Earth Forms

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ABSTRACT

Earth Forms

Janelle Tullis Mock

Department of Visual Arts

Master of Fine Arts

_Earth Forms_ narrates and explains the Masters Project Exhibition by the same name. The sculptures included in the exhibition, _Earth Forms_, use a variety of personal symbols centered on one stylized human head. Some of the symbols included are antlers, branches, coral, leaves, plants and stones. Each of these symbols represents personal ideas of balance, growth and decay. They also represent the earth from which we are formed and the earth to which our bodies will return at the end of life.

Keywords: Fine Arts, Ceramics, Clay, Sculpture, Earth, Nature, Heads, Life, Death, Life Cycle, Joy, Pain, Growth
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Introduction

My connection with clay is a connection with the earth. There is something satisfying about working the earth with one’s hands. I find it a calming and meditative process. Some of my earliest memories are making mud pies and other concoctions in our enormous backyard in San Jose, California. This backyard was a combination of our own large, unfenced backyard and a huge vacant lot which had been planned as a percolation pond but was left undeveloped. In that vast expanse I found dirt, mud, rock and other clay-like materials. My day to day adventures in our back yard formed my first attachment to the earth; a connection I cherished all the more due to the stark contrast city living provided. From my first experiences with the earth grows my interest in and association with ceramic material. It is one I feel a deep connection to and one which is well suited to the imagery of nature evoked in my MFA Final Exhibition, *Earth Forms*.

The sculptures I have included in the exhibition, *Earth Forms*, focus on the human head as the center of individual thought and human sensory experience. Within our heads our individual existence is carried out through personal thoughts and the reception and processing of sensory information. Opened and connected to earth by our senses, we move through life subject to the pains and suffering our physical bodies’ experience. Health and sickness, strength and pain are all part of our sensory experience in this life. We are enabled on one hand by our bodies and inhibited by the burdens our physical bodies encounter on the other hand. On each head I include imagery that personally represents man’s place within the natural sphere of things: both the life giving and the taking of life that occurs in nature. This dichotomy is a central theme of the sculptures in my exhibition, *Earth Forms*. 
Nature, all around us is in a constant state of birth and death, growth and decay. Both aspects of this natural life allow our beings to grow, to deepen and to become enriched. A personal experience began to teach me the necessity of both aspects of life. After a relationship with a young man I had hoped to marry ended, I was talking with a trusted friend about the experience and the pain I was feeling. His comment to me was that break-ups hurt so much because of their potential to bring an individual joy, happiness and contentment. This thought was like a lightning bolt of realization for me. Before that time I had never felt such personal loss. I had felt the loss of someone moving away or departing for a time, but I had never felt the pain of losing someone and the relationship with them, knowing that it would never be restored.

The pain and loss I felt was deeper than I could come to terms with until I realized that the heartache I felt was so great because of the potential of the relationship. I also began to come to terms with the fact that although the door was closed on this relationship, the door and potential for another great relationship was still available.

Origins and Influences

As I work in clay and build my sculptures, I am awash in memories and associations. As a youngster, I often went camping in and hiking through the coastal hills of California. Summer vacations brought trips to a small farming town where my father grew up. There we helped on the family alfalfa farm moving sprinkler systems or collecting bales of hay. At home, we maintained a yearly garden which often brought a variety of experiences. These events ranged from over planting Zucchini (38 plants) and struggling with tomato plants eaten by the local deer populations to the jovial anticipation of our white peach tree producing the sweetest peaches.
Each year the cycle of growth and decay in the garden marked the passing of one season into the next. During the past three years I have experienced the death of a young family friend, an Uncle, and a Great Grandfather. Last summer my father was diagnosed with leukemia. Four and a half days into the treatment he was given 4 to 6 days to live. Now a year later he is in remission from leukemia, yet is dealing with an infection with a documented one hundred percent mortality rate.

During the same three year period, I have experienced the birth of two daughters. To feel their life growing within me and then months later to see them in my arms is an amazing and emotional experience. Then, to care for and nourish such tiny and helpless creatures has given life to emotions I have never before experienced. My life has moved into a new season.

The pain experienced from the loss of familiar relationships and especially the necessity of coming to terms with the potential death of my father, was awakening. Life has presented a dichotomy of the sweet and the bitter during the past three years. To experience both the giving and slipping away of life in a parallel time frame has deepened the growing awareness in me of the fragility of life. It seems that I have “grown up” in the sense that I realize that I am not invincible. The risks I take will directly affect me and my family. This realization is one that I’ve heard adults often speak of…and now I poignantly understand what they mean. The realization of the delicate nature of life has opened my eyes to the tender moments I want to experience and not let pass me by in this life. It also helps me realize the importance of both aspects of life: birth and death, joy and suffering.

