

CERAMICS: THE ELEMENTAL ART.

BORN OF EARTH AND WATER,

TEMPERED BY AIR,

MATURED BY FIRE.

by

KARL DAVID KNUDSON

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

June 1997

APPROVED: _____

Professor George Kokis

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Karl David Knudson For the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts
in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts to be taken June 1997

TITLE: CERAMICS: THE ELEMENTAL ART. BORN OF EARTH AND WATER,
TEMPERED BY AIR, MATURED BY FIRE.

Approved: _____

Professor George Kokis

This thesis follows the artistic and intellectual development of Karl Knudson through his study of ceramic art at the University of Oregon. It consists of a brief discussion of his artistic origins and development, his intellectual and aesthetic development regarding art, and cumulates with a critical discussion of his work from his Bachelor of Fine Arts Terminal Project Exhibition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses sincere appreciation to Professors George Kokis, Laura Alpert, and Heather Tanner for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript, as well as their insightful comments and questions concerning my art work. Special thanks are due to Cynthia Doss for helping me with the proofreading of this thesis as well as putting up with the odd hours of a potter. I wish to thank my family, David, Kaarin, and Bjorn Knudson for all of their help and support. My thanks to the art faculty and students of the University of Oregon, as well as my electronic friends on CLAYART for all that they have taught me about art and life. Finally special thanks to Jean Lamb, my high school art teacher who started me along this path. Thanks to you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT.....	1
II. ARTISTIC HISTORY.....	6
III. CRITICAL STATEMENT REGARDING BFA SHOW....	14
IV. CONCLUSION.....	23
APPENDIX	
A. RUNESTONES.....	24

CHAPTER 1

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

I was very fortunate as a child to be surrounded by art. While my parents were not rich, they acquired a modest collection of art, which was displayed throughout our home. I think that growing up surrounded by art played an important role in developing my appreciation of it. Through most of elementary school I did very little besides school art projects, but in the seventh grade I discovered drawing and painting. That year I won an award for being the “Art Student of the Year, 1987.” When I entered high school, I did not have any artistic plans. I took an art class because it fit into my schedule and I had enjoyed earlier art classes. In that art class, I met the best art teacher in the world, in my opinion, Jean Lamb. I had her as a teacher every term of my high school career. She planted the seed that forever changed the way I look at art, even though it took me six years to realize it. I owe almost all of my motivation to be an artist to her.

When I came to the University of Oregon, I intended to be a Chemistry/Pre-med. major. What occurred over the course of a year or two was a simple war of attrition. While I loved science, a steady doubting slowly grew. My classes became uninspiring and I began to feel quite distanced from my professors. One night I awoke and knew that I was not going to be happy continuing down the path that I was following. That realization created a problem with what I had planned concerning my possible future education, career and financial situation.

At first, the idea of becoming a professional artist seemed almost a joke to me. For many non-artists who read this, it probably is. In addition to the widely held myth that creativity and talent exist only in a small percentage of the population, I think that

prejudice exists because of the artist's stereotypical financial situation. Who hasn't heard of the "starving artist"? Artists of the past were thought to be starving because they were so motivated to work that they did not eat. I think however, that the idea behind this stereotype has changed in the modern era. Modern starving artists are hungry because they have no means by which to support themselves. Is there a fundamental reason for this idea of the poor artist? Is it simply that businessmen are not good artists and artists are not good businessmen?

Despite this, I chose to pursue a degree in art: in ceramics no less! Ceramics is stereotyped as a primitive, dirty, old-fashioned medium. In the modern world many artists are being pushed in the opposite direction, towards technological or abstract conceptual art. Ceramics is really about as primitive as it gets: earth, air, fire and water. Yet, at the same time, ceramists can take their work to an incredibly high technological level, using technologies such as computerized kilns, photographic reproductions on ceramics and computer glaze calculation programs. Some of the scientific knowledge (especially in glaze/glass development) that I see is almost beyond my reading level, much less my comprehension level. Ceramics is a unique art because of this dichotomy, as it is incredibly high tech while at the same time as simple as mud and fire. Its complexity or simplicity will depend upon the individual artist's persuasion.

