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Clay, Roots, and Coexistence

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CLAY, ROOTS, AND COEXISTENCE

BY

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TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE:

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The sculptural work in this terminal project is reflective of my involvement with the wilderness. I have attempted to translate into clay my almost spiritual experience with mountaineering activities: experiences that involved reality, fantasy, mystery, and an observation of what man has done at the expense of the wilderness.

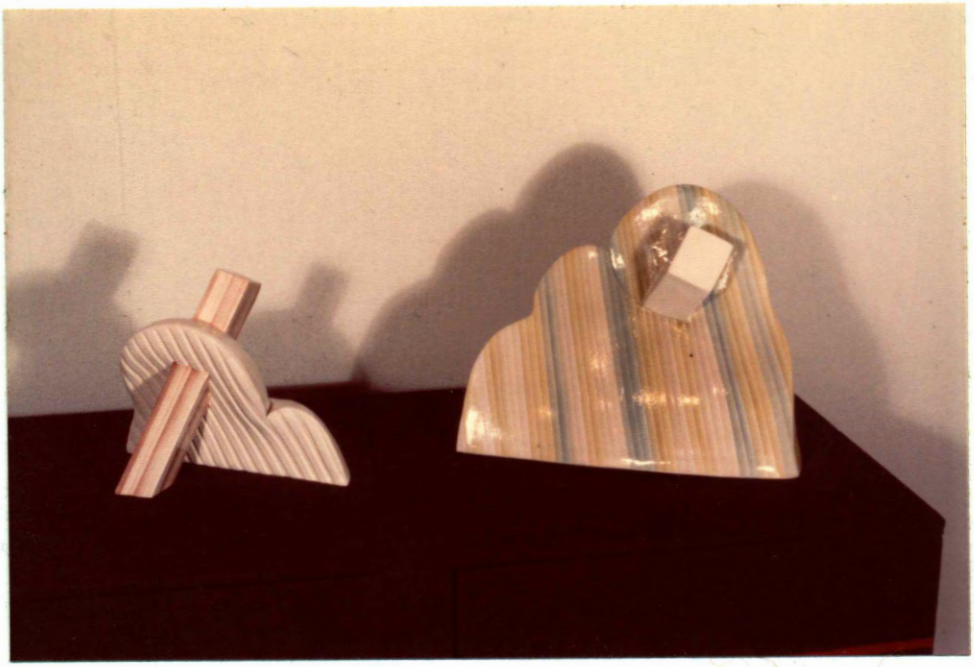
I have arranged clay forms with the intention of giving the feeling of a fantastic forest. Through the devices of individual forms, color, texture, and the composition of forms, I have tried to establish certain relationships seen in a natural enviornment. Architectural aspects of the work represent human interaction with nature. The combination of opposites such as fluid and rigid shapes, smooth and coarse textures, geometric and amorphic forms, create a balance between dynamic forces. For example, a ship plows through the water; the wave created by the action of the bow cutting the water's surface creates a powerful abstract image.

Balance is central to the coexistence of dynamic forces. By exploring coexistence through sculpture it is my intention to invite the viewer into a world reflecting man's involvement with nature.

multiple and changing levels of meaning reflective of my awareness.

In my work architectural forms are juxtaposed with organic forms, often in a relationship exemplifying contrast and tension between the elements, but composed in such a manner as to initiate balance and order between the components. Tubes and rods have a fabricated, man-made look. The measured, man-made elements never lose their organic quality because through my construction methods, the clay stretches and forms cracks. It is my intention to create forces that interact and produce new balances. The work presented in this project was done either in low fired earthenware that has been underfired in oxidation or in a buff clay that has been rakued. The two pieces in group A (fig. 1) were made of a lowfire talc clay body which fires out white at 1048 degrees centigrade (cone 04) in oxidation. These are examples of my first attempts at smooth, flowing, organic shapes pierced by geometric forms. The coexistence of the geometric and organic forms involves a very subtle tension in these works that is in keeping with the smooth sensuous quality of the white clay and brightly colored glazes. The surface treatments were achieved by airbrushing them with commercial underglaze for color then covered with a transparent glaze. I find these early pieces interesting with their smooth, sensuous surface and bright colors.