During this time, my sculptures have provided a method for me to work through, express, and deal with these new feelings and experiences of life and death. Through nature and the
expression I find in clay I have found the ability to face the pain and loss of family members as well as celebrate birth and other positive experiences on Earth.

After my father was diagnosed with Leukemia, I spent some time caring for him while he recovered from Chemotherapy. As I sat in my father’s hospital room this life seemed fleeting, unsure and at times unfamiliar. I contemplated the growing fetus in my womb and what was left of my father’s life before me. There were moments when I thought, and I’m sure the nurses thought, his slowed breathing would shortly come to an end. I feared that I wasn’t ready to let one of my constant sources of strength and support pass on…but I know that I am not the one who decides when a life is ready to move on. I am not the one who decides the course a stream will take, or the manner in which a mountain will be formed. Yet through this experience, I have come to better understand the nature of life. I am beginning to realize the importance of accepting and embracing both the joy and pain of life.

My love of nature and growing understanding of the natural processes of life have strengthened my respect for God’s plan here on Earth. Although there is pain and death, there is also pleasure and birth. It is this love, understanding and respect that motivates me and inspires my artistic narrative.

Aside from my memories and experiences with the natural world, there are many artists that have influenced the development of my sculptures and of my ideas. Viola Frey, Sergei Isopov, and Janis Mars Wunderlich, along with many other artists, create their figurative sculptures as personal narratives.¹ Constantin Brâncuși and Robert Arneson have made use of the

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head as a head, without any other additional figures used in conjunction with their sculptures. Beth Cavener Sticher and Rebekah Bogard deal with the psychology of human nature as compared with that of animals. Each of these artists’ work has in part influenced my own dialogue and the physical representation I use in my sculptures.

In an interview with Paul Karlstrom, of the Smithsonian, Frey discussed how each piece, whether figurative or not, is a self-portrait. “Everything is auto[biographical]; it's all autobiographical. Even on the plates where there's a string...” Frey went on to state that even if the image isn’t a self portrait, the meaning of the work is autobiographical. During another session of the interview with Karlstrom, Frey stated the following: “I don’t see how you can do

Tony Merino, “Androgyny: New Work by Sergei Isupov [Exhibit],” Ceramics Monthly 57, no. 7 (September 2009): 24. Sergei Isupov, in one of his most recent bodies of work, Androgyny, uses a format similar to mine: a series of vertical heads. This show, which has been exhibited across the United States, consists of multiple large slab-built heads. On each simply formed head, Isopov paints detailed images of personal narrative using glazes and stains. Tony Merino, writing for Ceramics Monthly, in June 2009, stated, “In Isupov's most complicated images… all of these emblems cascade in a crescendo of story telling.” The Ferrin Gallery, which represents Isopov, describes his sculptures in the following manner: “His dreamlike, surreal narratives are self-portraits and auto-biographical.” Isupov’s use of self-representation in sculptural form is a tool I have also incorporated into my own work.


2 University of California Davis, “Robert Arneson’s Eggheads,” UC Davis http://eggheads.ucdavis.edu/arneson.html (accessed July 8, 2010). A more detailed discussion on Robert Arneson’s Eggheads and his use of head as head can be found at the UC Davis website.


art if it doesn’t…it isn’t part of your experience.”5 Similarly, I consider my sculptures as personal narratives and as self-portraits of myself and the experiences I have had, whether or not the sculptures look like me.

I am also influenced by the art of native people around the world. Having grown up in a metropolitan area, I was surrounded by people and cultures very different from those in my household. Diversity was an everyday reality. My friends were first and second generation Americans whose parents came from Russia, India, China, Korea, and many other places. We often visited museums with artifact from various cultures and celebrated the similarities and differences throughout many cultures. These experiences enriched my appreciation for African Masks, British and Korean theater masks and such creations as the Easter Island Heads; all of which are part of cultural expression, narrative and storytelling. These heads also make use of a stylized rendering of the head in order to convey the narrative nature of the masks. In a similar manner my sculptures express my own personal narrative through the use of stylized features and proportions.

Process

Building and Firing

My sculptures begin in one of two ways. The first is as a conceptual idea, which continues to develop into the final formal sculpture. The second manner is through the routine work of building my sculptures and recognizing the emergence of new ideas and art forms. Through both origins, I am able to develop the narratives that create my sculptures.

5 Karlstrom, 1995 (See Session 2, Tape 1, Side A).
When producing my sculptures I use a sandy earthenware. This versatile clay body can be fired at a variety of ranges while maintaining its structural strength. It is also fairly flexible and demonstrates minimal shrinkage.