Ceramics is an art form traditionally marginalized by western art criticism and artists of other media. Many go so far as to argue that ceramics, especially functional, utilitarian ceramics, is not an art form at all, but a craft. This alone is responsible for years of arguing between artists about the role of ceramics in the modern world. Controversy about the status of ceramic art exists not only between ceramic artists and artists of other media, but also has been a divisive factor among ceramists. I believe that this controversy exists because of two factors: the Industrial Revolution's advent of mass produced ceramics, and the inception of the non-utilitarian art market. Potters argue that

ceramic sculpture is inaccessible and increasingly incomprehensible, whereas utility and accessibility for use in daily life are the criteria of the best art. Sculptors argue that pottery is commonplace and lacks any sort of intellectual content, that sculpture is the only way to true art. It is literally a case of everyone thinking, "There's something wrong with anyone who's not like me." I think that this is one of the stupidest things that a group of artists who are traditionally marginalized could possibly do. How can we as ceramic artists ever hope to educate the public and the rest of the art world of our value and contribution to art if we continually devalue the work of others within our field? The three major groups of ceramic artists are: the potter, the vessel maker and the sculptor. Simply defined, the potter makes utilitarian items for the home that have specific uses. A bowl or a teapot are objects that would fall under the potter's category. The sculptor, on the other hand, makes sculpture: objects to convey a specific intent or idea. Their art is hard to categorize because it does not necessarily ascribe to a standardized form to express a specific idea, unlike pottery which contains universal similarities. The group of artists which I think is the hardest to understand for a non-ceramic person is the vessel maker. I think an analogy would be to think of music without sound. These artists are concerned with making a potter's forms without the utility found in the work of a potter. The work that results is an interesting intellectual challenge. What is the significance of a coffee mug that is solid? A teapot with no openings? These are pots about pots and they ask a very interesting question: If a bowl has meaning because of its ability to contain something, if you remove that ability, what is left? Is it still a bowl? It can't take on a specific idea or intent without moving into, or at least towards, sculpture, just as it can't take on utility without becoming pottery. The potter would argue that the piece loses the only thing that gives it meaning. The sculptor would argue that an object lacking intent and idea is inherently uninteresting. The vessel maker would argue that his bowl transcends "bowlness" to become something else without requiring intellectual baggage. In

the end it is probably the consumer that decides the piece's fate. It is just as valid to own a piece of ceramic art that sits on a shelf and matches the couch, as it is to own a bowl used to serve dinner, or a sculpture that makes you think.

To explain how and why I developed into an artist is a difficult task. It is a very personal subject which, until recently, I had never given much serious thought to. I had always been more interested in the doing than the actual reasoning behind my doing it. Perhaps this was due to the very nature of the difficult questions that I was either afraid or too busy to ask myself: "Who am I? Am I an artist? Where does this come from? Why do I do this?" Questions like these often have no answers, much less easy ones. The true answers may only come to me at the moment before death when my whole life flashes before my eyes. It seems to be an interesting paradox. When I am actually able to truly say, "I AM ..." I will not be able to.

Some people may be able to define themselves in a simple statement like, "I am a potter." To me that statement seems limiting. Since I began working with clay seven years ago I've been a "potter" meaning; worker, maker, chemist, mason, architect, carpenter, electrician, plumber, geologist, student, teacher, designer, salesman, of course pyromaniac and probably a few dozen others. I am not just a potter, I work in other media as well. I find that it is impossible for me to explain the nature of my artistic being as I have not yet fully defined myself and probably never will as my own ideals and aesthetics are changing.

I spoke with my advisor, George Kokis, about this conflict and in the manner of most good professors he answered me with different questions. His questions led me to rather simplistic answers. Who am I? I am who I am. Am I an artist? If I say I am. An artist is someone who makes art and the definition of art is ambiguous. The Webster's College dictionary defines it as, "The quality, production, expression, or realm of what is beautiful or of more than ordinary significance and the class of objects subject to aes-

thetic criteria.” This definition to me seems to include almost everything imaginable, which is probably the root of arguments such as whether a piece is art or pornography and so on. Peter Volkous, one of the great modern American figures in ceramics, at a recent lecture in Seattle stated this idea simply as, “There is no such thing as art, only artists.” Whether that statement makes perfect sense or is nonsense is really up to you.

The question of where my art comes from became at once very simple and at the same time unexplainable. Simply stated, I think that art comes from a person’s collective experience and influences (the soul?). Why it manifests itself is harder to explain and is most likely different for each artist. Why do I make art? Why not? I enjoy doing it. For the most part it satisfies a number of psychological needs. I love mud and fire. There is a sense of accomplishment when I create something. Every time I fire a kiln I can hardly wait to see what happens; when I open the kiln it feels almost like Christmas. There is also a sense of immortality when working with clay, which arises from the durability of the ware. The pieces I make could last thousands of years. I believe that ceramics has the potential to satisfy financial needs as well, which is also beneficial.

Unlike some artists, I do not intend my work to be excessively concerned with vast socio-political meaning. Nor do I try to cover it up with reams of incomprehensible “artspeak” in an attempt to make my work more important by making it impossible to understand without a thesaurus. There is only so much a reader will believe. I think that an artist who relies verbiage to supply a work with content, in the end loses the prospective audiences’ respect. It would be difficult for someone to take me seriously if I were to write something like, “This work symbolizes the primal compulsion for grounding in a dysfunctional society where Nirvana can only be achieved through a universal, transgendered reliquary containing artifacts of daily ritual cleansing in the modern capitalist world,” about a toothbrush holder. I would have trouble taking myself seriously. Frankly, my ceramic work is mostly concerned with simpler things, utility, purpose and beauty.

