as that of George Rickey, an awareness developed of movement within each piece that has no connection with the mechanical movement he tried to convey. Captivated by the movement of shapes and spaces that move up and down in his sculptures, I attempted to convey this in my designs. In 'Transparent Ripple'(photo 3, pg. 8), the top and base have movement like waves in the ocean. The container has movement as it rolls through the wave. Each part relates to another, and to the negative spaces that become equally important as they form even more interrelationships.

Optical effects created by changes in line pattern can suggest new forms. My work includes positive and negative displacement, varying orientation of the lines , expression of movement by wavy lines, lines of varying thickness, interpretation of space by plays of perspective, projected shadows on opposition.

The idea is to get the attention of the viewer and compel their eye to wander in and around a piece, never to be left with a sense of completion. By using the pointed legs in 'Just a Dream'(photo 4, pg. 10), I intended to keep the viewers eye from stopping at the floor. Instead, the shape of the legs brings your eye back up into the piece and relates to the table and cups. Kineticism is then one means of continually transcending ideas of fixed objects by creating a dynamic environment.

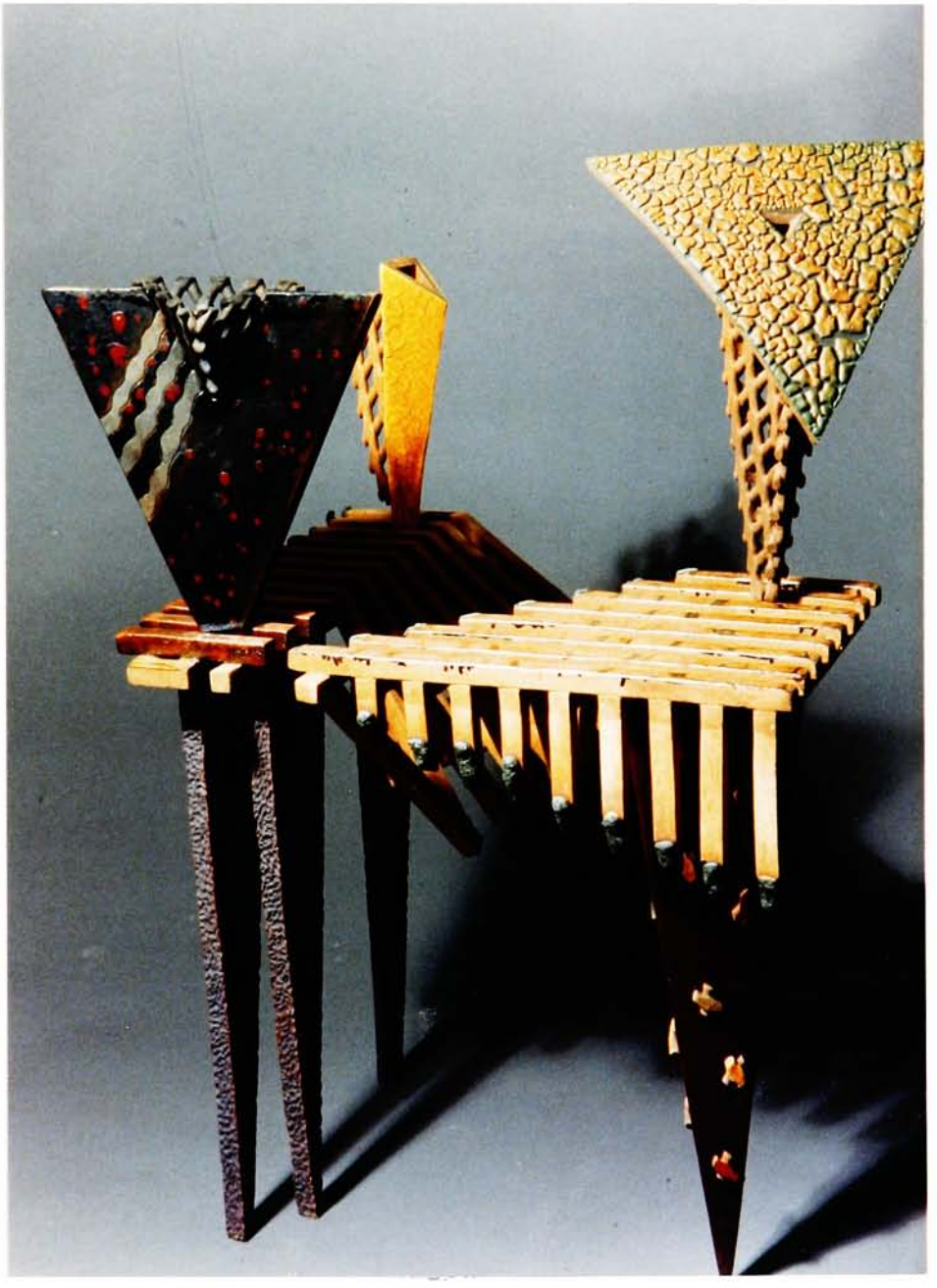

PHOTO 4 - JUST A DREAM

Tension

