

contemporary clay sculpture



a collection of four of our favorite articles
on contemporary ceramic sculpture

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Clay reigns as the oldest and most natural medium for sculpture. From the dawn of human history, people of every culture have taken clay and molded it into objects. You can coil monumental forms, build with slabs, make totems, or even use computers to generate sculptures. For thousands of years, clay's versatility and universal accessibility have made it the most popular medium for creating three dimensional work.

Some of the work in this new Ceramic Arts Daily download is monumental, some intricate, some site specific, but all of it influenced by clay. With each artist providing some aspect of the sculptural process from conceptualization to forming and finishing to the final installation, you'll find the range of ideas and techniques informative and inspiring.

Figurative Ceramics by Mark Chatterley

from the Ceramics Monthly Working Sculptor's series

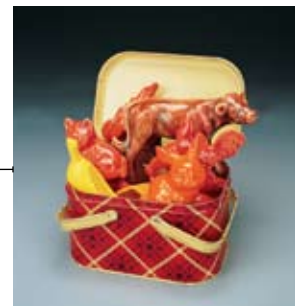
Mark Chatterley discusses his approach to making large-scale sculpture and surviving as an artist over time.



Reflections on Accumulation

by Wendy Walgate

Canadian artist, Wendy Walgate comments on a culture of acquisition with brightly colored, slip-cast, and assembled sculptures



Doug Herren's Large-scale Clay Vessels

from the Ceramics Monthly Working Sculptor's series

Doug Herren shares with us his experiences in making a living with art and provides his best advice for those wishing to do the same.



Barbro Åberg: Lightweight Sculpture

by Ulla Munck Jørgensen

Barbro Åberg's abstract paper clay sculptures hint at ancient language, astronomy, and biology.



Figurative Ceramics by Mark Chatterley

I was recently at an alternative art space opening with a group of friends and a student looked at us and said, “Rock and roll old school.” At first I was offended, but then realized he was right. When I went to school cone 10 clay was king. Functional, thrown, utilitarian objects were the flavor of the day. We didn’t have computers, cell phones or iPods.

Now anything is possible in the clay world from content to temperature. There are so many ways to work that I myself set rules to work within so I don’t get lost in the possibilities. Clay bodies, glazes and kilns are all things that I have formulated or built. It gives me a fleeting sense of control and sets working parameters.

The best part of being a ceramic sculptor is working with clay and making the forms. I barrel through 18,000 pounds of clay a year. I make work for 3 months then fire it all in one kiln load. The rest of the sculpture making process goes downhill for me as far as pleasure. Loading the kiln, glazing and finishing the work are all things that need to be done so I can continue my addiction with clay.

Although neither marketing nor selling my work are very high on my list of favorite things to do, both are necessary evils and must be considered. The economy is down and people are concerned with their 401k plans. Art is not on the average person’s mind when they are worried about paying the mortgage. So I am looking for

the not-so-average buyer, people who want art either for an investment or as an enhancement to their quality of life. I work with sixteen or so galleries around the country that hopefully have access to this ideal art collector.

Throughout the year, I have an average of six one- or two-person shows. People don’t want to see the same thing year after year and this keeps me in a constant state of trying to reinvent myself and come up with new work. I find myself revisiting old themes but hopefully with a different point of view. After working with clay for over 20 years, my options of something new become smaller. A Zen saying goes, “A beginner has many possibilities and an expert has few.” I have been teaching workshops on creativity and the golden mean, trying to help others and myself make inner connections for a more personalized style. One of the class assignments I give is to take pictures of interesting objects that resonate for each individual. Then I have the student combine three of these images into one using the golden mean proportion that we will later translate into clay. Rorschach tests and guided meditation are also experimented with for inspiration.

I also like to read books outside of the art field for inspiration, including quantum physics, psychol-

ogy, string theory, shamanism and Kama Sutra. Then I try to figure out how conceptual ideas can be translated into clay forms.