CHAPTER 2

ARTISTIC HISTORY

I plan to illustrate my own artistic development by briefly explaining my work chronologically and explaining what I was thinking about and doing. Initially, in the formative stages of this thesis, I compiled a long list of people who I consider to be major influences on me. Almost instantly it became clear that I would be unable to write about each influence. Professor Kokis brought up an interesting phrase that summed up this situation well, "I'm sorry, I did not have time to be brief."

When I seriously started making art, I was a painter. While I had some drawing skill, I had the good fortune, of being surrounded by a number of extremely talented draftsmen in my early art classes. Immediately, I knew that it would be years before I would be able to have the necessary training to consider myself a peer. I had recently made the transition, not only from junior high school to high school, but also from a town of four hundred people to a school of over two thousand. I wanted to be considered a useful part of the art group. Since I could not compete with my classmates in drawing, I began to explore alternative mediums and styles. Almost immediately, I discovered the impressionistic painting style. I worked in this style for almost three years before I discovered ceramics (illus. 1, 2).



Above. Ill. 1. *Pond*. 30 x 40".

Below. Ill. 2. *McHugh Creek*. 40 x 50".



My early work in clay is typical of most students learning to throw clay on a wheel. My pots were awful. They were short, bottom heavy, inconsistently thrown and often lopsided. My goal at the time was to throw classical vase shapes, but my lack of skill resulted in a vast number of them becoming flaring spittoons. Much of my painting style showed through in the decoration of these pots. I was still thinking like a painter, that the canvas had to be covered before the painting was complete. Unfortunately, when my canvas was a white or cream spittoon and my colors were brown, gold, blue and green, I made some ugly pots absolutely hideous. I often joked that they were either space shuttle nose cones, or something that we could drop out of planes on the enemy.



III.3. *Raku Vase*. 6"



III. 4. *Desert*. 7"



III. 5. *Raku Pond*. 8"

As I began to develop some skills as a potter, I was fortunate enough to get a summer internship with a local studio potter, Sharon Reeves. Working with her, I got my first taste of American style Raku, a firing process where a piece is removed from a kiln at 1800° F and placed in combustible material for a smoking process. I was still thinking like a painter, but my "canvases" had greatly improved and Raku is far more forgiving. Painting's brush strokes, (illus. 3) landscape composition, (illus. 4) and the use of color to suggest scenery, (illus. 5) all played important roles in my ceramics. The similarities between my painting and ceramics is especially apparent when you compare my Raku vase to my painting, "*Pond*" (illus. 1, 5).

Ceramics is not entirely painting though and I gradually began to grow out of using painting techniques to finish pots. My exploration of the use of the hand print was the point where this shift became most apparent. To make them, I would simply dip my hand into glaze and handle the pot. While using a hand print on art as a signature gave

me some interesting historical identification, as it has been theorized that this is the reason for many hand prints appearing in primitive cave paintings, that was not the reason that I did it. Instead, I was fascinated by the emotional power that I felt conveyed by these hand prints. I think that my initial response came from a Chinese vase that I caught a glimpse of in a movie. The hand print on it was desperate, visually it was incredibly powerful. I tried for the rest of my high school career to create emotion in the hand print (illus. 6, 7). Hands that were empty and open, seemed to be searching, longing for something. Hands reaching for each other sought companionship to stave off isolation. Hands balled into fists drew upon the raw emotions of fear and rage. Only a few really worked well.

When I resumed ceramics at the University of Oregon, I continued where I had left off. I was still very interested in the hand print, (illus. 8) but much less so. I briefly tried returning to a very painterly decoration, (illus. 9) but this too was unsatisfying. I began to experiment with pouring and dripping glaze over my pots (illus. 10). Initially, my pouring was very conservative, (illus. 11) but as I progressed, the drips became increasingly abstract (illus. 12). Soon I began to see shapes created in the abstract drips that I was making. Images of monkeys (illus. 13) and a bird (illus. 14) were perhaps the most recognizable, but many of the more



III. 6. Hand. 10"



III. 7. Hand. 9"



III. 8. Hand. 12"



III. 9. K. B. E.. 14"



III. 10. Breakfast. 6"



III. 11. Vase. 15"



III. 12. Vase. 12"



III. 13. Monkey. 13"

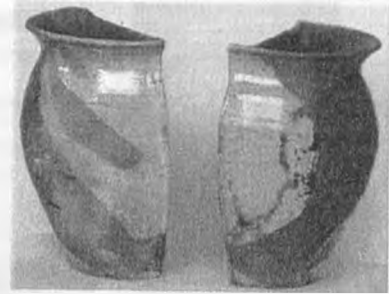


III. 14. Bird. 14"

abstract drips required only a little imagination.