The pieces in group B (fig. 2) are still small, the largest being twenty-one inches tall. They represent my first attempts at



Group A fig. 1

Group B fig. 2

exploring texture and color. All of these sculptures were fired short of their maturing temperature. When fired short of its maturing temperature, the clay has a brittleness, lightness, and openess resulting in a different character from the hard, density of clays fired to maturity. "The paradox of softness and hardness, the tension between transience and permanence, are part of the attraction of clay and apply especially to the raku process."[2] The tension between the geometric and organic elements in these pieces is heightened by the use of rougher joints and contrasting textures than in the first essays. The pieces make more dramatic use of space by moving futher upward, and balance becomes more of an issue. The organic mound shapes have a coarse texture achieved by bonding dry powdered clay to a slip covered slab. To accomplish this Schouls Clay[3] was spread out on the studio floor. The slab was then laid, slip slide down over the dry clay and pressed down by a rolling pin to make the dry clay stick. The slabs were then moulded into shape over wadded newspaper. This method was used in many of these pieces. Additional color was then added by spraying washes of rutile or burnt umber on them. The tubular forms were constructed by the use of plaster press molds cast from a large pipe. After being assembled, the forms were either rakued or fired to

approximately 1148 degrees centigrade in oxidation. In all of the pieces in this group I used an iron slip burnished into the surface of the tube forms. Glazes and lusters were added in the final stages. The slips, oxides, and glazes completely cover the pieces in order to change the undesirable oxidized surfaces. In later pieces I used colored earthenware clays as an alternative surface to achieve greater earth tones.

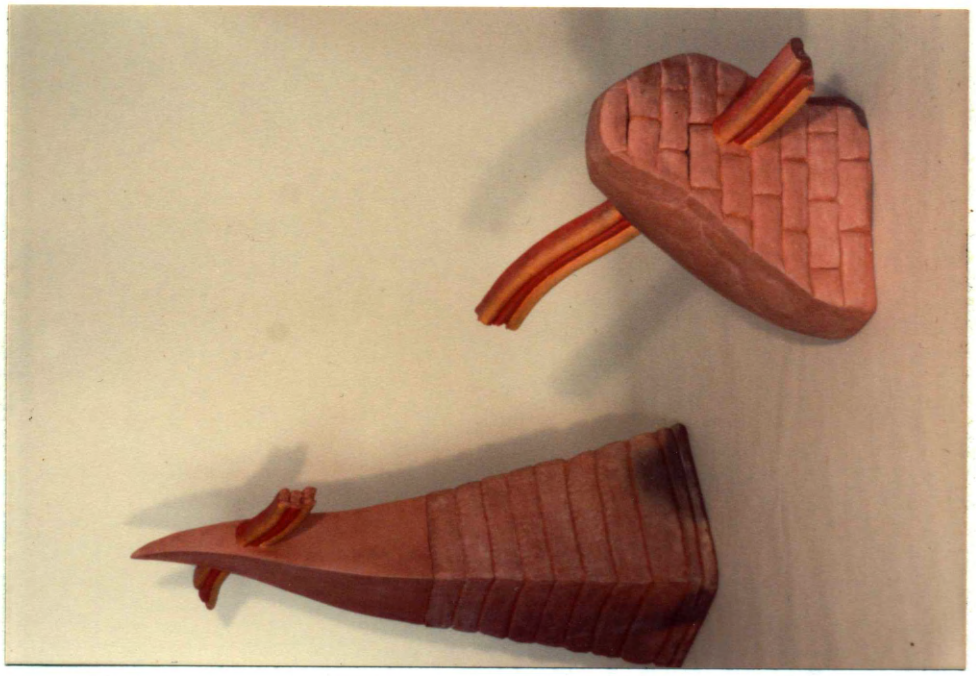
At this point I changed the scale of my work. Increasing the size gave greater presence to the work and related it more to human scale. These larger works comprised the major part of the terminal project show and are designated group C. Figure 3 is the first and largest of the series and is fifty-one inches tall. I feel this piece expresses emotion on more than one level. The pyramid has its own symbolic connotations, but through organic distortions of construction the piece takes on a whimsical quality. I hope that this quality, seen in much of the work, reflects the joy one feels upon entering a spring-filled mountain meadow on a warm afternoon, the joy of being reborn into a timeless environment that is serious, magical, and mysterious.

