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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Richard Garrett Masterson for the
Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics presented June 6, 1990.

Title: Torso as Ceramic Vessel.

APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

Robert Kasal, Chair /

James Hansen

Michihiro Kosuge

James Hibbard

Maxine Thomas

The ceramic forms in this thesis project represent a study of the sculptural and figurative qualities of the ceramic process. This study includes a search for a personal form language, development of the slab construction technique, and development of a glazed

surface appropriate to the work. The subject of the work is the human torso, with the vessel-like forms focussing on the core of the body as a metaphor for the core of the human spirit.

TORSO AS CERAMIC VESSEL

by

RICHARD GARRETT MASTERSON JR

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
CERAMICS

Portland State University
1990

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

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Robert Kasal, Chair, Department of Art

C. William Savery, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

DEDICATION

This graduate thesis is dedicated to my father,
Richard Garrett Masterson Sr.,
who taught me to work with my hands
and encouraged me to ask questions.
He is a craftsman and a thinker.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to recognize and thank Robert Kasal for his contributions as teacher, advisor, and friend. He saw enough potential in me to allow my acceptance into the graduate program. He has been kind, generous, and considerate of my circumstances. His judgements were always in my best interest, and his teaching style has been an inspiration. Most of all, he has guided me out of my humble beginnings into a deeper appreciation of and participation in the visual experience.

The sacrifices required to complete this degree were not mine alone. A greater sacrifice was made by my wife and by my daughters. They elected to leave home, relatives, and a secure income in order to allow me to fulfill this personal goal. To Penny, Katie, and Sarah I am deeply grateful.

I want also to thank my mother, Mary E. Masterson, who, by her example, taught me to accept challenges, confront problems, and care for others.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	v
INTRODUCTION	1
THESIS DEVELOPMENT	3
CONCLUSION	23
REFERENCES	24

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1.	First Gestural Torso Drawing	4
2.	Second Gestural Torso Drawing	5
3.	Torso on a Column	7
4.	Second Sectioned Torso	12
5.	Fourth Torso Form	15
6.	Red Glazed Torso	18
7.	Three Sectioned Torso	20
8.	Final Sectioned Torso	22

INTRODUCTION

Exploration into figurative and sculptural characteristics of the ceramic vessel is the subject of my graduate thesis project. The relationship between ceramic vessel forms and the human torso became the focus of this exploration, and provided a way of moving ceramics out of the realm of pottery and into the realm of sculpture. It also provided a more satisfying means of personal expression in the medium.

The ceramic sculptures which constitute this thesis project represent a breakthrough in my approach to the medium. I have worked in ceramics for many years and have found great satisfaction in the materials and processes associated with pottery. Yet, I have been continually moving away from traditional forms in search of a more personal and original means of expression. In the past, this search had included altering or combining traditional pottery forms. The ceramics in this thesis project, however, represent an alteration in my approach to art in general. Rather than manipulate traditional ceramic forms to create an original style, I found that I needed a deeper understanding of sculptural vocabulary and a clearer understanding of the forms and ideas that motivate me to work in clay. This change in my approach to art is a result of the influences

of my graduate studies at Portland State University, and reflect the impact of my professors in drawing, sculpture, ceramics, and art history.

THESIS DEVELOPMENT

The idea of the human torso as a focus for this thesis first emerged in my figure drawing class. Drawing became a vigorous, expressive medium with which to explore ideas about the human body in relation to the vessel form. I was encouraged to reach beyond the technical, literal rendering of anatomy. I was also influenced to recognize the possibilities of symbolism and metaphor in the drawing process. Through the drawings of this period I strove to express an inner presence of life that exists within the model. I abandoned nearly all anatomical references to the figure. These drawings were, at first, gestural oval forms (Figure 1). They floated on the page and had a focus of active line and texture pouring from the center. Often these forms looked as though they were ruptured and broken open to reveal interior and exterior surfaces. This suggested a metaphor of the body as a shell or mantel covering the human spirit. Later drawings were developed more fully as complete compositions (Figure 2). The gestural oval began to appear more solid or massive as well as addressing the issues of context and format. The drawings done during this time suggested a new direction for me to pursue in clay and presented problems which challenged me visually. The sculptures which make up this thesis

Figure 1. First gestural torso drawing.

Figure 2. Second gestural torso drawing.

are, in many ways, continuations of those early drawings executed in three dimensional form.