By this time I had acquired some skill throwing and I began to experiment with various firing techniques and alterations. I tried combining salt with raku which lead to some unusual results as the clay bodies exhibited warmer tones in their coloration compared to the stark blacks of Raku (illus. 15). I soon discontinued this practice when I discovered how sick I could make myself doing it. I shifted through a number of methods in the weeks and months to follow. I experimented with carving designs into the surface of the clay, (illus. 16) combining colored clays together in a single pot, (illus. 17) more Raku (illus. 18) and crystalline glazes (illus. 19). Crystalline glazes were the longest lasting of each of these techniques, mostly because of the difficulty in formulating a glaze and a firing schedule that would work in the kilns available to me at the time. Most of the work that I made during the six months that I worked on crystalline glazes ended up on the shard pile. I've only kept about five pieces.

The technical demands of crystalline glazes and other intensive firing methods, became monotonous and uninspiring after a while, so I began to work in the simpler atmospheric firings of the wood and salt kilns. My wood fired work at the time was compelling, (illus. 20) but



III. 15. *Saliku*. 10"



III. 16. *Fish Vase*. 15"



III. 17. *Bottle*. 8"



III. 18. *Vase*. 13"



III. 19. *Bottle*. 7"



III. 20. *Vase*. 11"

not nearly enough to compare with the results and effects that I was achieving in the salt kiln. I began simply using coloring oxides to decorate the work (illus. 21). At the same time I experimented with applying wood ash to pots in the salt kiln (illus. 22).

It would seem only natural to combine the two techniques on a single pot (illus. 23). I was fairly happy with the results that I was getting in the kiln, but the process lacked some of the finesse that more controlled firings offered. So again, I made the move to a more controlled environment experimenting with the development of copper red glazes (illus. 24). Along with this, I started carving geometric designs on my pottery and firing them using glazes that would highlight the carving (illus. 25, 26). This work looked great when it worked out, but required such an investment of time and energy to create, that it became a significant loss if a piece failed.

At roughly the same time that I was working in the salt kiln, I began carving stone. While this is not directly related to ceramics, I worked extensively in stone for nearly a year while I continued working in ceramics and it offers a unique parallel. Stone sculpture is vastly different from pottery, they are nearly polar opposites, the hard, subtractive stone compared to the soft, pliable clay. In ceramics, forms are generally created using an additive process, a piece of clay is stretched and shaped into a form. Stone on the other hand is a subtractive medium requiring stone to be removed to shape a form. Many people asked me how I was able to do both simultaneously because



Ill. 21. Tumbler. 5"



Ill. 22. Vase. 15"



Ill. 23. Vase. 15"



Ill. 24. Vase. 11"



Ill. 25. Vase. 9"



Ill. 26. Cup. 4"

they are so different. It was really just a matter of thinking about the space within a form, or the negative space around the form. A simple analogy is creating a simple circle on a piece of paper, you can fill in the space within the circle (pottery), or you can fill in the area outside of the circle (stone sculpture). I think that it is that simple with three dimensional forms as well: add or manipulate clay to fill in the space of a vase, or cut away all the stone that does not look like the same vase.

My stone carving began in marble. Like my ceramic development, my early work was reminiscent of earlier artist's styles, but gradually evolved into a different style. With clay I was making forms that were very functional, cups and bowls and the like. My first marble sculpture was of a female torso (*Torso*, illus. 27) and was my attempt to work in a style similar to the ancient Greek or the Italian Renaissance sculptors. My second marble would initially start out along similar veins, but would become gradually more abstract while I carved it (*Tylenol woman*, illus. 28). After this I carved a soapstone, *Embrace*, which continued to become more abstract and suggestive (illus. 29). This trend would continue through the remainder of my stone carving to date. The chlorite sculptures *Kindred* and *Progeny*, (illus. 30, 31) complete a triad with *Embrace* that illustrate the emotional direction that my stone carving had taken. While my pottery was strictly



III. 27. *Torso*. 14"



III. 28. *Tylenol Woman*. 28"



III. 29. *Embrace*. 15"



III. 30. *Kindred*. 20"



III. 31. *Progeny*. 10"

utilitarian, my stone sculpture took on a very different tone regarding emotion and allusion. One of the things that I enjoyed most about this new allusional stone was the different responses that different people had to them. I was often very reluctant to tell people what I thought the sculpture was about because of the bias that knowledge gives the viewer. In looking back over the stone work that I did, I noticed two distinct themes. The first theme began with my *Torso* sculpture and contained imagery at various sexual levels. The classic nude, (*Torso*) followed by an abstracted pregnant torso, (*Tylenol woman*) followed by figures comforting each other (*Embrace*). *Progeny* easily fit into this category alluding to a sexual encounter. *Kindred* posed a bit of a problem though. I originally conceived it as a portrait of two male siblings, the older brother dominating his younger and smaller sibling. When I first showed it for critique however, no one saw this. Rather, the class evenly split between the figures being symbolic of the male/female relationship with the patriarchal male dominating the supportive female, or as a couple huddled together for protection against the outside elements. Either of these interpretations fit better into the sexuality motif than my siblings interpretation. This bothered me until I realized that my interpretation of the entire sculpture body was representative of the life/reproductive cycle. I had made a series, out of order, that contained; the female, courtship, intercourse, pregnancy and finally, the weaning of the offspring. The mind works in mysterious ways.