Through the juxtaposition of two separate parts through a brightly colored and flowing stripe I have tried to enhance the mystical quality I see in the pyramid shape, a quality further exaggerated by an abrupt break in the flowing line. I feel that this

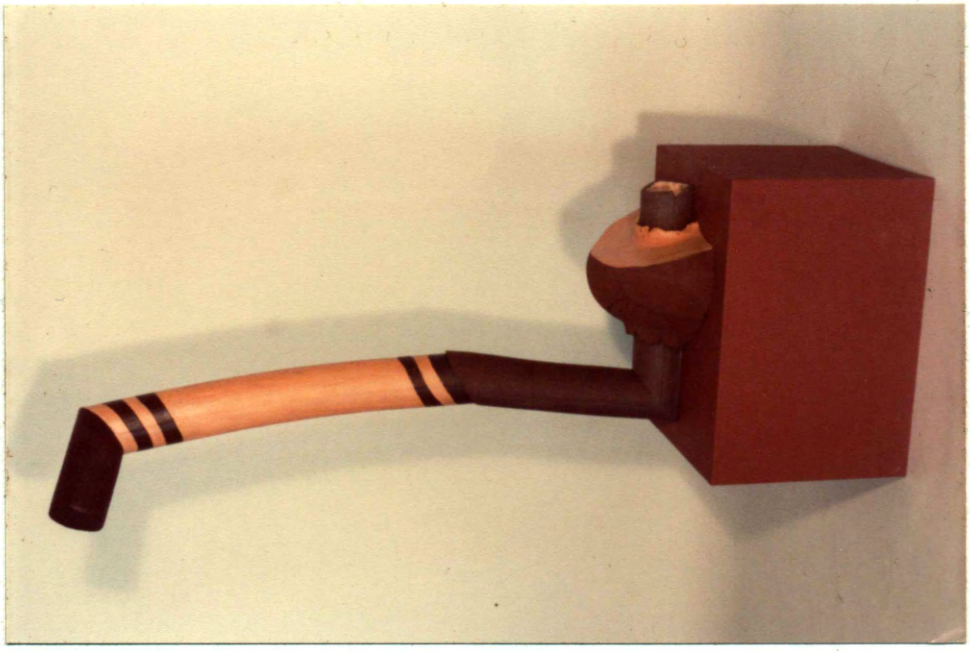
mysticism transcends the whimsical nature of the piece. The fabricated construction of the larger pyramid relates to the brick-like surface on the smaller piece.

In group C I have tried to exploit iron-bearing clays for their inherent color possibilities. Slips and oxides were again sprayed and brushed on for additional color and texture. Three clay bodies were used, each one a different shade of brown or redish brown. The clay color became the dominate color in each piece for greater clarity than that possible through the manipulation of applied color.