The first completed torso form was a large textured oval on a simplified Tuscan column and base (Figure 3). This piece was a breakthrough, not only in the direction suggested in the drawings, but also in the techniques used and in the handling of the clay. It was constructed in three sections, built and fired separately, then stacked together to complete the piece. The top section makes clear reference to human torso with the strong, chest-like appearance of the form. There is also indications of neck at the top, and of shoulders rising on either side of the neck-like opening. The composition is formally balanced. It draws more from the impression of human form than from any anatomical depiction. This torso form sits on the column not as a sculpture on a stand, but more as an extension of the column -- the way we have come to see a capital as belonging to a column in architecture. There is a terminating band of clay at the top of the column which seems to draw the torso in like a belt, compressing it into alignment with the pure cylinder of the column. The column itself sits on a square base with battered sides, linking it to the floor geometry. The surface texture manifests a change from section to section. The torso section is aggressively textured with tears and scarring which resemble the irregular, broken surface of a rock wall. Similar to the change from the swollen form of the torso to the compressed cylinder of the column, the texture is restrained and confined within the form of the column. The base appears solid with little texture. The textures seen

Figure 3. Torso on a column

on the form exist not as decoration but, rather, as evidence of the slab construction technique.

It was with this first completed torso form that I began using the technique of slab construction. I needed a technique which allowed for an increase in scale, and also allowed more immediate manipulation of the clay wall into the form desired. Wheel throwing is a fast way to generate form. I found it difficult, however, to avoid a mechanically crafted look in the finished work. After reading about Peter Voulkos' aggressive, physical approach to clay, I felt it would benefit me to work in a way that forced some kind of physical struggle in order to develop the form. By increasing the scale of the work, which presses the limits of the material, and by adopting a technique which built up the clay walls more quickly, I imposed an element of physical struggle on the work. The application of semi-soft slabs to construct the walls of the form often involved the use of my entire body to hold the walls in place and prevent collapse. I would support portions of the wall with an arm and part of my chest while the free arm applied interior reinforcing structure, or stiffened the clay by paddling. Nearing the top of the form, the weight of the clay wall tried to pull the opening into a circle. Since I was working primarily toward an ellipse at the top, this presented great difficulty. There was also difficulty in spanning across the top of the form with the soft slabs. In some cases I had to use transverse ribs and fan vaulting to hold the clay in position. I have a deepened appreciation for the arch and the dome of ancient architecture as a result of

needing to apply these principles to the structure at the top of the forms.

There are some variations of the slab technique which made these works unique. One variation involved the formation of the slab itself. I prefer working with slabs which have been hand thrown, as opposed to slabs which are rolled out flat using a rolling pin or mechanical slab roller. There is a difference in the look of the clay surface between a slab which has been pressed out flat by a rolling pin or mechanical slab roller and one which is hand thrown. A rolled out slab is compressed into a flat dimension and takes on the texture of the surfaces it is compressed between. A thrown slab is stretched out through the momentum of its weight pulling against the drag of its contact with the table. The resulting texture is natural looking and earth-like. The stretched sheets of clay thrown out on a table can look very much like skin or hide. To maximize this texture I make the final throws without alternating sides of the slab, and after the surface of the slab has dried slightly. This produces a surface texture more geologic in nature. The clay looks like landforms in miniature, which reminds me that the clay, being of the earth, behaves in small scale like the earth's crust. The clay is then ready to be torn into whatever shapes are needed to assemble the form.

Another variation of the slab technique is the layering of one slab in front of another or, in some cases, one slab behind another. This creates, in the extreme, a layered look, enhancing the idea of a shell of clay overlying the volume of the form. Often, however, the overlapping slabs are paddled and manipulated for the sake of a

strong joint or further development of the form, in which case, the overlapping remains visible only as an irregular seam or fissure in the form. Like the lines of a well executed drawing, these fissures open and close or appear and disappear articulating the surface features. The idea of a broken, ruptured surface, first explored in the drawings, is now expressed in the textured mantle of this first torso. The form is never actually broken open to reveal the interior except for the opening at the top. But the surface looks cracked and scarred, and in some places looks layered. The column section, as was mentioned earlier, has significantly less texture. Yet, there are visible seams between the sections of slabs used to build the form. For me, these marks in the clay powerfully symbolize the scars one accumulates as one continues through the human experience. The marks are a positive element, like the scars of battle, worn with pride and honor.

This first torso sculpture differs from traditional ceramics particularly with regard to its unglazed surface. The influence of sculpture, with an emphasis on form and away from decorative treatment, led me to abandon glazing in the traditional sense. The dark gray color and harsh, stoney surface is a reaction to the colorful, tactile surfaces of glazed pottery. I did not wish to cover this form with thick, colorful glass. Instead, I applied only slips and stains. The result of this change was a focus on the form and a move away from relying on glaze to beautify or decorate the form. Because the work has a look of stone rather than typical glazed ceramic, this serves to move it away from the genre of pottery to be considered as

sculpture. One dissatisfying side effect is that the work lacks color and luminosity which could further enhance the strength and life of the forms.