My other sculptures deal more with design using geometry to create movement, or something visually stimulating. Overall, I think that these are less successful than my other sculptures, although a few of them are more engaging because of their design, (*Spartan*, illus. 32) or the movement and balance that they create (illus. 33).



III. 32. *Spartan*. 16"



III. 33. *Waves*. 12"

Along with my stone carving, my pottery at this time began to become more decorative and less functional. I began to develop a bright glaze assortment to go along with my new ceramic shapes (illus. 34, 35, 36) I began to join thrown sections to form large pots, (illus. 37) and to combine thrown sections with a handbuilt, thrown section to create the *Totems* (illus. 38). The *Totems* are the bridge between pottery and sculpture for me. They are created using pottery techniques, but are assembled in a sculptural manner. They are about formal issues, the interaction of the geometric and the organic, of refined and stressed components. I would have liked to explore them further but circumstances in the ceramics studio prevented me from developing them further.

Finally, I have become very interested in the process behind the wood kiln over the last eight months. Examples of this work will be covered in the chapter about my terminal project. Much of this energy comes from MFA candidate Alex Anderson's effort to rebuild and organize a very successful anagama style wood kiln. I have been making most of my pottery specifically for it. Glazing has become simplified to shino-type glazes or no glaze.

During this time, I learned that the choice of clay is an important factor in the success of a piece. A clay body that reacts well to the fire is essential in developing the flashing and coloration typically associated with the wood fire. Now that I have developed a body that is very successful within the kiln, each firing of the kiln is eagerly anticipated.



III. 34. Vase. 14"



III. 35. Teapot. 7"



III. 36. Vase. 13"



III. 37. Vase. 26"



III. 38. Totem. 28"

CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL STATEMENT REGARDING BFA SHOW

My terminal project BFA show will be set up in order to highlight some of my more recent works as well as example what I consider major advances in my career here at the University of Oregon. It will consist of six elements grouped by their stylistic similarity.

The first section will consist of three *Totems* (illus. 38). As already discussed these forms dealt with the interaction of different formal elements. This interaction is shown in the two flanking *Totems*, through the use of an inverted pyramid intersecting a bell shaped base. The comparison of curve and angle is further enhanced by the stretched, circular rings that cover the pyramid's sides. This was an aspect of these forms that I discovered during the process of making them. Initially, I had concerned myself with the idea of combining not only different forms, but different styles of forms in a single composition. Many questions arose. How does one integrate an organic shaped base with a geometric shaped top? What role did symmetry play in the success or failure of a piece. How does proportion affect impact and balance of a piece? Because of each *Totem's* uniqueness, these questions had to be asked and answered for each piece. My later work experimented with combining more than two forms in a single piece as shown by the center *Totem*. I also worked briefly with the idea of transforming geometric forms into organic shapes.

The next section will feature my use of sprayed wood ash based glazes over dolomite matte glazes (illus. 34-37). I am still very interested in this style of working because I believe that they have a very decorative nature as well as providing many

unusual effects that happen during the firing as clay and glazes interact. These pots are also interesting to me because of their surface embellishment. I imagine myself working more in this style in the future.

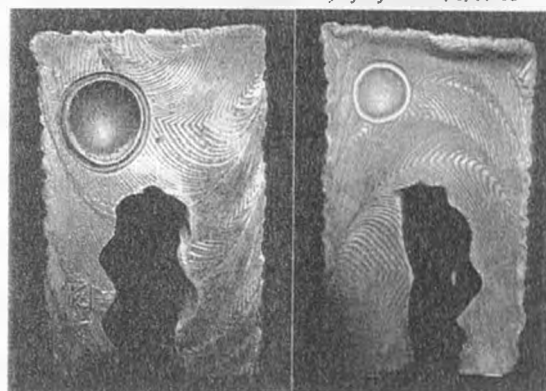
The next grouping will consist of the three stone sculptures *Embrace*, *Kindred* and *Progeny* (illus. 29-31). Their importance and significance to my artistic development have been discussed previously.

Following my stone sculpture will be a small display of a few pieces of wood fired ceramic sculpture.

The Story of Life, Pt. 1, 2, 3. (illus. 39) is the opening set of a series that I had planned to document the twenty-four years of my life. I planned to have then increase in size similar to my own growth, decorated with simple marks to represent major events and the various stages of my development as a person.