Visual tension was also used to create the illusion of movement. The presentation that surrounds a pitcher and cup implies a movement of liquid from one to the other and a direction of the poured liquid. The tension can be released by usage. In the stick cups and pitcher in 'Aftermath'(photo. 5, pg. 12), the tension is never dulled. This is related to the tilted position of the suspended cups which appears to defy gravity.

In 'Just a Dream'(photo. 4, pg. 10), the pointed legs create more anxiety. Will they be able to hold such a mass on points only? It explores the relationship between the base of a table and its top. The envisioned movement lies in whether it will fall or stand.

TECHNIQUE

Extrusion

The use of the extruder with clay is a departure from convention and permits the use of exciting new techniques and processes. Extruded clay can be left alone or altered, by cutting and reassembling with thrown or slab forms. Unusual curves are obtainable with a free approach to die design, and when coupled with the miter process of assembling squares, rectangles, or other geometric shapes, the variations seem endless. The extruder allowed me to gain a sense of transparency, (photo. 3, pg. 8), by enabling me to look through my forms and to enclose space without using solid clay walls.

Forms possible with the extruder have the potential for incredible stability. Using a grid pattern I was able to build sturdy table tops of considerable size. The strength of the grid structure enabled me to move the tops many times before and after firing, without warping or collapsing.

