IMAGERY AND FORM

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the

University of North Texas in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Steven L. Phillips, B.F.A.

Denton, Texas

May 1994

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

For the past several years, my concerns in the visual arts have led me to work in two areas, ceramics and painting. Until recently, I treated both areas separately. My ideology about painting was limited to using graphic materials on a two dimensional rectangular sheet of paper or canvas; ceramics was limited to the traditional wheel-thrown, glazed vessel.

My influences and artistic sensitivities in painting naturally pushed me toward abstraction; primarily the development and search for interrelationship of formal concerns. Aesthetic considerations of subject, form, content and occasionally incorporating social/political concerns formed the basis of my work. As my work evolved, my approach to imagery became more intuitive or expressive, opposed to a tight rendering of a subject. However, the imagery was still contained within the limitations of the two dimensional picture plane.

Work in clay, on the other hand, was primarily centered around the disciplines and skill of the wheel. Initially, my responses and concerns were strictly opposed to those of painting. My training in ceramics focused on making a "good" classical pot with emphasis on shape, weight and function. My painterly attitudes were temporarily satisfied with a glazed surface.

My previous academic environment supported my notions of a separate and sometimes equal attitude toward ceramics and painting. Exploring both disciplines simultaneously, it was my belief that I could work as well at one as the other. I maintained a loose approach in painting and a tightly controlled approach in ceramics. Experiencing marginal success with both ventures, I only recently realized that keeping both separate but equal concepts didn't make me a better artist. Instead, the substitution of one attitude for another limited my own sensibilities and possibilities for exploration.

Presently, my focus in ceramics has challenged me to explore avenues and approaches which tear down the parameters separating these philosophies. Painting, for me is no longer restricted to the format of the canvas. I better understand that all the mastery of skills involved in throwing a well balanced form does not necessarily make a good pot. Limiting those possibilities in either painting or ceramics often times can leave the form static and impersonal. This period has enabled me to open my eyes a little wider to the creative possibilities of clay (its legitimacies as art and/or craft). The only boundaries of clay are those I make.

However narrow my aesthetic vision for painting/graphic composition and the ceramic vessel has been prior to this period, both the integration and the development of the two disciplines are important to me. Questions of whether or not this is a new idea are immediately put aside when looking at

the historical context of ceramics and how the graphic image is used. Ceramic artists don't become recognized by simply reinventing the wheelthrown form, but by using it as an element in their work. What sets these artists apart, in addition to certain advances in form, are their individual marks made in and on the surface of the clay. I figuratively compare this to the way painters still find individual comments using traditional subjects such as the figure or landscape.

Statement of Problem

My exploration centered around the concept of using the wheelthrown form as a ground or "canvas" for creating a more dominant graphic statement. The purpose of this investigation examined formal issues relating to the surface of the vessel and the form itself. The work was conceived of with the idea of making the vessel a more individualized visual statement so that it wouldn't be interpreted as a "decorated pot". I addressed the following questions:

1. What relationships can be established between the two dimensional graphic work and the three dimensional wheelthrown form.

2. How does altering the symmetry of the form through the addition or subtraction of its mass, with relation to its graphic statement change the visual impact of the work.

3. How can the graphic images reflect or change the functional content of the form?

Methodology

For the purposes of this problem, I chose two wheelthrown forms that integrated abstracted graphic imagery.

1. The platter form.

2. The narrow footed vessel that bulges out and then back into a closed or narrow opening.

I created eight of each form utilizing contemporary firing techniques. The subject of the imagery utilized abstracted design, recognizable imagery and text. Image/vessel design and formal considerations were explored, as well as, possible social/political concerns. The imagery included techniques of carving, sgrafitto, relief, stamped text, brushed and sprayed colorants and slips.

CHAPTER II

INVESTIGATION

I broke the project into four groups of work. Each documented group dealt with different aspects of the questions raised in the Statement of Problem. Pertinent information was gained by sometimes comparing or contrasting them with one another. Works in Group I included:

1.   <u>Streams of Consciousness #1</u>, vessel, Fall 1993.