III. 39. *The Story of Life. Pt. 1, 2, 3.* 13"



III. 40. *Dawn/Dusk.* 9"

Dawn/Dusk (illus. 40) began as an experiment in simple slab decoration and design. I think that this piece was really blessed by the kiln gods as it was during the firing that the piece was really completed. On one side the larger sphere, representing the sun, rises over the cooler gray clay. The clay being symbolic of cold earth after a cool night. On the other side, the smaller moon rises over warmer, toasty brown clay, symbolizing the hot, dusty earth after a hot day. When I first saw it, I was amazed at how much it reminded me of the Midwest in the summer time.

Dawn/Dusk is a good example of how chance can play a role in art, especially in ceramics. Prior to the firing this piece was basically a design on a slab. It was after the

fire that representational meaning became apparent. These chance effects play a major role in a number of ceramic processes, atmospheric firings in the wood and salt kilns, Raku, pit and saggar fires, as well as many of the specialty glazes such as carbon trapping shinos and crystalline glazes. Some argue that chance is detrimental to the artistic importance of ceramics that rely on chance during their formation. They argue that choice, not chance, is the better method of creating artistic "merit" in a piece. This philosophy promotes the artist's intent and idea as the deciding criteria, minimizing or elimination chance in the artistic and aesthetic evaluation of a piece. I do not agree with this limited definition of merit in ceramic art. Chance is a valid and essential component in the success of many works of ceramic art, especially those relying on glaze or atmospheric variation to achieve aesthetic results. Using *Dawn/Dusk* as an example, if I were to have painted each side of the piece with acrylic paint, I do not feel that the piece would be nearly as successful because there was no risk using that method.

By comparison, when I fired this piece in the wood kiln, using the fire alone to glaze the piece, there was no way to predict the final outcome. Its coloration depended upon its location in the kiln, the arrangement of the pieces in the kiln around it, how the kiln stacking affected the flame path, how we stoked the kiln, what kind of wood we were burning, etc. There were literally thousands of variables that affected the finished piece. This to me presents a tremendous risk of failure, or if not failure, at least an unexpected result. I would ask how something that is a sure thing like painting a piece with acrylic paint, or acrylic's glaze counterpart, is more artistically valid than a piece that involved taking a risk.

The largest section of my show will consist of pottery fired in the wood kiln (illus. 41-42). I do not have a lot to say about



Ill. 41. Vase. 10"



Ill. 42. Vase. 9"

my pottery concerning any great ideas or ambitions I have about them. The truth is I really just like to make them. Pots are pots. Clay is a tactile, sensual material. There really is no feeling quite like throwing a nice pot. There is a freedom in working with clay as well, I have always thought of it as being Zen. What I mean by that is that there are many times when I am sitting at the wheel throwing and am completely unaware of anything going on around me, including the pot that I'm throwing. Surprisingly enough, these "Zen pots" often times end up being the best pots that I make. I liken the sensation of throwing those "Zen pots" to drawing a smooth curve. For example, if you draw very slowly and thoughtfully, the curve will often appear jagged, however, if you draw a curve quickly, without really thinking about it, it is more successful as a smooth curve. This is not to say that these pots are free of craftsmanship, they are not. They are free from most intellectual and emotional baggage, because they are created from spontaneous and primal responses. I think that is what makes them successful. When I make a form it is because I like a shape or curve. When I texture or embellish the surface of the pot, it is because that is the way that I see that particular pot as being, or because I just feel like it. What other medium offers such freedom?

My personal pottery aesthetic is concerned mostly with craftsmanship. How well a piece was crafted is very important to me. Good pots are made from a mastery of a skill or technique. They reflect that mastery in their finished state. I wish I was more adept at making really nice pots. A poorly crafted pot will always be that regardless of what glaze you try to hide it under. Pottery is a demanding medium. It is nearly impossible to make a bad pot good, while at the same time it is stupidly easy to make a good pot bad.

I wanted to include a lot of pottery in this show because it is primarily what I have done during my time here at the University of Oregon. While I often diversify and take classes in other media, or work on non-pottery ceramics, pots are what I always come

back to. I chose to highlight mostly wood fired work in this show because it is my most recent work and as an acknowledgment of what the wood kiln has meant to me personally and as a potter.

As I mentioned previously, chance plays a large role in each firing of the wood kiln. It is like a blank, three dimensional, thousand piece jig-saw puzzle that you put together inside of the kiln, burn three cords of wood around it and cool it slowly for a week, before you can see the picture. Each piece depends on everything else in the kiln. The same idea exists among the people firing the kiln. Wood firing creates and demands a very close sense of community among the people firing. The amount of work necessary to fire a kiln of this size is staggering. To cut, split and dry three cords of wood is a lot of hard work. Loading the hundreds of pieces into the kiln takes a crew of four people at least eighteen hours hunched over in a tunnel four feet tall. The actual firing is a five day ordeal where the kiln requires two to four people to feed it wood twenty-four hours a day nonstop. Unloading and cleaning the kiln is the easy part. It would be nearly impossible to undertake a job of these proportions without developing a very deep sense of community and trust with your peers. This sense of community is perhaps the most special thing about the wood fire.