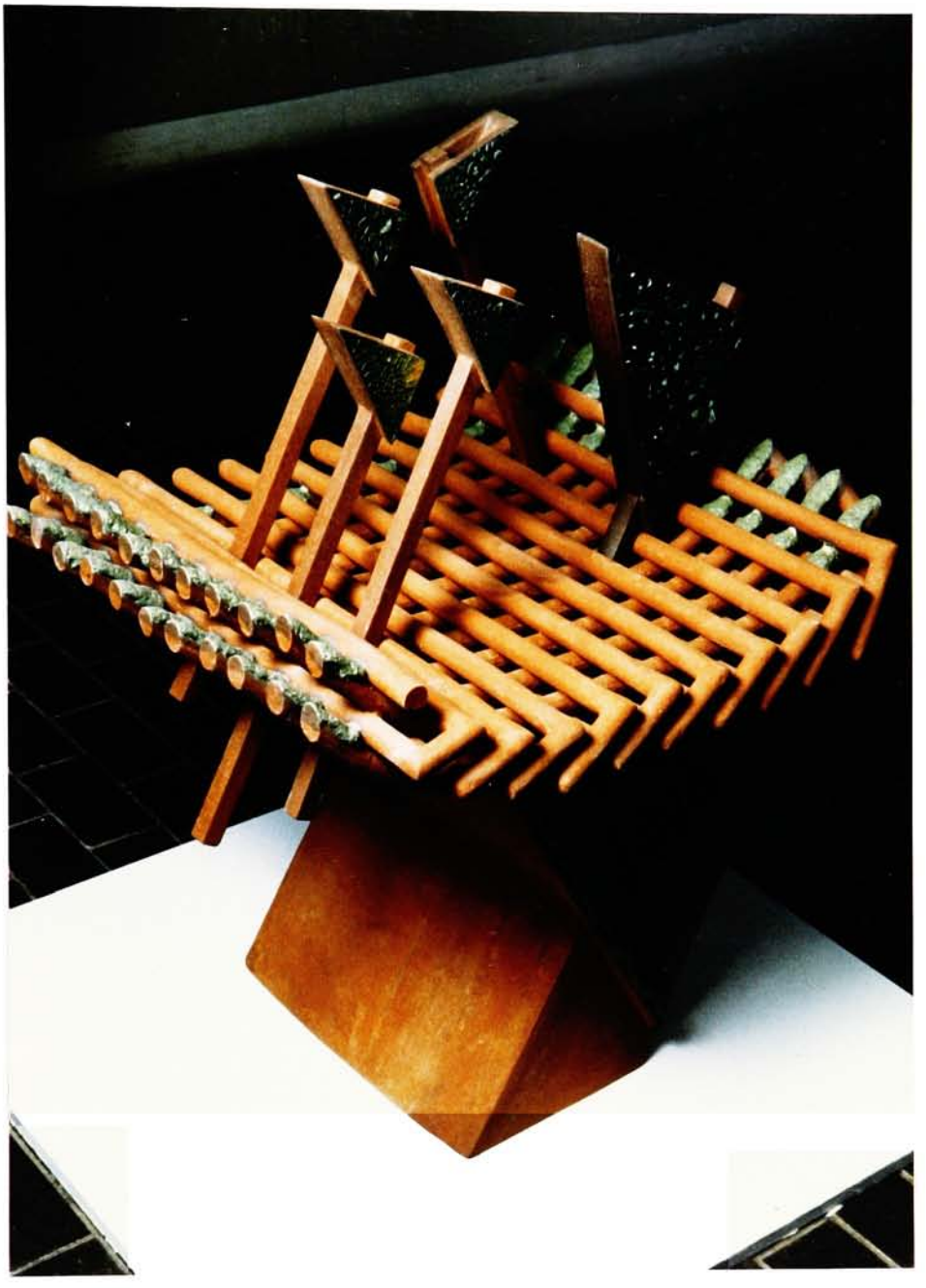

PHOTO 5 - AFTERMATH

In the past, the slab roller emerged as a tool that saved the artist valuable time which was freed for the creative process. The extruder further expands this potential. Learning to use the extruder requires more design discipline than physical. The extruder does not present the artist with a finished product, it is a tool just as the wheel is a tool for the potter. This tool combined with the slab roller can add many dimensions to ceramic sculpture.

Color and Texture

Clay has the ability to take on natural and applied color which further extends its scope. As an artist I have approached color aesthetics visually (impression), emotionally (expression), and symbolically (consruction). Color is used to enrich and embellish the work.

I had several considerations for the finished appearance; the natural color of the clay, the glaze, and the distribution of light and dark. These were considered alone and then together. The natural color of clay, especially low-fire red, has a raw beauty that can compliment a smooth glazed surface. My work was left with the natural surface, for the most part, with the glaze added for contrast to the finished forms.

Textures were obtained to change the look and feel, by adding sand to the clay and glazes. In 'Transparent Ripple'(photo. 3, pg. 8), the lid to the container is a good example of this texture. It provides sharp contrast with the gloss red glaze and the bare clay. The textures enhance the forms and intensify the expressions. As light falls on the work, and the distribution of lights and darks alter the color and create various hues and values. It defines and relates other elements within the object which creates visual texture. It is an illusion ocurring in an indirect manner.

ENVIRONMENT

The relationship of the component parts and the space around them is important. Each sculpture has its own presence that is a life of its own, its own environment. All the parts relate to the overall concept. In 'Aftermath'(photo. 5, pg. 12), each part has a meaning of its own and

relates to the overall design. The base is angled in the same manner as the handles and tops of the cups. The side of the grid top moves in the same direction. The depth line on the base connects to the depth line of the coiled table top.

