

DOGS HAVE MASTERS

BY

©2008

Todd F. Cero Atl

Submitted to the graduate program in Design,
and to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts.

Chairperson

Committee members

Date defended: _____

The Thesis Committee for Todd F. Cero Atl certifies
That this is the approved Version of the following thesis:

DOGS HAVE MASTERS

Committee:

Chairperson

Date approved: _____

The study and practice of ceramic art allows me to talk about intimate and universal experiences simultaneously. The corporal metaphor of clay, and the allegorical reference to earth are both inherent to the history of ceramics and both propel my research. Visually, they define my world and my role in it, but it's the language of pottery that has always built the foundation of my work because it is the language of survival, relationships, containment, protection, offering, and sacrifice. For me, working in clay is the equivalent to the writing of love poems in Sanskrit, unnecessary and overtly symbolic, yet unequalled in romantic translation. It does not matter how far I distance myself from "traditional" pottery making. I am always referencing the work back to this tradition.

The vignette I created, *Dogs Have Masters*, places a dog, an autobiographical metaphor in its sometimes self-destructive loyalty, confronting the human condition, which is visually explained by a piling of discarded tires that have been packed with red earth and then polished clean. The tires represent forward momentum, human ingenuity, adventure, escape and freedom. Visually they are the surface exteriors of the human experience. The iron-rich clay, desiccated, drawn and cracked, is packed into the tires' interiors and retains the memory of its maker. This encapsulated earth acknowledges our bond with the land, for we also, are packed with "mud" and the suggestion of momentum merely catapults us closer to our ultimate reunion with soil. However, loyalty, love and existential acceptance, allows this most human conundrum to become cloaked in gold. The

loyal sentry, who has the courage to “keep watch” despite a viral halo of accrued life experience, is placed in proximity to the one golden tire, his symbolic desire. So tethered to his desire, this guardian thus defines the source and boundaries of his existence, a further reference to the ceramic history of containment, real or implied. Artificial forms of happiness, as represented by the disco ball, serve only to distort the human condition, bringing no true “illumination,” offering rather only seeming, fleeting glimpses of clarity.

The imagery I chose was drawn from a wide range of influences: Japanese gardens of old Kyoto and their ingenious and often imaginative use of space; ancient Egyptian mythology with its systematic blueprint for journeys through an eternal afterlife; the phrasing and pace of the Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jimenez; the gay nightclubs of my youth with the coded messages of American jazz and blues music. I processed all these disparate ideas to create my own lexicon of imagery, focusing on the sameness of beliefs rather than the apparent differences in their cultural codes. I then linked this information to my own upbringing in the rural Midwest, and how I was taught to see and how those external forces forged my internal landscape. I could thus turn a junkyard dog--for one man’s trash is another man’s treasure--into the sentinel of my afterlife, standing guard by my tomb of detritus under the eternal rotation of the night sky. Much like the terra cotta tomb warriors of Han Dynasty China, the Ibo grave guardians of West Africa, and the Mimbres funerary bowls of the American Southwest.

A major component of my research lies in binary truths, in oppositions that create balance. Everything in life has its opposite, from physical phenomena to morality. And thusly, we distinguish and understand one truism from another, right and wrong, life and death, day and night. When a person is capable of experiencing extreme happiness and love, then its opposite holds true as well. Light is always balanced by shadows and darkness. The only thing one needs to fear of a dog is his master.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in my use of clay for this piece.

Commercially produced industrial porcelains that provide the Gordian knot atop the dogs head are placed in conjunction to the unfired terracotta that robs the tires of their assigned function, and transforms them into something new. These extremes of a singular material, that function as signposts along the path of communication and understanding, simultaneously providing the depth and width of my creative orbit. Here, opposite ends of the spectrum leading to the same sobering and perhaps unexpected conclusion: even in death, clay is man's best friend.

All pretense becomes lost in the act of repetition--repeatedly pinning cups, or stuffing clay into tires, or the continuous ringing of cathedral bells, and the constant swirl of reflected light from a rotated projection. Release is repetition. Repetition is release. I will repeat an act in much the same way that I will listen

to a song or repeat a word over and over again until each becomes senseless and loses all power of understanding. This repetition becomes the transducer for new ways of understanding for me; opaque beliefs with defined boundaries are rendered transparent and become mutable. Flowing freely from one to the other, they allow me to understand connections that would not be possible in a classic linear fashion. I understand the passion of the tire-biter, that dog who sits on the edge of the property waiting for vehicles to pass only to chase them down with Quixote-like abandonment, gladly protecting his master with utter contempt for danger or hurt. This dog's life is one continuous and eager offering of loyal and faithful companionship and devotion. This sentry, eternally on guard, stands in perpetuity, protecting his home from threat or harm.