The history of the wood kiln itself also plays a role in this community. Kilns of this type were developed and used by potters over three thousand years ago. Those potters had their roots in kilns that were being developed thousands of years before them! It is simply amazing to sit next to a white hot kiln at night, listening to the fire crackle and pop, thinking that you are a part of a tradition thousands of years old. To think that people just like me were doing exactly what I'm doing, throwing a bit more wood to the fire and hoping for some really great pots, at the same time my ancestors were a struggling Neolithic culture is astounding and at the same time humbling. It is simply amazing to me to think that I am a part of a community and tradition with that much history.

The last and most important section to this show will consist of a series of three wood fired rune stones and a rune platter (Appendix A). The stones themselves developed in an unusual way. I began working on them with the idea that they would serve as some of the later stages of my "pills" series, but by the time the first one was four inches high I had decided against using them for that. I was stuck for a day or so thinking about what I would do with them, (by this time I had started the second piece) so I sat down with MFA candidate Roberta Tryon and we sketched possible solutions to my problem. After a few hours I had come up with a form that I was drawn to as well as an idea to make them into vessels, capping them with modeled stone caps. After I had completed the first two smaller stones, I spoke to Professor Kokis about them. He saw them as Scandinavian rock cairns and suggested that I do some research on runes, as runes were often carved on these cairns. I was immediately drawn to the idea of including pieces of my ancestral heritage in these works. I had been involved in conversations with a number of foreign students concerning the fact that they had grown up surrounded by their heritage, whereas I, living in America, felt very little connection to the depth of my own ancestry. When I opened the first book that I found in the library on runes I was literally amazed at what I saw. In it there was a picture of a rune stone, shaped nearly identical to the ones that I had been making, with inscribed runes, rune serpents and animals. It fit so perfectly to what I was doing that I never even questioned doing it. I returned from the library, smoothed the stones down and began carving on them. Later that evening I got the idea to translate the runes into English letters and to inscribe my stones with my messages.

While I was carving, I thought a lot about what words mean. If you speak a language that no one understands, does what you say matter? What if no one hears you speaking in a language that everyone understands? Does language lose meaning simply because you can not read or hear it? I thought about the hieroglyphs of Central America

that have only recently been translated. These lost languages had been literally just pictures. Only recently have their meanings been rediscovered. I came to the conclusion that incomprehensible language retained its potential for meaning, but hides that potential until the language is understood. In a way, it is similar to the question of who holds the true value and importance of art. Is the viewer's or the artist's response to a piece more important? That is a difficult question to answer. For a while I thought that it would be fun to give out a partial key and see how many people would try to translate the stones and come to a full understanding. I may still do this and include a full translation only in my thesis.

It took me quite a long time to decide whether or not I was going to include a translation of what I had written. Most of the runes dealt with personal matters revolving around the death of my mother and the effect that had on me as a child. Initially, I was going to keep the rune's translation a secret. Much of what I wrote is not idle shop talk, but thoughts of my mother's death, sadness, pain, loss, fleeting memories, being forgotten, the preciousness of life and of my own mortality. These are not happy thoughts. Thankfully, my ability to not think about them as I fall asleep has improved since I was seven.

This was the first time that I had used this part of my past in art of any form. Frankly, it was a rather depressing experience for me. I have seen the work of many others who draw heavily on trauma that occurred in their lives. Art is very therapeutic in most cases. Some are able to portray it very successfully. Others just seem to be whining. I wondered if the impact to the viewer would have changed if I would have transcribed a recipe for chocolate chip cookies instead.

I often wondered why some artists relive trauma repeatedly in their work. The answer that is always given is it is therapeutic to do so and makes really powerful art in the process. I ask myself if artists benefit from continual therapy? At what point do

artists overdose on therapy? I am not sure of the answer. How does constantly reliving trauma relieve or lessen anything? I would think that the best thing to do would be to deal with your pain and get on with your life and not let bad experiences decide and dominate the rest of your existence. I wonder what happens to all the artists, especially those in school, who dredge up traumatic experiences and then exploit them for art. After the exhibit is taken down and the last, "Great job!" is said, is the artist any better off? My own rune stones depress me greatly when I read them, but I have to admit that they are beneficial in part. They serve, in part, as a memorial to my mother, the woman who not only gave me life, but managed to be a factor in shaping my personality both in life and death.