"The bases of which Brancusi made many, were, it seems to me an effort to relate his sculpture to its situation on earth more directly than would merely placing them on stands. Without the illusion of horizons that stands give, they were his link to the actuality of sculpture, floor, and their surroundings. This intermediary between sculpture and space is perhaps equivalent to my concern with limits, the limits that define environment."[VII]

CONCLUSION

My work is not intended to function in the manner of the everyday objects from which they were derived. Each piece explores ideas of function relative to the environment and the boundaries of form as they relate to geometry. The ultimate goal was to identify universal absolutes regarding form and function that can transcend time.

It is essential as an artist to be cognizant of existing elements and their potentials and limitations, and also be attuned to other visual and natural phenomena. Balance, movement, proportion, transition, unity, opposition, distribution, variation, light systems, process and environment, are all important considerations. I use and misuse these precepts as the need and occasion arise. I am aware of perceived movement and how various elements affect the degree of this percerption. Furthermore, forms can be distributed and yet unified, be varied and in opposition, while still maintaining transition throughout the piece.

[VII] Hunter, Isamu Noguchi, p. 190.

Through this exploration I have learned that I sense and evolve rather than totally preconceive and execute, allowing my mind to conjure images and explore ideas. I let these images and ideas freely manifest themselves and create new forms and concepts that give substance to my thoughts. However, I cannot rely soley on instinct to evolve new realities, nor can I be governed by dogmatic systems of order. At the point instinct reaches a conscious level and can be controlled and exploited, the form created or the concept exploited is real and unique and takes on added significance.

It is evident that forms of everyday objects depend on several factors including; function, environment, technology, conscious art influences, and intuitive concepts such as geometry. The shapes of pitchers and tables of the future may be drastically different due to new technologies or changes in the environment ie. zero gravity. However, a pitcher will still be used to store and decant liquid and a table will still be used to hold a pitcher. Man will continue to identify with geometric forms and these forms will continue to appear in his everyday objects.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Clay:

Joann's Earthenware cone 04

Red Art	50
Gold Art	20
Talc	20
Pine Lake	10
	1% Barium
	5% Grog: 100 mesh mullite 10%
	35% mesh mullite 5%

Variation on above:

Red Art	60
Gold Art	10
Pine Lake	10
Talc	15
3124	5

<Try: 1 or 1/2% red iron oxide

Glazes:

Raku Crakle Glaze

Gerstley Borate	70
Talc	20
Ultrox	10

Graham's Black Brown Luster cone 04

White Lead	175
Neph Sy	39
EPK	13
Flint	48
Mang Carb	17
Red Iron Oxide	8

Conrad's Blue Matt cone 05 to 03 - ranges from a dark grey with turquoise speckles to an intense turquoise

Flint	53
Lithium Carb	26
Kaolin	12
Copper Carb	3.7
Soda Ash	3.3
Bentonite	2

Otto's Texture cone 04

White Lead	590	(62%)
P. Spar	190	(20%)
Barium Carb	90	(10%)
EPK	40	(4%)
Cornwall Stone	40	(4%)

ADD. 4-8% Cr = Red
4% PbCrO3 = Yellow
4% Fe = Mustard Brown
4% Cu = Green
4-6% KBiCrO3 = Orange red
1% Cu = Dk Blue
6% Rutile = Green Ochre

*Apply extremley thick for broken dry texture

Opaque Coral Red cone 04

White Lead	81.5
Kaolin	5.7
SiO2	9.7
Cr	3.1

*Add Red Potassium by Chromate for Green/Copper effect

Opaque White	cone 07-03
White Lead	24
Borax	35
Feldspar G-200	30
Whiting	60
Ball Clay T#5	6.25
Flint	11
Tin Oxide	5

*Add grog or sand to make a paste and apply. When fired it will have a rough texture. note: grog or sand can be added to other glazes for the same effect.

Duncan Lowfire Glazes:

Red - SP 912

Gunnmetal - AR 683

Midnight Fire - 20087

Black - GL 613

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