I build my sculptures through a combination of slab and pinching techniques. The slabs are thrown to a width predetermined by the use of the slab. These range from one fourth of an inch to two-thirds of an inch. Slabs that are intended for the base of my sculptures are thicker than those used as appendages to the base.

Plaster molds are used to form and quickly release the clay into a predetermine shape. I use a number of plaster molds to give shape to my clay slabs as they dry. The main plaster mold I use is a two-part mold of a large featureless head. It was created from a head I pinched with the intention of making the mold.

The clay slabs I use are often dried to a leather hard stage which allows for rigidity when building. Other times, I use the slabs while still moist, allowing me to join them quickly to other moist slabs in order to fill the large surface area of my plaster molds. This is the manner in which I work when using the large featureless head mentioned above. The moist slabs, placed and joined to the other slabs in the two-part mold, are dried till leather hard. At this point I am able to join the two parts of the mold through a process called slipping and scoring. I then add additional clay over the resulting seam to strengthen and support the final head. These slab-formed clay heads are the basis for my sculptures.

With the head placed vertically on a flat surface, I begin to form the features of the face. The features are created from thinner clay slabs that have been allowed to dry, but are not quite
leather hard. Keeping the clay from becoming leather hard allows flexibility in forming the rounded facial features without causing breaks in the clay.

Once the face is complete I build and attach the appendages. Most often these added features are built through a combination of slab-building and pinching to create the shapes needed. These shapes are reinforced at the seams and paddled to create smooth shapes before being joined to the central head. Joining the appendages is done by slipping and scoring and then applying a gentle yet firm force to the main body of the sculpture. Once all the parts are assembled, the clay surface is roughed up and then smoothed over or otherwise textured.

The completed sculpture is fired, or bisqued, to 1940 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature is high enough to harden the clay into a sturdy and rigid state while still allowing for compatibility with a variety of glazes. The clay is now ready for surface work.

Surface Treatment

Under all glazes, I apply the mineral black copper oxide mixed with water. Once the water dries, I dust off the majority of the mineral. I am cautious to use NOSHA approved masks and gloves when working with this element. When used, black copper oxide emphasizes the texture of the clays surface through the glazes applied over the mineral. It also emphasizes any minor surface flaws that would otherwise not be seen. I appreciate this characteristic of the black copper oxide as it adds a weathered or aged feel, to the sculptures.

Next, I spray multiple layers of glaze to my pieces. I start with layers of very dry glazes followed by a light coat of a matte glaze of a different hue. Doing so adds a very slight sheen to the dry coats applied earlier and a more sculpted feel to the final glaze. When I feel the color
and texture of the glaze are appropriate for the piece, I let the glaze air dry before carefully
placing it in the kiln. I low fired the glazed sculptures to Cone 05, or 1915 degrees Fahrenheit.
This is lower than the temperature at which the glazes I use are normally fired, to ensure a dry,
earthy surface. The sculptures may be glazed and fired multiple times or a non-fluxing, room
temperature glaze may be applied to complete the final sculpture.

Exhibition Contents

_Earth Forms_ contains nine works of art. The pieces included in this exhibition use a
variety of personal symbols centered on one stylized human head. Some of the symbols included
are antlers, branches, coral, ears and stones. Each of these symbols represents personal ideas of
balance, growth and decay. They represent the earth from which we are formed and the earth to
which our bodies will return at the end of life.

Image Description

Antlers, trees, and coral are elements of nature that go through cycles of growth. Each
year animals of the cervidae family grow and shed new antlers. Deciduous trees grow during the
spring and summer, lose their leaves during the fall and then lay dormant during the winter
waiting until the next spring to begin their new growth. Coral as well cycles through new growth
often building upon past generations of hardened coral polyps below them. Antlers, trees and
coral are personal symbols of the cycle of life from which I borrow imagery in the sculptures
_Cycle, Residence, Clip._

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6 Images of _Cycle, Residence, and Clip_ can be found in the Appendix on pages 15, 16, and 17, respectively.
Residence makes use of the antler, tree, and coral symbolism explained above and additionally includes a small nest. Like birds, human beings build places to protect their young from the elements and places to go at the end of the day. This sculpture deals these ideas of residence in association with the dwelling places of man.

Clip is a piece of emotional complexity for me, personally. I began working on Clip after giving birth to my second daughter and after the time I took off from school, while my Father was in the hospital. Because of the emotional roller coaster I had just experienced, my mind was constantly drawn back to my family, to my ill father and to my infant daughter. Everything I did caused me to think of my family and I had to create something from that emotion.