During a recent talk with Professor Kokis, he brought up the illuminating point that in many myths it is the hero/heroine's wounds which form their character. The typical mythic plot, greatly simplified, is the hero coming upon and overcoming difficulties (wounds) and emerging victorious as a greater hero. My wounds did form much of my personality. I am who I am because of what has happened to me, both good and bad. How much this affects my art is not as clear to me. I do not consciously choose to use my wounds as source material for art, but they do play a role in why I make art and who knows what role they play in my subconsciousness. I do not need to make art as a release for my pain, I create for the joy it brings to me and others. I am a maker. I create things from the work of my hands. To say that I am making hand made work as a personal statement in an increasingly impersonal industrial world is not entirely true. I have no qualms about the theory of industry and mass production in general, they also serve a purpose. Specific instances may bother me, but for the most part I think that my world is a better place because of them. In part the act of creation is a matter of self preservation. This is probably the most apparent legacy of my greatest wound. I like to think that my mother was an important person, especially to me. Yet, I am confronted by the fact that

she is slowly slipping out of memory. The fact that she plays less and less of a role in my conscious life is quite frightening to me because I am one of the people most affected by her life. The thought that I am forgetting her, logically brings up the question, "Who will remember me when I am gone?" I do not want to be forgotten. I want to be remembered. I want to have an impact on the people around me, so that I will be remembered as something more than a genetic middleman between my parents and my children. Creation, in a way, helps alleviate this troubling thought. When someone uses a bowl of mine each morning to eat breakfast, a part of me is a part of their daily life. Both the user and I benefit from the fact that the common object we share through creation and usage connects our lives. This is not the case with industrial objects, there is no human touch in something that was made by a machine. Knowing that my pottery has the potential to survive and be enjoyed by successive users for thousands of years, is quite comforting, as a part of me will play a small role in each of their lives.

CHAPTER 4

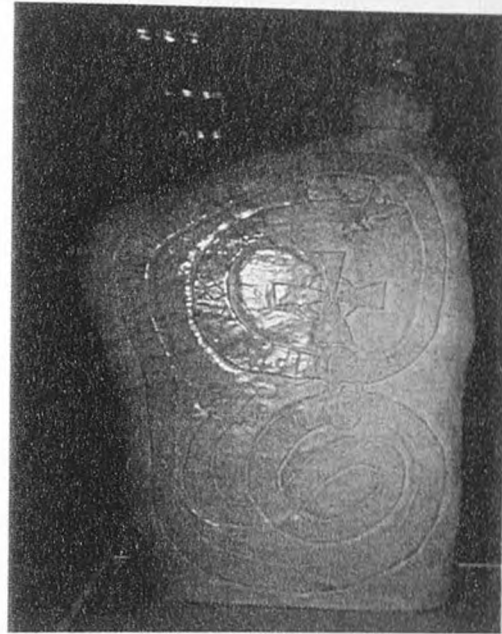
CONCLUSION

I have been a student in the University of Oregon ceramics studio longer than anyone else currently working there. The good times there and at the University in general, far outweigh the bad ones. Seven years is a long time to be studying ceramics as a student. At last, my time is up and another will take my place. This is the end of my beginning. Does the future hold success or failure? Where will I be when I look back upon the time I spent here? I will miss all of my friends, the faculty and the facility. Hopefully I will have left enough of an impression and unclaimed pottery that I will be remembered as a part of the studio long after I'm gone. What more could I ask?

APPENDIX A



"In the spring of 1980 my mother died. She lies for eternity under the elm trees near the bank of the river red."



Life is the candle in the night. Tiny holes in the darkness, shared by few. Before the light there was darkness. When the light is spent it is forgotten. Memory is fleeting in the darkness. So too am I."



"Sadness is a dark night. I slept alone in that darkness."



"Life is an amazing thing. I want to experience it all. So much is denied. Will anyone pass content with what was? So much will come after. I will see nothing of this. The sun will rise. Will I? Brief is life. Cherish all as nothing is eternal."



"Since I was a child I have been aware of my own mortality. Knowing of my unavoidable death led to many sleepless nights. Fear is great in the mind of a child. Sleep magnifies fear. I remember crying on my parents bed convinced of their death and my loss. I realized how much of my life revolved around theirs.

How much would I miss without them? Within a year my mother was dead. I was the prophet of my own loss. Helpless as she slipped away. Knowing death is coming does not prepare you for its impact. Emptiness is a poor companion. Sadness a cruel friend. Why have I forgotten her? Why must I be as well? Forgotten. I want to last longer than that."



"I remember very little of her now. Memory is funny that way. As pain is forgotten so to is love. Is that a blessing or a curse? Is the release of pain worth the loss of joy? In the end does it even matter? Nothing lasts forever. Right?"

"I have been asked why this is written in runes. The simple reason is that some things are best said quietly. Can you hear what I am saying?"



"I make. I am. I think. I am. I act. I am. I eat. I am. I pray. I am. I die. I am not."