I also have a small group of friends that I can bounce ideas off of. We meet once a month for a show and discuss what we are working on. Mostly, inspiration comes down to going into the studio everyday and trying to figure out what I can do that is new but won’t be



Detail of *Peace*, handbuilt, crater glaze, fired to cone 6.

too weird or different from my previous work so that I will lose my collectors. Maybe that is what it means to be old school, stuck in a style that is recognized as mine and being financially fearful of branching out.

The one advertising class I took in college droned on about name recognition. I realized that it is a way to get work out into the marketplace and try to elevate prices. For each show I do, the gallery provides a press release of my artist statement and photos to the local papers that sometimes lead into featured stories. I also split ads with the galleries in national art magazines. In addition to building name recognition, I try to attract attention to a specific piece.

Being a ceramic sculptor, the physical aspect of working large becomes an issue. The older I get, the larger and heavier the work seems to get. I keep threatening to become a jeweler when I grow up. Until that happens, I go to the gym 3 days a week for an hour of weight training followed by an hour of aerobics. I try to maintain my strength so I can move my own work around. When I do a show I drive a body of work in my own van, which can hold 2 tons, rather than making crates

for each piece. Unloading and placing the work can get physical, especially if stairs are involved. I find myself shying away from shows if I have to walk the work up stairs. I imagine someday I might have to hire assistants or get a fork lift to move the work around, but until then, I think of it as a free work out.

I may be rock and roll old school. I just hope I have a few new licks to be relevant in the future.

To See more of Chatterley's work, go to chatterley.com



Inset right: Mark Chatterley building life-size figures in his Williamston, Michigan, studio.

Below: *Child pose*, 58 in. (147 cm.) in height, handbuilt, crater glaze, fired to cone 6.



Reflections on Accumulation

by Wendy Walgate



Green is Balance, 28 in. (71 cm) in height, slip-cast white earthenware, fired to cones 06 and 04, with metal ammunition box.



Yellow is Betrayal, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, slip-cast white earthenware, fired to cones 06 and 04, with metal egg basket, 2004.

Auntie Annie's mantelpiece was my wunderkammer (wonder cabinet). She had arranged hundreds of ceramic animals on three levels of her mantel, resting just out of reach, above the sight line of her worshipping 12-year-old niece. There were no doors or cabinet sides to protect this collection, but it was clear to everyone that they were strictly untouchable. I would stand in front of them, dutifully clasping my hands behind my back as I mentally cataloged the animal population. Auntie Annie worked in a factory attaching light bulb filaments by hand. On the weekends, with whatever money she had left over

after food, rent and clothing, she would buy new animals for her menagerie. Miniature dogs, cats, deer, mice, sheep, cows and every other representation of the animal kingdom appeared. They were purchased for pennies, of course, but they meant everything to me. I adored, marveled at, coveted and now seek to recapture that mantel. Forty years later, Auntie Annie and her collection are long gone, but I conjure them in my work.

Maybe as a manifestation of repressed domesticity, the 1940s and '50s produced households literally swamped with ceramic figurines. Looking to construct a "nice" home, my

mother accumulated inexpensive ornaments from occupied Japan, available at local discount stores like Woolworth's and Zeller's. In Canada, a vast range of animal figurines came packed with Red Rose tea bags. These tea bag figurines accumulated in drifts and shoals, and soon vied for space with families of poodles and kittens attached with chains, proudly displayed in our kitchen window. A long-legged ceramic Bambi held a place of honor on my dresser, along with ceramic souvenirs from family road trips to the Canadian Rockies.

In her fascinating book *An Alchemy of Mind*, Diane Ackerman states, "Much of a self derives from recollected events, this weight and outcome, and the personal iconography they create." I agree. It would be dishonest for me to produce work that is all about reduction and simplification. Minimalism, Zen and Abstraction are philosophies that I cannot possibly embrace simply because of my weight of recollected events. My life is and was complication, crowding and profusion. When I look around me, that is what I see. From the window of my current studio, which is located in downtown Toronto in a 19th-century distillery building, I watch commuter and cargo trains rattle by. Above the train tracks is an elevated highway, streaming with trucks, cars and motorcycles all day long. A glimpse of Lake Ontario now and then between the boxcars reveals commercial tankers working in the harbor. The world outside of my studio window is a continuum of movement, sounds and vehicles. I find this urban activity strangely soothing and energizing, as if it represents the music of vanished childhood.