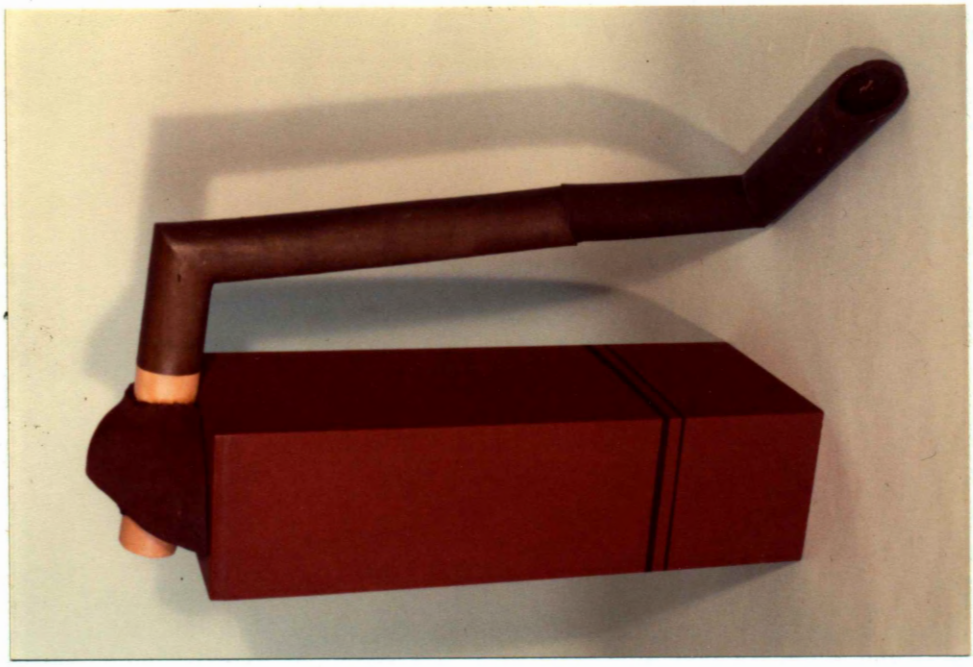
To permit the construction of larger and sometimes thicker pieces I added perlite[4] to the clay bodies. Perlite opens the clay body, thus reducing its density. This makes the piece lighter in weight, promotes even drying and firing, and gives interesting textural effects. Perlite's disadvantage is that it reduces plasticity. In other pieces shredded nylon[5] was added to aid green and working strength. I have attempted to create a somewhat mysterious balance of elements through geometric rods imposed into the forms. In figures 4 and 5 the tube forms are open at one end to show interior space. Ripped clay emphasizes thrust. The implication of these geometric forms upon the organic parts support potential movement. This is illustrated in figure 4 which juts into the air and in figure 5 which moves beyond the confines of its base and crawls onto the floor. I feel that figures 6 and 7 are the most forceful examples of the thrusting man-made forces. The rods burst out of the organic



