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CONSCIOUSNESS IN CLAY

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CONSCIOUSNESS IN CLAY

By

SHARON ROBINSON, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER 2017

CONSCIOUSNESS IN CLAY

By

SHARON ROBINSON, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Consciousness in Clay is an exhibition consisting of seven tall ceramic sculptures and nine smaller works. Clay is the ideal medium for these designs; the plasticity during the making phase yields to the stoniness of the finished work and traps the hand movement. As life is my metaphor, the ambiguous forms leave much to the imagination— to thoughts of the natural world, and to ideas about color, rhythm, and harmony. Strong lines, undulations, fecundity, dark openings, negative-spaces, the phallic-symbol, and budding new life may all come to mind; but nothing finitely specific emerges. Using my knowledge of biology and microbiology as fertile ground for shapes and patterns makes this living territory infinite. Truth and beauty reveal themselves through a search committed over time, and *Consciousness in Clay* is the repository of that revelation for me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the people who helped me navigate my way to this important milestone. As the oldest of three children, my parents raised me to be a leader, to be independent, and to love nature. My father, Charley Vaughan, a fighter-pilot, sportsman, and genuinely fun guy, took the family on wilderness camping treks by horseback. These illuminating dramas were almost always dangerous, but we somehow all survived. My mother, Judie, taught me how to read (finally at the age of eight), since the teachers at school had all but given up on me. A love-affair with books developed (real, bound, paper books) and never left me. She also taught me how to snorkel-dive along the coral reefs in Hawaii, complete with the taxonomy and dangers of the local fish, eels, and other lurking predators. These combinations of travel, adventure, and intelligence remain and help inform my work now.

In spite of my full-time job as a respiratory therapist at the hospital, and as a mother of two teenage boys, the ladies I ride horses with, Connie Fleckenstein, Jo Sidnell, Ruth Heino, and Cheryl Verner, unanimously recommended that I take Piero's class— "Just take it, you will love him!" That was almost twenty years ago. As my major

professor, Piero Fenci has been my mentor and friend for all these years and has introduced me to countless artists and people with similar interests. He said “You’ve got to get out of this cultural waste-land and go to some workshops!” I chose Alfred State College of Ceramics in New York and spent a wonderful summer session meeting his long-time friends and his mentors! I want to thank David Lewis for illuminating History and making it come alive for me. Ron King helped me gain confidence with my workmanship and public stance. Mark Sanders’s help with the supporting document was just the finishing touch I had hoped for. I would also like to thank Erik Ordaz for his tireless help with my computer skills.

During graduate school, my husband Quinn gave me encouragement when I needed it most. It couldn’t have been easy watching me writhe and squirm after the brutal critiques, or hearing the dumpster clang when I threw away a semester’s worth of work after finally seeing the errors of my way. Now, I am confident in my work but still practice “sensible potting” by being a good editor— since ceramic objects last forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS.....	4
The Artwork Shoji Hamada.....	4
Ken Ferguson.....	5
Beatrice Wood.....	6
John Gill.....	6
THE WORK.....	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	25
VITA.....	26

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	<i>Slice of Tea no. 7</i>	9
Figure 2.	<i>Drink the Water</i>	10
Figure 3.	<i>Lips of Venus</i>	11
Figure 4.	<i>Eleganté vulgaris</i>	12
Figure 5.	<i>Amore Verdant</i>	13
Figure 6.	<i>Dreaming of Kandinsky's Blue</i>	14
Figure 7.	<i>When the Fat Lady Sings</i>	15
Figure 8.	<i>Cut</i>	16
Figure 9.	<i>Slice of Tea no. 5</i>	17
Figure 10.	<i>Less is More</i>	18
Figure 11.	<i>Small Basket</i>	19
Figure 12.	<i>Dark Knotted Basket</i>	20
Figure 13.	<i>Still Alive in Time</i>	21
Figure 14.	<i>Blue Dervish</i>	22
Figure 15.	<i>The Yellow Jacket</i>	23
Figure 16.	<i>Clouds</i>	24