Ironically, I first studied ceramics at the University of Manitoba, in the middle of Canada's vast, flat and featureless great prairie. My major at the time was printmaking, and the process of impression and reverse printing on plates echo in my claywork today. One day, watching Robert Archambeau sit at a kick wheel and powerfully manipulate a pot, I became enthralled by the qualities of clay. As sculptor Sidney Geist wrote, "Love of material is a psychological, not a sculptural affair." I fell in love with the material. As a result, I ended up completing a double major in printmaking and ceramics.

Years later, I attended a rigorous two-year course at George

Brown College in Toronto in commercial ceramic production to better understand the technical aspects of throwing, glaze chemistry and slip casting. After graduating from this course, I set up my own commercial studio in an industrial area of Toronto and produced wheel-thrown majolica functional ware for sale in many craft stores across Canada. I did this for years, until carpal tunnel syndrome forced me to abandon throwing and use coils and slabs to produce teapots, plates, cups and vases.

Later I returned to school for an M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art, where I continued to work on functional forms with heavily embossed surfaces and dynamic colors. By dusting plastic, metal and wood forms with cornstarch as a resist, I was able to use found objects as molds and bypass the plaster stage. For example, South Asian textile printing blocks provided me with surface texture to impress slabs for teapots and vases. Soon, these two-dimensional surface textures emerged as fully realized, three-dimensional objects. Press-molded animals and objects began to appear on the edges of my plates, lids and teapot bases, as well as on the handles of pitchers.

During a two-year residency at the Harbourfront Crafts Studio in Toronto, an exhibition opportunity in an outdoor gallery space led me to make a large fountain. After purchasing a commercial greenware "archangel" and a couple of "Venuses" to complete the fountain, I was invited by the owners of the greenware store

to go to the back of their shop and rummage through their pile of discarded molds. Damaged as they were, a battered Paul Revere, a worn, stylized frog and an idealized cottage soon acquired personal meaning and became part of my ceramics vocabulary. My battered Paul Revere came to signify the American military. The worn, stylized frog came to symbolize nature. The cottage characterized the ideal of home—the home of daydreams and imagination.

My palette evokes a child's sensibilities and references the commercially made animal figurines that lined the shelves of my childhood home. I use achromatic arrangements of color to unify the impact of the sculptural arrangements. This idea also has historical antecedent. Samuel Wittwer, in *A Royal*



Blue Rabbit with Garlic Necklace, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, slip-cast white earthenware, fired to cones 06 and 04, with toy drum, wire, 2004.

Menagerie, explains that, in the 16th century, Augustus the Strong of Poland commissioned a vast collection of porcelain animals from Meissen for the Japanese Palace in Dresden. A total of 25,215 porcelain pieces were arranged in color groups that reflected a certain hierarchy. As the visitor moved through the antechambers that led to Augustus' audience room, the importance of the color of both the room and its porcelain animals increased. According to the color associations of that period, red stood for power, green for humility, yellow for splendor, blue for divinity and purple for authority.

By grouping my animals by color, I am pointing to their objectification by society and their callous use as a commodity. Categorizing animals by color also refers to the endless possibilities of genetic manipulation. Denaturalized red chickens, turquoise calves, yellow pigs and pink turkeys represent the modern hubris of genetic manipulation. We appear to have acquired power over creation, but choose to use this power to turn all creation into a fashion accessory.

Process

Color is important in my life. To achieve a range of brilliant surface colors, I use both commercial and studio-mixed glazes. Matt and glossy Cone 06 commercial glazes provide the saturated colors of “poinsettia red,” “pumpkin orange” and “yellow jacket yellow.” I also hand mix two simple bases, a glossy and matt, which fire to Cone 04. These bases are mixed with 15% commercial stains and are used to contrast the smooth, regular surfaces of the commercial glazes. This palette evokes the color-saturated world of my Ukrainian ancestors, the piles of brightly colored toys and books from my past, and echoes a life of profound nearsightedness—I always saw the strong, bright colors first.