Because of the height of this piece, and the time it took to build it, I continued through an array of feelings as I reflected on the piece. Midway through the piece, I no longer enjoyed it. The clipped tree began to remind me of the forest Snow White ran through to get away from the Huntsman. I became tired of the piece. It is an interesting experience to work through so many feelings and emotions in building one sculpture. I feel that these feelings are evident in the odd faces and juxtapositioning of the tree. Instead of dismissing this piece, I have included it in the Earth Forms exhibition, as commentary to the turmoil of feelings I have felt during the past year.

Sprout and Shoots also make use of growing forms from nature. Both plants and animals experience cycles of growth and decay. The imagery used in the appendages on Sprout and Shoots reference both plant and animal life. Some days when I look at these sculptures they speak of plant life to me and on other days they speak to a more animal nature. I appreciate the fact that the viewer can decide what each piece will personally reference as they reflect on the

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7 Images of Sprout and Shoots can be found in the Appendix on pages 18 and 19, respectively.
sculptures. Life is filled with continual experiences of growth. It is through these experiences that we locate and define who we are.

The dichotomy of life demonstrated in *Plot* grew out of my elementary school days. Wheat grass was used each year for classroom spring or Easter crafts. Yearly, we collected used- green strawberry containers. In a class activity, prior to Easter, we filled the baskets with dirt and then planted wheat grass seeds. Each day following the activity, we would check the soil to see if the seeds had sprouted and then gently water the small baskets.

Within a week the grass was growing. We would then begin measuring and recording the growth of the grass each day. The Friday before Easter was always a big celebration. Our tiny grass baskets were filled with small chocolate eggs and other candies. Both the growing grass and the use of the basket for our Easter celebration solidified grass as a personal symbol of life and the resurrection.

As I look at this piece, I am also faced with the reality that birth drags death trailing behind into this life. In the United States it is part of our culture to lay our loved ones to rest in the ground and then to plant sod over the burial place; *Plot* echoes this earth to man relationship. As strange as it may seem, I enjoy visiting cemeteries, walking through the landscape of grass and headstones, and thinking of the lives that have passed on before me. Cemeteries are a peaceful and reverent place. This piece therefore honors the lives of those who have already passed on and find their bodies resting in the earth.

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8 An image of *Plot* can be found in the Appendix on page 20.
Guide, Stack, and Small Stack are built from the idea of trail markers, called cairns.\textsuperscript{9}

Cairns are used to mark the path for hikers in rocky environments. They have also been used as grave markers for the poor. I find the idea of stacking rocks to both guide people on a safe route and also to mark the place where someone has died an interesting dichotomy. It is, once again, both a symbol of life and of death.

Another element of importance to me in these pieces is the stacking of heads. Just like coral polyps builds upon dead and hardened polyps, each head in these sculptures stacks upon another head, representing a building of generations. This building of generations and the balance of life and death are important aspects of the stacking sculptures.

Conclusion

As I have worked through my feelings and ideas in clay I have found my connection with the earth deepen. I have come to more fully comprehend the nature and cycle of life as experienced in my life and demonstrated in my sculptures. It is my hope that those who view the Earth Forms Exhibition will likewise feel their sense of and connection to the earth deepen and grow.

The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes. I know that it wasn't created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to

\textsuperscript{9} Images of Guide, Stack, and Small Stack can be found in the Appendix on pages 21, 22, and 23, respectively.
understand it. So I must believe that, at least to human perception, a place is not a
place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, have lived in it,
known it, died in it--have both experienced and shaped it, as individuals, families,
neighborhoods, and communities, over more than one generation. Some are born
in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they
left is the one they have been searching for. But whatever their relation to it, it is
made a place only by slow accrual, like a coral reef.

--Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*\(^{10}\)

APPENDIX
Image 1: *Cycle*, 19”x18”x28”, Low range multi-fired earthenware and non-fluxing glazes.
Image 2: *Residence*, 15”x15”x24”, Low fire earthenware.
Image 3: Clip, 21”x23”x38”, Low fired earthenware and non-fluxing glazes.
Image 4: *Sprout*, 17”x20”x24”, Low fired earthenware and non-fluxing glazes.
Image 5: *Shoots*, 18”x15”x19”, Low fired earthenware.
Image 6: *Plot*, 13”x15”x18”, Low range multi-fired earthenware.
Image 7: *Guide*, 14”x9”x25”, Low fired earthenware.
Image 8: *Stack*, 12”x12”x21.5”, Low fired earthenware.
Image 9: Small Stack, 6”x6.25”x6”, Low fired earthenware.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