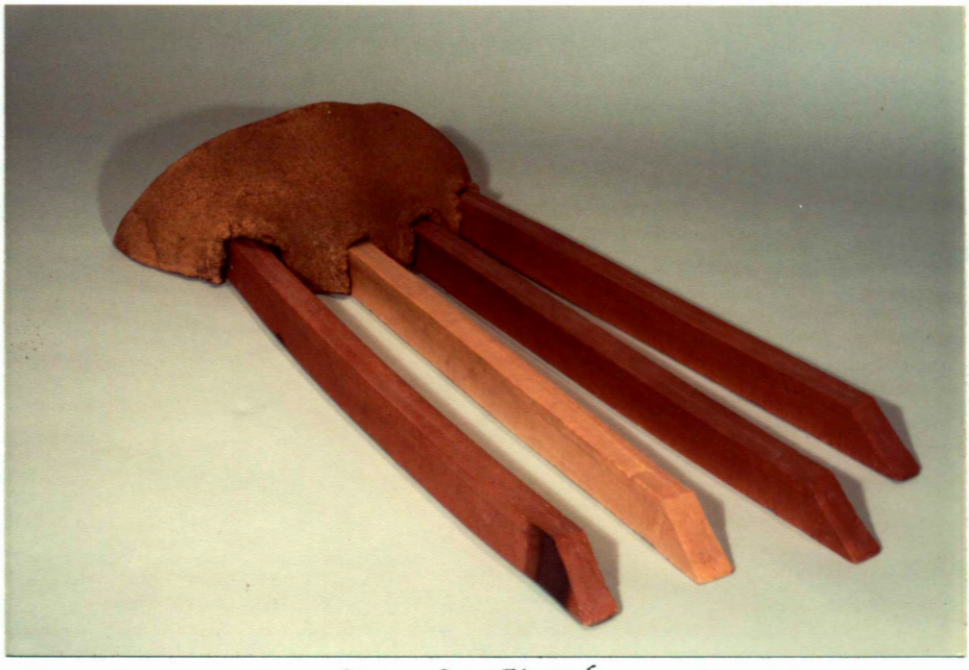
Group C Fig. 3



Group C Fig. 4



Group C Fig. 5



Group C Fig. 6

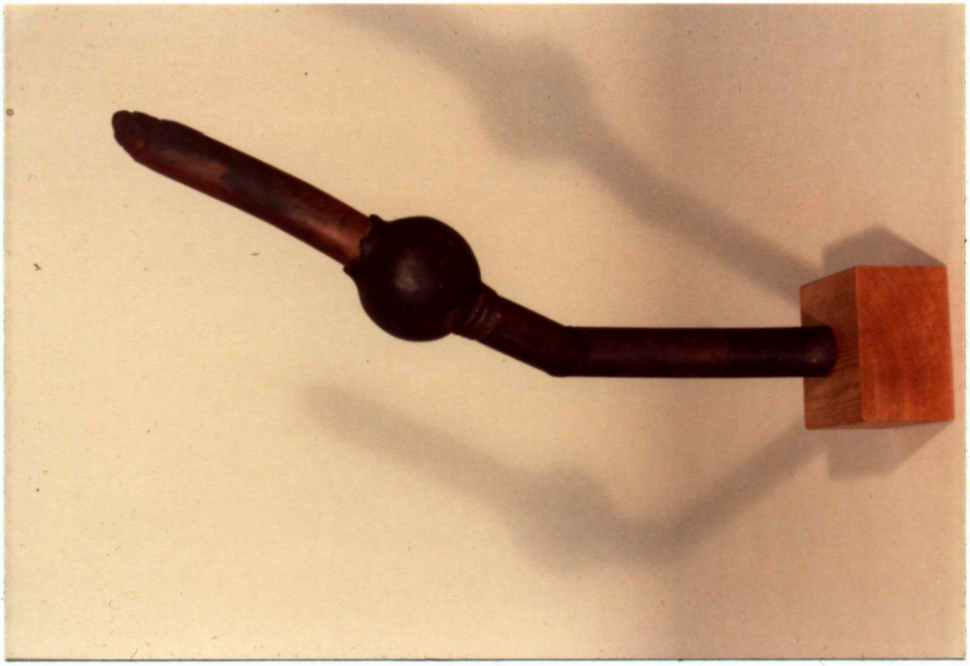
Group C Fig. 7

parts and imply a continuation of the movement to draw the viewer into the work. Group C gave me a better understanding of the relationship between idea and process. The energy and sponaneity from idea to finished form is aided by using surface treatments that are applied to the piece while it is wet and under construction. The sculptures are then fired once in either updraft or downdraft kilns to approximately 1148 degrees centigrade in oxidation. The gas firing often makes flame flashes on the pieces creating a visual tie with the energy of the fire. This effect is illustrative of nature's unpredictable forces.

Group D is a return to the intimacy and preciousness possible in smaller pieces. My intent was to give them the spontaineity and freshness of a sketch establishing a more intimate relationship with the audience. Figures 8 and 9 are constructed of the same talc clay used in group A but are underfired and finished by smoking in an open pit firing as with figure 8, or blackened by heavy reduction after a raku firing as with figure 9. Decoration is limited to sprayed oxide washes and smoke effects from the firing techniques.

The sculptures in this project were executed on different scales with many of the works close to the scale of the human body. I feel that this relationship gives the larger pieces a forceful appearence, very different from the smaller works. I have a recurring vision of

Group D Fig. 8



Group D Fig. 9

walking into a mountain meadow and discovering my sculptures as surreal, living entities within the environment. Andre' Breton once said, "I believe in the possibility that, in the future, dream and reality, apparently such contradictory states, will combine in one kind of absolute realism..."[6]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Naum Gabo, "Sculpture: carving and construction in space", in Herschell B. Chipps, eds., Theories of Modern Art, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1968, p. 331.

[2]Christopher Tyler and Richard Hirsch, Raku, New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, London: Pitman Publishing, 1975, p. 45.

[3]Schouls clay, an earthenware clay obtained from Schouls Tile Company, Schouls Ferry Rd., Portland, Oregon.

[4]Supreme Perlite Company, 4600 N. Suttle Rd., Portland, Oregon 97217.

[5]Tyler and Hirsch, Raku, p. 77.

[6]Andre' Benton, as cited by Mario Bucci, Miro, London, Sydney, Toronto, New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1970, p. 34.

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4. Rhodes, D., Clay and Glazes for the Potter, Philadelphia: Chilton, 1957. Rev. ed., 1973. London: Pitman, 1967.

5. Tyler, Christopher and Hirsch, Richard, Raku, New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, London: Pitman Publishing Group Ltd., 1970.