Each finished work usually contains over 80 individual slip-cast objects, which I personally cast and glaze. Commercial glazes often must be applied three times to each piece. For a work that has 80 cast objects, I can end up handling the pieces for one arrangement over 240 times.

In order to fix the arrangements of animals and objects together, I use an industrial strength glue called E-30 CL, made by Loctite, which is specially formulated for adhering ceramics. Over the course of a few days, I build up the height of each work by adding successive layers of objects.

A Final Word

In 19th-century England, according to Bevis Hillier in *Pottery and Porcelain, 1700–1914*, the public's passionate demand for collecting ceramics dramatically increased the reproduction industry and its corollary, the “fake” work. The general consensus is that replicas, when marked with the maker's name are “reproductions.” When they are not marked or signed, they may be “fakes.”

Wheel-thrown reproduction is a well-accepted part of the studio-pottery movement in which I originally studied, but

one-of-a-kind originality and individual manipulation of the material are still its touchstones. Needless to say, among ceramics practitioners and public viewers, the use of commercial molds in my work causes an astonished reaction laced with a hint of “fakery.” In fact, most public craft shows have a contract that stipulates that no commercial molds may be used in the making of the work. A set of regulations from a contemporary craft show in Toronto includes the clause, “articles made from molds are acceptable only where the mold is the design and product of the artist or crafts person.” The reasoning behind that clause is to prevent manufactured wares from competing against handmade pots in crafts shows. There is a kind of a priori (empirical) arrogance in such a statement that I find telling and provocative.

I make two responses to these criticisms, one academic and one experiential. Academically, my response begins with Dadaism, defined by Udo Rukser in 1920 as “a stratagem by which the artist can impart to the citizen something of the inner unrest which prevents the artist himself from being lulled to sleep by custom and routine.” (Hans Richter, *Dada, Art and Anti-Art.*) While Dadaists preached “anti-art,” their ideas inspire one to confront the passivity and conformity of Leachian practice in traditional ceramics circles.



Tell Me What You Eat, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, slip-cast and handbuilt white earthenware, fired to cones 06 and 04, with metal lunch box, 2004, by Wendy Walgate, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. To view more, go to walgate.com.

Doug Herren's Large-scale Clay Vessels



Green Industrial Teapot, 17" (43 cm) in height, stoneware with sign painter's paint.

Working in ceramics was something I discovered in college. Watching my first instructor throwing pottery on the wheel was mesmerizing and something I just had to learn how to do. So my original aspirations to pursue graphic design gave way to ceramics... and all along I really wanted to be a fine arts major anyhow. Over the next few years, I earned both my BFA and MFA in ceramics, and continued on to residencies, one at the Archie Bray for two years and a second one at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia. At these residencies, I shifted from making functional pottery to developing my current sculptural style. I have sold work since my undergraduate days but I have never relied on these sales completely. Teaching has been my main income since leaving gradu-

ate school and currently I am an adjunct professor at two area universities.

How I've managed to sell work over the years has been more happenstance. During my residencies, I always had the chance to exhibit and sell. My recent work is represent-

ed at a gallery that, for the first time, is not exclusively ceramic. Most of my sales are to collectors.

As much as I enjoy working in the studio, I often have side interests that occupy me from time to time. For a few years, I took classical guitar lessons and last year I built a large truss-style Dobsonian telescope. Two years ago my wife and I bought a property that we attempted to renovate for apartments, but a year later we sold it deciding we were in over our heads. Now we have a townhouse facing a park in the city with a carriage house in the back we use for our studios.

Being a potter for so long, it's been a challenge to shake using only ceramic solutions for my work. But the scale I employ now compelled me to use things like sign painter's paints instead of glazes. I make stands for my work using discarded lumber from the numerous row houses nearby. I cut up large timbers for table-tops that I then fashion ceramic legs for and bolt on.