2.   <u>Streams of Consciousness #2</u>, vessel, Fall 1993.

3.   <u>Bigmouth</u>, platter, Fall 1993.

All three forms are thrown symmetrically, with no alteration, reemphasizing the curvilinear nature of the form and the proportional transitions from foot to rim. The claybody is a traditional stoneware body fired in oxidation with little grog. Surface texture is smooth and interrupted only with strategic banding within the body of vessels #1 and #2 and the rim of platter #3. Using a black slip, the imagery was created on the three works in a stream of conscious manner with no preconception of the composition.

In vessels #1 and #2 abstracted imagery (masks, fish, windows to name a few) were used, but because of an emphasis on positive/negative, figure/ground reversal without one dominating the other, the subject of the design becomes ambiguous and pattern like. The composition is structured

upon the shoulder of the vessels radiating out and around the rim. The graphic composition's structure and inherent framing by the vessel's parts serve to reiterate the dominant qualities of the form upon which it rests. The graphic composition doesn't alter the function of the form and the overall visual impact of the composition seems subordinate.

Within platter #3, the symmetry of the form further serves as a type of framing of the asymmetrical image it surrounds. The platter's utilitarian function is altered only because of the porous and nonvitreous manner in which the surface is treated. The addition of color and sgrafittoed marks (lines scratched through the slip) along with the black slip brushwork might add to the visual impact but does little in the way of changing the platter's original content.

On all three forms, the two-dimensional qualities of the images were reinforced by the lack of physical alteration of the vessel. The compositional structure in each functions separately from that of the form. The asymmetrical qualities of the graphic design are unable to change the form's overall "tight" symmetrical nature. In each case, the graphic composition surrenders itself to the form.

Two aspects of the imagery in these works became prominent, distinguishing themselves throughout the project. This first aspect was the recurring motifs within the images of vessels #1, #2 and platter #3 including: the window, fish and calligraphic symbol. The previously utilized

calligraphic symbol relates to both text and different layers of meaning. However, the window and the fish were recent motifs and their dominant reoccurrence here stirred me emotionally. In analyzing both, I found many references to my own childhood that I've carried continuously into adulthood. Windows contained my dreams and separated them from reality; something I might look through to see my innermost thoughts or fantasize about what road I might like to be on. Visually, they relate to the layering of images and allow the viewer only partial access to what's behind them. Fish bring back the best of my memories of childhood, as well as symbolize paradoxically for me, both the symbolic harmony or truth in nature and also the intense struggle paramount in life. The reoccurence of these images provided me inspiration as I moved into the next group of works.

The second aspect centered around how emotionally moved I was by the relationship of the void (refers to the negative space created by an opening through the surface of the form) enclosed by the rim and surrounded by the composition in #1 and #2. Viewing the graphic design from the top of the form, the void becomes a more critical aspect of the compositional activity. This realization fueled my desire to integrate the void further.

Despite these two critical realizations, there was still a lack of fulfillment toward my original intention. The forms were still very "tight" and traditional in appearance. Because of this, the relationships between the image and form were still weak. I realized that alteration of the form might

be more necessary than I expected. I had previously resisted altering the form, fearing a contrived result.

Ironically, as I ended this group of works, I attended a workshop in Houston given by American ceramic artist Don Reitz. In all honesty, the importance of this event towards the rest of this problem's development cannot be left unmentioned. A great deal of the ideology that he shared entered my work in a way that reading or looking for visual sources couldn't have done. I was familiar with Don Reitz through the course of my studies but his work had little direct impact on me. Although his shared methodology and encouragement towards everyone struck me, his sense of honesty about the human spirit and his philosophy about the clay medium is what really motivated me.

Up to that point, I had not heard of a single ceramist refer to the form as a "visual image". With Reitz, the image and the form seemed to be a means to the same end. From the beginning, the image seemed as much a part of the form or a reaction to it, not preconceived in a step-by-step plan. I'd always worked on a more intuitive level with the image, but this was the first time that I ever considered the intuitive combination of form and image. I came away from the "shop" inspired in a way that I hadn't been before. It was refreshing to see someone who was clearly reverent of function shrug off the "pottery baggage" with a wave of the hand and remind the group that it was only clay.

