ART OR CRAFT?

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I chose to exhibit sculpture and classical style vessels together to encourage discussion about whether ceramics should be considered a fine art medium. I was interested in experimenting with different forms and textures in order to see which combination would captivate the viewing audience the longest. I found that massive textural sculptural forms held the attention of the viewer more so than did the classical smooth surfaced vessels.
INTRODUCTION

There is a stupendous degree of instant gratification for me when I have decided that I am finished creating a piece from wet clay, and I step back to assess what I have done. Joy, achievement, excitement, and wonder are some of the emotions running through me while creating ceramic objects. Frustration and a feeling of failure play into these emotions as well. Without the trying times, there would be no satisfaction or sense of accomplishment from the manipulation of ceramic materials. I am the only one who may decide whether a piece of mine is successful or not. Just because I discard it does not mean that I did not consider it a successful piece at one time, but that I may not be happy with the end result. As long as I have learned from it, I feel it was a necessary step in the evolution of my work as a whole.

Clay is heavy and takes quite a bit of energy to move around. It takes time to stretch and form. One must coerce the clay in order to get it to do what they want. If the clay is pushed too far too quickly, it will surely crack apart. Some may accept the cracking, or embrace the cracks, but if they are undesired, one must be sensitive to the abilities, or limitations of the clay.

Clay has a memory. In other words, any pressure applied to it will cause an equal reaction throughout the entire structure of the piece. This reaction is magnified as heat is introduced to the object. Any type of pushing or pulling of the clay must be reinforced with a push or pull from the opposite direction. If a wet symmetrical vessel is dented from the outside with no support on the inside, the alteration will be exaggerated during the firing process. The clay will remember this pressure and warp more in the same direction of the alteration while being fired, exhibiting the tension within its structure.
Clay does not wish to do anything. Only humans, and other creatures that use it, have the desire to make clay do something and we have to tell it exactly what we want it to do. A lot of experience is required before one develops an intuitive working method with the material. At the same time there seems to be an instinctive visual understanding of what it might have taken in order to manipulate the clay into a free standing form. Almost anyone would agree that it is not an easy thing to do. Assuming a critical audience, only people who have gained knowledge of ceramic materials and firing processes are able to successfully produce ceramic objects.

If it is a feat to create these freestanding forms from clay, then the achievement one feels must increase with the scale of the object. I feel that I am testing my abilities, or insight into the inherent qualities of the material, as the scale of my pieces is increased. The greater the challenge, the more rewarding the finished product is. Pushing the limits of the clay creates an opportunity to become more in tune with the substance and forces the next piece to become better in the eyes of the maker. Continuous experimentation with forms emphasizes the evolution of the work and helps the ceramist to stay energetic and better understand their surroundings.

Recently, such artists as Peter Volkous and Don Reitz have made breakthroughs in the field of ceramics, to name just a couple. Volkous made huge platters that have holes gouged out of them, and huge cracks running through them. These pieces are hung on the wall, further denying their utilitarian predecessors and elevating their status to fine art. Many of Reitz’s pieces are hollow on the bottom and completely closed over on top, denying any traditional function. The pieces are expressions of the artist’s aesthetics resulting from years and years of working with clay. With all of this in mind, western
thought about craft versus art becomes an issue. It seems that anything functional, or even resembling something function or maybe even just something that is made out of a traditional material, is deemed craft, not art. I believe these expressive ceramic objects are questioning the validity of this common categorization and why it even exists.
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Throughout history ceramics has been made for utilitarian purposes and decorative accents. It has rarely been accepted as a sculpture medium. Generally vessels and sculptures made from clay have been kept separate. I will explore the possibilities of the vessel becoming sculpture. Using variety in scale and texture I wish to force the viewer to spend more time with the object in an attempt to bring to attention the issue of craft versus art objects. Throughout the making of this body of work the following questions will be addressed.
QUESTIONS

1. How will scale play a role in the way the pieces are viewed?

2. Will excessive texture hold the attention of the viewer longer?

3. How will the different forms affect the viewer’s opinion of the art versus craft issue?
METHODOLOGY

In an effort to answer my questions I will create ten vessels, which are larger than I have ever made. I will create pieces that are sculptural in appearance. I will have a questionnaire at my exhibition for viewers’ to record their thoughts. I will take the recorded comments and incorporate them in my descriptive paper.
RESULTS

My exhibition encompassed three hand-built teapot sets, four large wheel thrown vessels, and six sculptures made with a combination of techniques. My aim in showing the pieces together was an experiment to see what type of forms and textures combined would captivate individuals the longest. I believe I was able to come to some conclusions based on observing people as they were viewing the pieces and the comments made about them.

I provided a questionnaire in order to aid me in my experiment. After reviewing the results of my questionnaire, some of my assumptions were positively reinforced. For example, the larger the scale of a piece the longer the viewer tends to spend viewing it. With the addition of text and unexpected elements, the viewer seems to explore the piece with their eyes and have questions in their mind. Forms created using wheel throwing and hand building techniques tend to extend the viewing time one may feel they need in order to fathom the entire piece. A sculptural form tends not only to spark more interest in the audience, but also may change their mind about whether the material should be considered a fine art medium versus a craft medium. Complex, massive, dynamic, excessively textured, bulbous, sculptural forms with text, color, and unexpected elements bursting out of them hold viewer’s attention longer than simpler, smoother forms.

Ultimately, the size of a piece has something to do with the amount of time a person spends viewing it. It seems that the more a piece encroaches on one’s space the more fascinating it is. The larger the piece, the more viewing space is needed. However, the more space around the object, the less invasive the object is and one may feel less compelled to view it if it does not take up enough of their visual space. It may seem
miniscule or unimportant, so in this sense, the scale of the piece is relative to its milieu and this environment plays a major role in the way the piece is viewed. If someone is too crowded all they will want to do is get around the object and have little desire to view the thing. Having said this, it is apparent that there must be some sort of instinctual balance of space that is taken into consideration when a maker of objects displays their work.

Pieces which are smooth and symmetrical seem to be passed by with little awe. Sculptures which include a variety of multiple excessively textured areas hold the attention of the viewer longer. Hard edge forms protruding out from within a bulky, organic form extends the critics interest. Forms such as this including low relief text, smooth, rough, shiny, and matt areas with different colors may encourage individuals to look at ceramics as more than just a craft medium. Pieces of this magnitude help to elevate the status of ceramics to that of fine art.
CONCLUSION

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