INTRODUCTION

Growing up as an Army “brat,” I lived in seventeen different places and was actually born in Germany; my father had been born in China. These facts alone opened my eyes and interests at a young age. I enjoyed making mud pies in Tennessee, wild-mushroom hunting in Illinois, and riding horses through the forests in Virginia. How did these interests coalesce later in life with my love for clay, for creating forms and for using nature’s elegant transitions as the inspiration for the decorative vessels in this exhibition? It came from a love for life and the way things grew: consider budding, vines, tendrils, eggs, spores and sex. Desiring a more intuitive approach to vessel making, I practiced on the potter’s wheel for years until I mastered the techniques for simple forms. Bringing in ceramic’s history of use, its tactile and visual richness, and a high regard for large decorative vessels allowed me to move forward, to free myself from the constraints of making utilitarian-ware.

The potter’s wheel is my primary tool. I am able to produce the work more efficiently than with slab or coil-building; the parts can be cut up or stacked any number of ways, sculptural attachments may be added, and so on. The Zen method of mastering a discipline until it becomes second-nature guides me. I know this works,

because I have learned how to jump horses over obstacles or break a board with the top of my foot. Eugen Herrigel's classic book, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953), is a wonderful example of how he transcends technique so that the art becomes an "artless art" which grows out of the Unconscious. Weaving together the scientific and philosophical ideas of Henri Bergson, Carl Jung, and Vassily Kandinsky, I hope a deeper element, both thoughtful and spiritual, informs my artwork. I believe the natural world and the psychical (spiritual) world are connected through our innermost energy: what Jung calls *libido*, Bergson calls *élan vital*, and what I consider my soul. Thus, I wish to direct this creative energy, proceeding from consciousness into the realms of unconscious activity (especially if it is indeed a Jungian collective-unconscious), to bridge the gap between intuition and intelligence. A dualism exists, but how does one possess extreme technical capability and still manage to leave the known path? Zen philosophy answers the question: with practice, ten years at least! The artist—and indeed her audience—should look back and see patterns emerging from the work. How do these patterns evolve? A point needs to be reached where the doing becomes automatic—it just happens. The energy flows and the transitions from one plane or line to the next appear seamless.

In terms of my artwork, I am trying to navigate my way through the peripheral, to use my vital energy, to make the work shine brightly. If Kandinsky can relate line to

time in music, and color to the high and low notes, I can infuse the naturalistic world around me with my creative energy and use the collective-mud of the earth to make sculpture. These vessels are endowed with my life-spirit and should look like they are confident in their own existence.

Ideas and memories come together over a lifetime. I hope the primacy of life-affirming pleasure, humor and play are evident in my work, tying my childhood interests and scientific mind together with sculpture.

INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

I choose to look at earlier artists doing the type of art that interests me. I am part of this time-line, too. It gives me a voice and a starting place regarding form and style.

The Artwork of Shoji Hamada

Shoji Hamada, the famed “Japanese National Treasure,” has been a great inspiration. I remain fascinated by the way he worked with clay. He was a potter who carried forward the ancient way, while at the same time making the studio-life approachable for modern artists. He demonstrated how the clay can be gathered and aged, methods of throwing pots “off-the-hump,” how glazes are made from wood-ashes, different glazing techniques, and how the whole community worked together when firing the huge *anagama* (wood-fire) kiln.

I may not mine my own clay, but I like mixing it myself from bags of raw materials. This mixing gives me the assurance of knowing which ingredients are actually present and also keeps me from being too frugal with the use of the clay. Hamada’s quiet, patient manner remains with me, leading me into all aspects and processes

of working with clay. Every phase of creating the work is important. The outcome does not need to be “perfect” as in mass production. It will have an *imperfect beauty*, an integral part of the Japanese aesthetic. These imperfections add a contemplative essence to the work, giving it lasting charm. Some people intentionally do things to make their work imperfect, but I prefer for these “accidents” to occur spontaneously. The wonderful feeling of opening a kiln after a firing is better than anticipating Christmas. The surprises and successes balance out, somehow. Even if only one or two pots out of the whole firing sing with beauty, it is enough for me.