The platters within this group became a necessary first step, better relating the image to the form. The inherent two-dimensional nature of the platter form, with most of its visual impact facing the viewer, led to a more direct approach to the graphic composition that was employed. Works in Group II included:

4. The Big Gulp, platter, Fall 1993.

5. Symbol, Signature, X, platter, Fall 1993.

6. Intuitive Symbolage, platter, Fall 1993.

7. Tribute to Don Reitz, Energy Made Physical, platter, Spring 1994.

8. Tactile Strut, platter, Spring 1994.

With the exception of platters #7 and #8, the above platters follow the linear track that I have been trying to maintain within the paper. By the time #7 and #8 were created, I was well into the group of forms discussed in Group III. I began to work with a warm color claybody in this group that would be utilized throughout the remaining series of forms.

In each of these forms I utilized a rim with a strong linear character. This reiterates the thrown characteristic of the form, but was altered to redirect the viewers attention into the body of the plate (the compositional area). This alteration interrupts the ideas of both utilitarian function and the nature of a framed image.

In both platter #4 and #6, I subdivided the round format with fragments of a strong rectilinear one. Coupling this with contrast of hue and

texture, this treatment aluded to spatial variation and created a visual tension within the work.

The postmodern ideology of using text in platter #4 helped redirect the content relationship of the form away from its original function in a way that is better described within Group IV. For now, I will point out that my purpose was to use the text ironically, to make fun of the very contemporary trends that I was utilizing within this piece. In formal terms, however, its textual surface reiterates the form's graphic purpose, whether viewed for reading or texture. It places the form in the context of aesthetic function rather than that of a traditional utilitarian function. This idea is further explored by juxtaposing the text with the "windowed" layering using the fish and the empty hook (previously mentioned in Group I).

The remaining works within the group explored the use of the symbol or calligraphic shape in a manner associated with that of Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism; both considered Modernist philosophies. The calligraphic shape/symbol was explored frequently by painters within both artistic movements. The calligraphic symbol's stylized textual nature is something I have utilized for years. Within the context of modern philosophy, the calligraphic shape or symbol has been recognized important as a compositional object in and of itself.

Platter #6 exhibits a direct painterly approach; exhibiting variation in the use of subjective color and texture within its compositional field. The

window motif becomes an actual piercing of the clay and serves as a void. The void further subverts the ideology of traditional function and balances the strong interruption of the platter's rim opposite the void.

Platters #5, #7 and #8 further explore the use of the void including further reduction of pictorial elements active within the format. The cutout shapes are repositioned within the composition. Contrasting hues are deemphasized in #5 and #7 to reiterate the relief quality of the image and the significance of the symbols in relief. In #8 the symbols are reduced to two complementary hues within the field. Using a method of sprinkling powdered clay on the wet surface of the platters, I attained a pebbly surface texture which helps maintain interest within the compositional area.

Using the physical alteration and painterly techniques described helped me detach myself from the pure mystique of the thrown form. I began seeing the form more for its own formal qualities within the context of image as opposed to traditional functional form. The challenge that still confronted me was that of the vessel with its three-dimensional nature.

The vessels of this next group were conceived with the idea of changes in scale and utilizing construction of thrown parts opposed to a single thrown form. With these forms, the sections were created asymmetrical. These changes further deemphasized the mystique of the thrown form and altered my approach from that of preconceived vessel to a form that grew more intuitively. Works in Group III included:

9.   Life, It Rocks I, Tribute to Josh and Cole, vessel, Spring 1994.

10.   Life, It Rocks II, Tribute to Josh and Cole, vessel, Spring 1994.

11.   Blue Skies Forever, vessel, Spring 1994.

12.   Sandy Beach Memories I, vessel, Spring 1994.

13   Sandy Beach Memories II, vessel, Spring 1994.

I should point out that my transition to this group of vessels was not an immediate one. Considering the transition works as test pieces, I did not think they were successful enough to include in the context of the problem. They were important only for the technical information they provided me about construction, slip application and firing range. One important discovery was that the alteration of joined symmetrical parts proved to be tentative at best. The resulting change in scale set up new challenges that I had not previously considered. The forms seem to become more sculptural. It forced me to approach the form in a more physical manner.