The essential issues of the torso on the column include the expression of human figure, the highly textured treatment of the form, the dark, unglazed surface, the strong sense of volume, and the sculpture being composed of stacked sections. These became the issues that would guide the rest of my work throughout the thesis. In an attempt to expand on the ideas of the first torso piece, I explored two additional characteristics with the next sculpture (Figure 4). I wanted to present a clearer representation of the figure in the form. I also wanted to explore breaking open the form to reveal an internal core, to more literally express the metaphor of a shell covering an interior form. It was built in five sections. These include a base, middle, and top, separated by two core sections. These five sections are stacked in such a way that the textured elements express the figurative characteristics of the torso as mantle over a core. The smooth cylindrical sections of the core are recessed behind the mantle and appear to be a single element running through the interior of the form.

This sculpture is larger in scale than the torso with the column. The figurative elements of the human form are more clearly described in the sculpture. The form rises from a relatively narrow base to powerful, broad shoulders at the top. The shoulders, collar bone, navel, pectoral and stomach muscles are more literally described. The strength of this second torso is its physicality. It is a

Figure 4. Second sectioned torso.

dark stoney figure broken into three parts. The breaks in the form, with the revealed edges, are a contradiction to its physicality. This piece does communicate the mantle over a core. It looks like a warrior's suit of armor. But it also seems cold and devoid of life. This sculpture is more figuratively descriptive, yet, lacks a humanness I had hoped to achieve. By including more representational elements, I lost the impact of an abstracted form, as well as the quality of an underlying human spirit. In that way, however, this second torso form was important in clarifying the direction for the remainder of the thesis. After this piece, I returned to the ceramic vessel form as an abstract, rather than literal, expression of the human torso. I also discovered that a strong interior volume more clearly suggests the human spirit than a visible interior core.

The second torso sculpture was important in defining the extent to which these forms could be figurative. I decided to move away from the literal representation of the figure and interior core to a more simplified abstraction of the torso and a stronger sense of interior volume. To explore this direction more readily, I chose to reduce the scale of the work. I wanted to keep the sculptures large enough to remain physically challenging but small enough to complete in one piece. I also wanted to further develop the sculptural elements of the work. My study of sculpture had helped me to focus on form as a singular concern. The work moved forward as a result of freedom from the concerns of function or glaze decoration. It was not the absence of function or glaze, however, that

made the work sculptural. Rather, the focus on form language taught in my sculpture classes helped me to recognize and apply characteristics of convexity and concavity to the forms. I had learned to see and use the play of light and shade on the forms. Most of all, I had learned to refine and distill the elements of the form into a strong, unified whole. These sculptural principles greatly effected my work in this thesis and became more evident as the work progressed.

The next several sculptures returned to a more traditional vessel form as a harmonious whole, and as a metaphor for the human torso. The texture continued to be an integral part of the forming process. It seemed to enhance the expression of the interior volume. I continued to explore breaks in the walls of the forms, not as divisions in the forms, but as small openings or tears in the surface. These ruptures more carefully suggest the shell's fragility in contrast to the strength of the interior volumes. Finally, these next few sculptures returned to a truth of materials. The previous two sculptures drew strength from looking like stone. The work from this point on draws strength from clearly defined volumes. As a result, I felt free to return to glazing as a way of creating a colorful, luminous surface which could contribute to the feeling of life and energy in the forms. The next several sculptures were constructed with the same textured slab technique. The forms, however, were built of one piece and recalled the shapes explored in the drawings.

The fourth torso form(Figure 5), for example, represents a move back to the traditional vessel in scale, form, and colorful glaze

Figure 5. Fourth torso form.

treatment. This piece could be considered a compromise between the more literal figure and core idea of the second torso, and the hovering oval form seen in the drawings mentioned earlier. The form rises from a narrow circular base to a swollen, zeppelin-like ellipse at the top. This gives the piece a general waist to shoulder reference. In addition, the sculpture opens slightly at the top to form a neck. All other anatomical details have been eliminated. The rising, widening of the form is echoed in the textures of the overlapping slabs, which also begin narrow and widen out at the top. There is sufficient evidence in the textured surface to illustrate its construction. One can, for instance, trace the perimeters of the various slabs which were overlapped and paddled together. The natural, earth-like texture of the slabs looks like a stoney skin overlapping the form. In some places, however, the texture has been paddled nearly smooth. These areas are focused at either end of the elongated top where the clay seems compressed against the swelling interior volume. There are breaks in the surface at the junction of some of the slab pieces. These serve to set up a tension between the strong volume and the fragile shell. This also suggests a fragmentation of the slab sections -- either fragments combining to form the whole, or the whole of the form becoming fragmented. The color of the form is white, gray, and blue, with the strongest colors in the crevices of the texture. This was done using a cobalt stain brushed into the texture. The surface was then wiped off to remove the stain from all but the recessed areas. Finally, an opaque white glaze was sprayed over the entire piece. The firing left the surface

matt and stoney with the stain breaking through the glaze from within the texture.