Ken Ferguson

Ken Ferguson’s tall, strong, suggestive vessels were made primarily on the wheel, and then the thrown pieces were used to hand-build larger pots. He believed in mastering the wheel and said, “If you go through the discipline of learning to throw well, glaze and fire a kiln, you are deeply into the medium. Then you have a product, something people can hold in their hands—you can sell it.” These words ring true for me—I enjoy being “deeply in the medium,” going through the paces and getting really dirty and tired. I use his methods for building my work, and, as a result, now have tall, strong pots instead of safe, short ones.

Beatrice Wood

Beatrice Wood was just my kind of woman! She was born in 1893 and lived to be 105 years old. Beatrice kept working and having solo shows each year until her death. It was rumored that she worked in the studio the day before she died. Learning about making luster-glazes from the Nagles, (who were brilliant chemists in the glaze room) served her well throughout her career. She made exquisite functional pots, some with sculptural additions like faces or little bodies for decoration. Each one seemed special. Her methods of pricing her work ranged from reasonable to unreasonable. If she loved it, it was very expensive. Beatrice once said: "I, who wanted danger, adventure, and love." She had an exciting and fulfilling life, and I can't think of a better role-model.

John Gill

Professor John Gill, head of the Ceramics Department at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, helped open my mind to the potential shapes clay can assume. I met him during the summer session for his *Morphology of Shape* workshop at Alfred. John recommended spending time in the reserved book sections of good libraries. Looking back through history is critical for artists as those who came before us knew a great deal about form, function, and beauty. Professor Gill uses ideas from past cultures and allows drawing, architecture, nature, colors of every hue,

and clay to work together, culminating in stunning sculptures. His workshop lectures still keep me fresh. If I stall-out intellectually, I know just what to do. Change is important. The morphology of shape by these re-combinations can breathe life into the work. My favorite quote by him is: "All colors work together, some just have to work harder than others."

An interesting pattern has developed. Ken Ferguson was John Gill's teacher. Later, when John was at Alfred, he and Piero Fenci were in graduate school together and sat across from each other. Then, much later, I showed up for the summer workshop and noticed how things fit together. It makes me proud to know them and to continue the tradition. Someday, a future potter can look back and say, "Wow, Sharon studied with Piero, and he knew Gill and Ferguson, and, they all loved Hamada!"

THE WORK

Work for the exhibition, *Consciousness in Clay*, made with various clay bodies and fired in a variety of atmospheres, is presented here. The decision regarding which kiln to use is made with consideration for the clay body and the glazes—and their melting points— and for the final appearance of the vessel. Diversity is key. The knot motif appears regularly and references points of attachment for the energetic appendages.

Slice of Tea no. 7



Fig. 1 2017, cone six oxidation, 14" x14" x 8"

Ambiguity, playfulness, and a history-of-use decorate this sculpture. I enjoy making art that I can live with.

Drink the Water



Fig.2

2017, cone six oxidation, 19 x 10 x 6

Tactile surfaces, useful yet comical additions, and a stylish pose animate this vessel. The ambiguous spout is only a knob and is not for pouring. Figure-eight lips form an opening to the bottle and give it character. The folds on the rim as opposed to the standard pottery rims used in utilitarian-ware are an attempt to open wide the potential for design.

Lips of Venus



Fig. 3 2017, cone six reduction, 28"x 12" x 8"

The supple nature of clay is demonstrated here with curving lines, soft folds, and exaggerated size. The softness turns to stone upon firing the work. I enjoy the juxtaposition of smooth satin linings with textured outer surfaces. The tall elegant form is noticeable from a distance. It rewards the viewer, upon closer inspection, with carved details and a sensuous interior glaze.