When it comes to marketing my work, I have to admit I am my own worst enemy. Pursuing contacts and galleries is something I really fall down on, yet with the few shows I have had, my sales have been decent. Being a resident at The Clay Studio was especially helpful in meeting and being seen by many of the collectors in the area. Living in Philadelphia has certainly made marketing easier because of the strong arts community that exists here.

I do photograph my own work. I have been doing this for over 20 years, for myself and occasionally for others. I shoot slides, 2¼-inch transparencies, and digital shots to cover all bases. I've always felt no one knows better how to shoot the work than the person who made the work.

I regularly apply for the PCA and PEW grants offered here in Pennsylvania. I used to apply for more local and national pottery-oriented shows, but no longer as I only make sculptural work now. I divided my time between the two worlds for a number of years, but in the end both got short-changed. Only when I chose to develop the sculptural work exclusively did I really start to make more significant progress.

At present, I am the studio technician at Swarthmore College, where I teach occasionally and receive health insurance benefits.

My wife and I are both committed studio artists. Most of our free time is dedicated to being in the studio. For myself, it is mostly evenings and weekends that I find time for the studio. During the summer I can be there full-time, if not actually working on a piece, then spending days working on a drawing for new work.

I knew from very early on that I wanted to work in the arts. I don't expect to make much money from my work, just enough to have a studio space and time to make the art first and foremost. If my day job can be related to this work, so much the better. I do my best to teach students in basic handbuilding and throwing techniques and to encourage them as much as I can. I know how much things can stack against them. It is their own continuing interest that they will have to rely on to keep making art.



Above: *Platter-Form #7*, 28" (71 cm) in height, stoneware with sign painter's paint.

Right: Doug Herren assembling a sculpture in his Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, studio.



Barbro Åberg

by Ulla Munck Jørgensen

The distinctive works of Barbro Åberg are imbued with a life of their own. They tell tales of ancient cultures and common human dreams. Their powerful symbolism wakes collective memories of early beginnings, of the passing of time, and of eternity, in a collage of glimpses of life.

The works are not easily categorized. A Swede living in Denmark, Åberg manages to escape the shackles of both traditions, borrowing the best from each: the playful evocativeness of the Swedes and the rigorous analytical approach of the Danes. In addition, she spent five years in the United States at the outset of her career; a period that still inspires her works with a sense of confidence and adventure. It is in this amalgam of cultures—in this field of tension—that her works exist.

“A recurrent theme in my work is a kind of search for the universal,” says Åberg. “My work is not private. Of course I am an ingredient in the work. And the intensity of the work process is reflected in the work. If I wasn’t really present, you can tell by the finished work. Then, it’s of less consequence. A good piece has its own language, its own story. It’s alive somehow.”

Åberg’s work has various references. One is ancient scripts. She models Phoenician or runic inscriptions in three

dimensions and in the process transforms her content to a more abstract result that merely hints at its origins.

Once, the result was so reminiscent of old navigational instruments or astronomical devices that a new theme spontaneously developed. Based on the original drawings of the

sixteenth-century Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, she has created a series of works inspired by early astronomical instruments.

The cells of life are another reference. A recent piece, “Black Egg,” is a large sculptural rendition of a group of cells. Maybe a piece of human tissue magnified under the microscope. Or the cells of a beehive or a cut-through mushroom. The archetypal symbols of life are translated into clay, the very essence of renewal of life fossilized, forever unchangeable in an unsettling contradiction of meaning.

The ship is an ongoing motif that first appeared in her work when she was at art school. “As a child, I had a recurring dream about being a passenger on a large passenger ship,” Åberg explains. “I was there with a boy of my own age and many other people. We wanted to go and watch the sunset, and as we went out onto the deck, we saw that we were inside a grotto and that the ship was in fact a huge rock.” Yet another example of the duality of form and multiplicity of reference that



Spiral Wheel, 60 cm (24 in.) in diameter, ball clay with perlite and paper fibers, with white terra sigillata and stains, fired to 1135°C (2075°F) in an electric kiln, 2005.

characterizes Åberg's work. A ship of stone! More rock than ship, yet the form is unmistakably boatlike.