Other torso forms of the same series were glazed with a nickel red glaze over a similar blue stain. The fifth torso piece is a good example of this glaze effect (Figure 6). The pinkish red surface is quite luminous. The blue stain breaks through as purple in areas and black in others. In this example, the glaze itself is a strong color and a sensuous surface. It ranges from fuchsia to kaki-green. The glaze is not a decoration separate from the form. Rather, it enriches the surface and works with the strength of the form. This piece exaggerates the rising, swollen silhouette of the fourth torso form. The base is tall and narrow. The top is wide and irregular in shape. Together they work to float the form like an ostrich standing on one leg. The surface texture has been paddled smoother than on previous examples. This serves to strengthen and clarify the form. It also makes the surface appear tightly stretched by the inflated interior volume. The brightly colored fissures of texture open and close as they move across the form. This fifth torso sculpture is typical of the direction of the work which followed. This, and similar works, helped to define the issues of form and textured surface, as a new solution to the problem of the human torso. I was able to refine, in these smaller pieces, the issue of torso as a harmonious whole. They draw from and refer to the human body in an abstract rather than a literal manner. These later works are truly ceramic in character while remaining sculptural in orientation.

Figure 6. Red glazed torso.

The final stage of the work is a culmination of the scale of the first two torso pieces with the form and color of the later pieces. The strength of the later torsos was their distillation of elements into a unified whole. To achieve this unification and also increase the scale of the work presented a challenge to me. The increase in scale of the final work meant a return to breaking the form into sections, as seen in the first two pieces. The sections were necessary to divide the work into parts that were reasonable to fire and handle. I felt that each section should be a strong form, independent of other parts. I also concluded that I could leave record of the seams by not trimming the edges of the sections to match or line up. In this way the divisions could contribute to the sculpture by giving the form greater compositional and textural interest.

The example of the three sectioned torso illustrates the results (Figure 7). I was pleased to see, in fact, how powerfully the whole of the form asserted itself. The crude divisions and the mis-match of the sections becomes a secondary attribute to the work rather than a distraction. As seen in this piece, the work has become abstractly figurative, expressive of materials and technique, and deals with the sculptural issues of volume, form, and, in this latter case, mass. The surface is highly textured, revealing its slab construction. The effect of the visible slab edges contributes to the issue of the mantle or shell, as well as generating an exciting surface composition. The glaze makes the form appear lively and luminous. The glaze also contributes to the harmonious whole of the form. As mentioned

Figure 7. Three sectioned torso.

earlier, the divisions between the sections are compositionally significant. Rather than simply stacking one part on top of another, the sections become a vital part of the work. Now, the arrangement of the divisions in the form is given aesthetic consideration.

The final sculpture torso done for this thesis project adds one more element to the issues previously discussed (Figure 8). The three sectioned torso explored the possibility of harmony in the form with the combination of independent sections. This final sculpture explores the tension created in the form through the elimination of some of the sections. It was, in a way, a test of the strength of the form to be considered complete, while having stronger divisions between the sections, and while portions of the expected whole seem to be missing. The results are visually provocative. The breaks in the form are unexpected. The introduction of a flat horizontal plane is in contrast to the organic volume of the form. However, the vertical divisions in the form, in concert with the horizontal planes, establish a pattern for the sections. It is the way one would expect to section any solid form, such as a melon or a round of cheese. This implies a solidity of the form, in contrast to the textured shell. The divisions in the form create a striking silhouette. Yet, the volume of the sculpture continues to be assertive in spite of these apparent contradictions. This final torso engages the viewer in a way that requires him or her to participate in the completion of the form.

Figure 8. Final sectioned torso.

CONCLUSION

The focus of my graduate thesis in ceramics has been the use of vessels to express human form. Vessels can refer to either containers or conductors. Ceramic artists use the term with regard to pottery, which implies its traditional function of storage or containment. Biologists use the term as the conductor of blood to and from the heart. I use the word as a reference to the traditions of pottery, and to my method of working with a hollow shell of clay. But, for me, it also represents a metaphor for the human body as both container and conductor. The past two years have taught me a great deal more than how to build and fire works in clay. I have learned how to look within myself to find the thing that will keep my work vital. I have discovered how important it is to me that my work has integrity. I have learned that art is about problems, not solutions--that art is about questions, not answers. And, I discovered that it is only by producing the work that I can ever truly discover where the work is going and what the work is about. The ceramic sculptures from this graduate thesis are a tangible record of my growth towards becoming an artist. I am confident the experience I have gained in working with the members of my graduate committee will endure well beyond the significance of this body of work.

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