Within vessels #9 and #10, these changes in construction and scale helped me overcome a lot of "pottery baggage" about the manipualtion of the form I'd been carrying around. Height seems to be an important ego boost for some potters in attaining the skills of throwing. I honestly forgot about this during their construction and it almost proved a problem in firing the works for the exhibition. My own judgement of height was distorted enough that I misjudged the heights of vessels #12 and #13 by about 7 inches; forcing me to fire in a different kiln than originally scheduled.

Within all the works of this group, the integration of the image was conceived of with the same ideas in mind as in the previous groups; no preconception at all. I decided that the imagery should respond to the form while under construction, opposed to a form/image step-by-step alternative. This seemed to be the next logical step in developing the iconography, an evolution away from it. I utilized the voids (stemming from the windows and rim relationship in Group I) too open the concealed interior; both inviting the viewer to peer inside and also set up sharp graphic value contrasts as a result of the cutout shapes. The cutouts were sometimes attached as reliefs on the surface or a tool was utilized to stamp an image. This created changes in the symmetry of the form and served to pull the viewer around it in a pictorial sense. I subtracted areas and added areas, occasionally penetrating the vessels contour to help breakup its plane.

As I recognized various associations within the imagery, some motifs were transformed from non representational shapes to abstracted characters. This eventually set up a recognizable kind of narrative, which continued in Group IV. The direct application of colored slips helped isolate shapes and planes adding two dimensional spatial interplay within the form as well. Although the form still dominates the character of the imagery, it seems better coordinated with it than the works in Group I.

The latter stages of construction with vessels #9 & #10, caused me to further analyze the importance of key coded parts (coded referring to the

individual functions of rim, body and so on). To these, I attached a strongly proportioned neck with contrasting color to reiterate the thrown aspect of the form. This seemed necessary to reestablish the work as an identifiable vessel rather than a sculptured form. It was a step I felt important in capping or framing the composition here. The neck/rim added to the metaphorical association with that of the human figure.

Vessels #12 & #13, differentiated intentionally with the neck area becoming part of the compositional framework and the rim narrowed for visual closure. I contrasted the part relationships with those of the prior vessels to see which might work better. I found that this value judgement made it only different not better.

In every piece within this group, I feel that the integration of image and form unified better in a formal sense than in those created in Group I. Physical alteration of the forms in Group III helped to add an animated quality that was less static visually than those of Group I. The alteration, completed in conjunction with the image, contributes to the visual impact but also, establishes the individuality of the form as well. Image/form relationships seem tighter and not so separate in this latter group. The overall traditional function of the vessel is slightly changed through the subtraction and creation of voids.

The focus of the imagery within this group of forms centers around the use of text. This was briefly exemplified by #4 in Group II. Works in

Group IV included:

14.   French Persuasion, platter, Spring 1994.

15.   Coded Play, platter, Spring 1994.

16.   Text Surfer, platter, Spring 1994.

The use of text evokes different responses with individual viewers. Some might read text for content, while others distinguish it more for textural variation or how it fits structurally in the form. Those viewers perceiving text for its visual qualities might think it too demanding to interpret. While I don't discount those opinions, I argue that its content/form relationship is sometimes unavoidable and shouldn't go unmentioned.

I singled out these works to examine an aspect of the text that relates formally with image/form content (a valid part of question #3 related in Chapter 1). The separation of this group from that of Group II came linearly, but also contextually as I arrived at the image/form relationship of the works through recent art/historical philosophy; chiefly the ideologies surrounding Postmodernism.

Although Postmodern philosophy attempts to declare itself antiformal with its pluralist point of view, the fact that it has filtered through the academic system for the last twenty five years or more makes it less antiformal and more another strategy from which to create form. Like Marcel Duchamp, anti-formalist as he was, the analyzing and reanalyzing of his work has made him academic by today's standards.