Amore Verdant



Fig. 5 2017, cone six oxidation, 23" x 12" x 8"

Anticipating use, the cool colors and entwining pose of *Amore Verdant* reminds me of Edward Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, the cool shade, and men drinking wine with women. If it were pink or red, would the message be the same?

Dreaming of Kandinsky's Blue



Fig. 6 2017, cone 10 oxidation, 20" x14" x12"

If line and time can be music, and color can express the high and low notes, what type of jazzy, raucous sound would this vessel create? It only dreams of its historical roots.

When the Fat Lady Sings



Fig. 7 2017, cone six soda-fire, 19" x 7" x 5"

Slices and holes perforate *When the Fat Lady Sings*, and introduce a new way of looking at the bottle. Prompted by music and singing in four-part harmony, I carved the holes. Resonating basses, calming altos, bright tenors, and finally, the highest notes of the soprano pierced my imaginary world.

Cut



Fig. 8 2017, cone 6 oxidation, 16" x 12" x 8"

Slices of color accent graphite-blackness and encourage contemplation. The spaces left behind when considering negative-space are still mentally tangible, as in the entrance to a cave. Even after you leave the site, the space of the opening still stands for something.

Slice of Tea no.5



Fig. 9 Secondary-reduction, 2016, 10" x 12" x 6"

The inside and the outside of the vessel are equally important. Here is a view in which both can be appreciated, allowing a playful arrangement of positive and negative spaces. An area in the middle is left unglazed to allow the carbon to be trapped in the bisque-ware and to turn it black. The glazed portion crackles and develops a metallic luster from the reaction during the smoking phase of the firing.

Less is More



Fig. 10

2017, cone 6 reduction, 18" x 6" x 6"

This tall narrow bottle stands on its own merit. Everything it needs to say is done with as little interference as possible; it has simple carving, minimal glazing, and an ability to let gravity call the shots.

Small Basket



Fig. 11 2017, cone 6 oxidation, 12" x 5" x 5"

Small Basket has a lot going on when considering form and surface, so the glazing was kept monochromatic. A small drip of contrasting color, spilling out from the inside, enlivens the simple color-palette, without taking away from the form.

Dark Knotted Basket



Fig. 12 2017, cone 6 oxidation, 16" x 9" x 6"

Subdued, muted colors draw attention to the gestural movements developed during the making.

Still Alive in Time



Fig. 13

2017, cone 11 oxidation, 15" x 12" x 8"

Gouges, scrapes, and scars mar the surface of this strong form — as if it survived unearthing from a previous life. The matte glaze works well, emphasizing the roughness of the clay's surface. Inside, a silky-white lining invites the viewer to imagine its potential use; while at the same time, the exaggerated scale, unusual handle, and ridiculous spout negate its functionality.

Blue Dervish



Fig. 14

2017, cone 10 oxidation, 8" x 3" x 3"

The *Blue Dervish* portrays energy. The incised lines slashing across the form help direct the eye and mind towards movement.

The Yellow Jacket



Fig. 15 2017, cone 6 oxidation, 7" x 5" x 3"

Molten craters decorate *The Yellow Jacket*. I love how the dripping glaze was interrupted and "frozen" in time. Pretzel-like handles add an element of whimsy.

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VITA

Sharon J. Robinson was born in Würzburg, Germany, August 13, 1956, the first of three children of Charles U. and Judith A. Vaughan. She graduated with a B.S. degree from Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, in 1978. After nearly thirty years as a Licensed Respiratory Therapist, in 2001 she continued to work as she entered Stephen F. Austin State University for art classes, completing the leveling work required for Graduate School. In 2014, Sharon was accepted into the Stephen F. Austin Graduate Program seeking a Master of Fine Arts Degree. As a student, she maintained an active exhibition record, including many juried shows and group exhibitions, both locally and in other states. She was awarded a Master of Fine Arts degree in December 2017.

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