The strong ties to nature can be traced to her childhood. Åberg spent the summers by the Baltic Sea on the remote Eastern coastline in the very north of Sweden. "I spent hours alone roaming the beaches, my only company being the huge stones pushed onto the beach and into the sea by the ice cap," she recalls. "There were large smooth stones, and stones with many grooves and great texture. Then there was a boulder ridge and pieces of slate that rose several meters up into the sky."

Åberg still carries the visual material of her childhood. But not everything is stored in the treasure chamber of the mind. She also takes photographs. Not in the sense of a traditional photographer but to capture fleeting moments, to help store memories of textures, forms and motifs.

She works very intuitively. "I think ideas are born and then they develop," she explains. "Time needs to pass before something appears. I follow my impulses. I trust them. An idea arises suddenly. Then I make a loose sketch or write down a few words to remember it."

Often her works end up quite different from how she first imagined. They change during the work process. She enters into collaboration with the work; into a kind of dialog. "I have to listen and look; it's not just me making the decisions. Sometimes a piece is shouting at me to change it this way or that."

But how did it all begin? Her career as a ceramist began in the U.S. in 1979. She had met a young American

and moved to Oregon. There she went to college and took many of the art courses that were available, including ceramics. And that was it. She became the assistant to her teacher Nancy Travers, and she got a thorough foundation and learned many important practical skills. She also spent a year in Berkeley, California, working for various ceramics artists at the Berkeley Potters Guild. "They had a very different approach. There were no limitations and a great sense of freedom. You could do what you liked! The Danish approach is very analytical. These are two extremes. I try to combine both modes of working."

After five years in the U.S., she moved back to Scandinavia, where she studied drawing, painting and sculpture at art school in Sweden, and then finally graduated from the School of Arts and Crafts in Kolding, Denmark, in 1988. As of yet, she has never been tempted to settle on any material other than clay.

In 1990, she was introduced to a new clay body recipe by the American, Bob Shay, who gave a workshop at a Clay Today symposium at Hollufgård in Denmark. The clay was half ball clay, half perlite, a volcanic substance. The two together made an ideal material for sculpting.

"I felt a freedom with this new material," Åberg said. "I could do all kinds of things that I couldn't do with ordinary clay. I started working very expressively. I didn't want to control things too much. Perhaps I needed to liberate myself from my time at art school. I started to use bright commercial stains and acrylic paint, I built solid pieces, used cardboard boxes and filled them up with clay, and I

Flow I and Flow II, 65 cm (26 in.) in height, ball clay with perlite and paper fibers, 2003 and 2004.



combined clay with glass and heating elements.” But after a while, she grew tired of the many colors and resumed her interest in form.

“The year of 1999 marked a real dividing line,” she explained. “This is when I finished building my own studio. Until then, I had shared a studio with other ceramists in Århus. Working alone, my sculptures completely changed. They became lighter with more open structures. More refined. I spend hours on my work now. This latest piece, ‘Spiral Wheel,’ which is going to be exhibited at Meister der Moderne in Munich has taken me six weeks to make! I go to and fro. I look at it and I adjust. Usually I work on three to four pieces at a time, but this piece has preoccupied me completely.”

Today she includes paper fibers in her clay and she has many customized recipes, some for large solid pieces, some for small works and some for pieces with an open structure. The surfaces are treated with a terra sigillata engobe, and occasionally the surfaces are scratched and marked with stamps. In her recent works, the surfaces are left unmarked allowing the form to stand out.

And no doubt, Åberg is extremely conscious of form. Yet her work is never devoid of content. More of a sculptor than a potter, she creates objects of great depth and long lasting impression.



Spheres with Cross, 27 cm (11 in.) in diameter, ball clay with perlite and paper fibers, 2002.

Cargo, 110 cm (43 in.) in length, ball clay with perlite and paper fibers, 2002, by Barbro Åberg, Ry, Denmark.