Modernist philosophy sets up this form as an independent object unto itself with its own set of codes. The Postmodern ideology undermines the object and textual code, changing traditionally based relationships of established codes. The text I've integrated within the form (in this case the platter) impersonalizes it. This happens to the extent that the forms original function as seen formally can no longer exist on its own. The meaning of the text and the seemingly double-play of words as image, change the content of the form from that of independent object existing philosophically on its own to that of a mere part interdependent upon the text (and other parts) for interpretation. By the same token, the text doesn't exist as a sign in and of itself. It plays an equal part within the web of framework that supports the form's (platters) original traditional function.

For example, the double coding of text in #15 includes a phrase referencing "Levi-Strauss". "Levi-Strauss" refers to jeans only by the viewers known association of the phrase "wearing my". In reality Levi-Strauss is also a French philosopher well known for his contribution to Structuralist philosophy. "How about them cowboys" becomes quite a joke when associating Levi-Strauss the philosopher. At any rate, this coupled with the content layering of other parts of the imagery, some indeterminable even by me, makes the function of the platter become less dependent upon itself for interpretation and more a part of the overall system inherent with parts attached to it. Irregardless, the forms associated content is altered.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION OF THE PROBLEM

Depending upon your philosophical point of view, it seems evident that the subjective nature of this problem-in-lieu-of-thesis will lead to a few arguable points. Most of the points seem clear cut, such as the conclusions I reached through the alteration of form most evident in Groups II & III. Those conclusions seem to relate well with the formalist/modernist philosophy inherent in most academic training. The point of view point of view I took with Group IV might appear less conclusive to some. Its postmodern philosophy differs from that of accepted formal theory. In all cases however, my primary concern was to focus on the forms with the ideology in mind of finding answers to the questions posed in the Statement of Problem.

I tried my best not to place value judgements upon any particular point of view referencing one as better than the other. For some traditional forms have a stronger appeal, for others, altered forms work best and still for others philosophy seems the way out. My intention was to explore each of these areas in such a way as to examine how these interrelationships occur. It seems to me that all of those options are pertinent at any given time. My clear bias when relating this problem has been to lean toward the last three groups opposed to the first. But for other reasons, I will from time-to-time

probably create forms that are exemplified in Group I.

The experiences received from broadening my approach to the integration of form/image taught me considerably more than I had first envisioned. Most of them were technical others were philosophical. The changes from Group I led to adjustments of claybody and and the desire to once-fire the works, eliminating the the traditional bisque firing. The larger scaled works forced me to consider other physical challenges paramount in the process, such as handling and firing. These were experiences that add to the character of the form as well. It was not clear to me until the conclusion of this paper that I would also explore some of the parameters set up historically including: Classical/traditional, modern and postmodern philosophies. These are three distinctly different philosophical avenues and I'm glad to have included them. The different challenges often appeared out of the blue and I met some with fear, but enthusiasm. For me personally, the greatest benefit was the exchange of knowlege I received from the help I received along the way.

ILLUSTRATIONS

I READ ABOUT DAVID SALLE AND JULIAN
SCHNABEL AND WHAT THE HELL MAKES
THEIR WORK SO DAMN GOOD, AS IF THEY'RE
THE GREATEST THING HIT THE ARTWORLD
SINCE WINE AND FRENCH
BREAD. WELL, VERNON FISHER
TELLING ME DECONSTRUCTING
MY POTS WAS MY BIG IDEA,
DOES HE KNOW EVERYTHING
NOT-T,, WHO CARES, I CARE
BY GOD DARN BLASPHEMY...
TEXT, SMECK. POSTMODERNISM
FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, WHATS
NEXT NEOMODERNISM,,GET A NEW LIFE,,, I SWEAR
PAINT DAMN TEXT ON A COW, WATCH IT RAIN
AND CALL IT DECONSTRUCTION WHAT,
ABOUT THE COW, DOES IT GET A SHARE
OF THE GRANT TOO.. HELL, MAYBE I
COULD GET A GRANT FISHING,
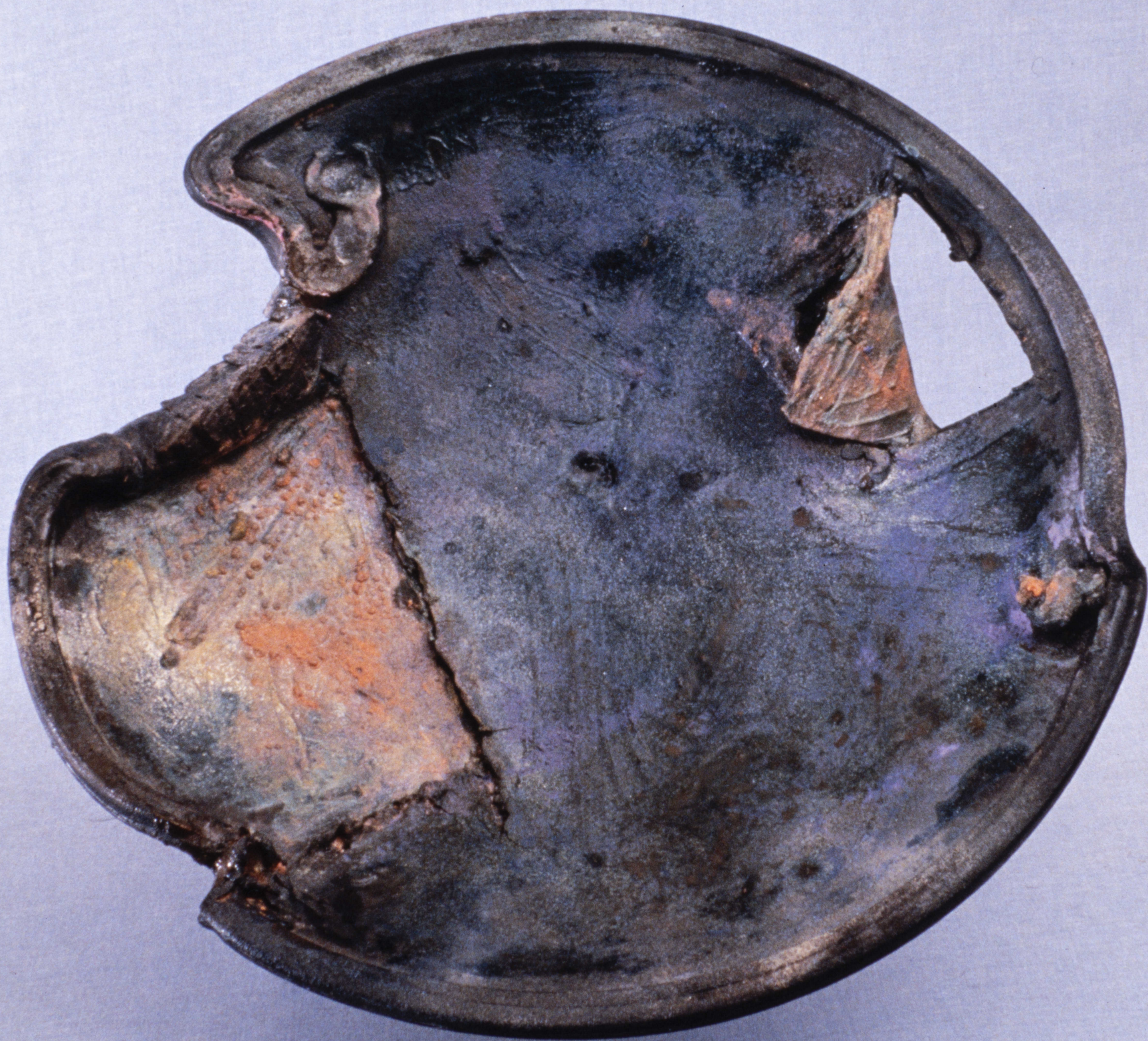CALL IT PERFORMANCE ART,,,,
HOW ABOUT THAT,,,,