Emerging From the East...

Final Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts Degree
Indiana State University, Department of Art

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Spring 2011
REBUS

You work with what you are given,
the red clay of grief,
the black clay of stubbornness going on after.
Clay that tastes of care or carelessness,
clay that smells of the bottoms of rivers or dust.
Each thought is a life you have lived or failed to live.
Each word is a dish you have eaten or left on the table.
There are honeys so bitter
no one would willingly choose to take them.
The clay takes them: honey of weariness, honey of vanity,
honey of cruelty, fear.
This rebus-slip and stubbornness,
bottom of river, my own consumed life-
when will I learn to read it plainly, slowly, uncolored by hope or desire?
Not to understand it, only to see.
As water given sugar sweetens, given salt grows salty,
we become our choices.
Each yes, each no continues,
this one a ladder, that one an anvil or cup.
The ladder leans into its darkness
The anvil leans into its silence
The cup sits empty.
How can I enter this question the clay asks?

Jane Hirshfield 1
The figure has become the vehicle of my visual language. The expressive potential of the figure allows me to portray personal narratives by bringing my inner vision into outer reality. Because of the inherent sensuality of clay—it plasticity, malleability, receptivity to applied texture, and the primitive earthiness, it becomes the perfect means to make tangible the dialogue of my concept and the making process. The product of this being figures that exude a sense of confidence of gesture, which echoes the ancient ideals of womanhood—fertility, sexuality, strength, and power. I strive to create female figures of strength and power, yet full of human emotion. This speaks of the spiritual power of the female as well as a deeply human vulnerability.

I have developed a personal iconography creating visual symbols, which enrich and facilitate the narrative. While working with the iconography, several symbols became more significant and vital to the narrative. I distorted the proportions of the figure in order to make the essential elements of the figure speak the narrative. The hand is a powerful metaphor for being human and the first tool before all other tools both for us as individuals and for our species. We use our hands as a way of knowing and understanding the world—therefore, the hands grew to be one of the most important if not the most important elements in my figures. The small head represents "ego" and the enormity of being humble.
Traveling to Taiwan this past summer changed my spirit, inspired me, and influenced the way I approach my work---the figure has grown in concept in tandem with my personal growth. The feminine symbols that I work with water, vessel, mother earth, hand mudras, symbols of self, and the mountain have become outward manifestations reflecting the inward changes. I have approached the gesture of the figure and the narrative expressed in a more minimalist way. By allowing the clay body to speak for itself, I only use color to accentuate an important element in the narrative.

My desire is to cultivate a personal conversation with the clay and the figure---and within this conversation to develop a greater understanding of my material and myself. It is through this knowledge that I intend to create work in an expressive and communicative way. My aim is for my work to resonate with the viewer while allowing the clay a voice. As my relationship with clay developed, I felt that in order to give the clay a voice, I needed to develop a clay body that would be structurally strong and beautifully sensuous. It was desirous for this clay body to have color as well. I researched, tested and developed three clay bodies of different colors that would work for me sculpturally. My work is about the female figure—alive with earthiness that echoes ancient tradition. My research of ancient, earth-mother figures has led me to the point of developing clay bodies that would reflect that union with the earth in color and texture.
As my relationship with clay developed, I felt that in order to give the clay a voice, I needed to develop a clay body that would be structurally strong and beautifully sensuous. It was desirous for this clay body to have color as well. I researched, tested and developed three clay bodies of different colors that would work for me sculpturally.

During various clay body experiments and tests, I learned to appreciate and love the simple, wonderful, colors from the earth. Previously, I had developed a clay body that would meet my demands for structure and building—the color was not important because I was covering the clay body surface with various glazes, oxides and stains. I was interested in building a history of surface treatments. As I worked and researched refining my direction, I was able to marry my needs for structure and the desire for beautiful, sensuous clay body color into three clay bodies: red/red-orange, chocolate, and ivory. These clay bodies have allowed me to develop my forms without the need to cover the form completely with glazes.

I am learning to allow the clay a voice within my work by focusing on the form while the color of the clay enhances the form subtlety—therefore, facilitating the narrative in a quiet way. When I feel the necessity for more color to focus the attention of the viewer on a particular element or area, I place the accent color exactly and minimally where it is essential.

The first clay body that I successfully developed was the red/red-orange clay body. This clay body has a warm, flesh-tone, with red/red-orange color that becomes
more intense and darker depending upon the temperature of the firing and the amount of reduction during the firing. This clay body was used to construct Searching for Balance (Figure 9), Conversations Over Tea I (Figure 10), and Bethany Blooms (Figure 13). It was a very conscious choice conceptually to use this particular clay body, as well as the firing technique and temperatures. Searching for Balance (Figure 9), required a warm, flesh-tone with a more red/red orange to depict the stress, conflict and agony of the piece. This figure was fired to a higher temperature and fired in a reduction atmosphere to obtain the deeper color. Conversations Over Tea I (Figure 10) also deals with conflict, but in a different way and tone. This figure’s color required a deeper red, but a more sensuous surface to focus on the form; therefore accentuating the narrative of the hands and the gestural language of the form. Bethany Blooms (Figure 13) is the same clay body, but fired to a lower temperature and fired in an oxidation atmosphere. This gave the figure a soft, quiet color with a smooth, satin surface. The quiet calmness of the color gives the piece what it needs to depict the introspective concept.

CLAY BODY FORMULAS:

**RED/RED-ORANGE SCULPTURAL BODY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIZELLA CLAY</th>
<th>FLINT</th>
<th>FIRE CLAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BALL CLAY</td>
<td>CUSTER FELDSPAR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KYANITE</td>
<td>GOLD ART</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The second clay body I developed was the chocolate clay body. I had been working on this clay body for two years. I desired a dark clay body that would be striking in reduction and oxidation. In addition, I was searching for versatility and receptivity to certain oxides and glazes. My needs for this clay body were boldness, drama, structural strength, and rich color. *Tie a Knot and Hang On* (Figure 12) was fabricated using the chocolate clay body. Technically and conceptually this piece was the most challenging—hence the need for a dramatic and bold color. Due to the fact that this piece is a hanging piece, I wanted a powerful contrast of clay body color to glaze application.

**CHOCOLATE SCULPTURAL BODY**

- BARNARD SLIP
- RED ART
- GOLD ART
- KYANITE
- FLINT
- FIRE CLAY
- CUSTER FELDSPAR
- LIZELLA CLAY
- BALL CLAY
During my research of clay bodies, I aspired to develop ivory clay—a clay body that would embody a pure, rather urethral, spiritual, calm essence. Ivory’s surface is sensuous, smooth and lovely to the touch. All of these qualities I desired in my clay body as well. These were requirements for the narrative of the piece. Conversations Over Tea II (Figure 11) was created with the ivory stoneware.

**IVORY STONEWARE SCULPTURAL BODY**

EPK GOLD ART  
KYANITE  
CUSTER FELDSPAR  
FIRE CLAY  
FLINT  
BALL CLAY

At this time, I am working mostly with clay body surface. This surface is enhanced by a series of firings—from low temperatures to higher temperatures—and sanding with different grades of diamond sanders between firings to create a sensuous polished surface; Other surfaces are treated by using my cylinder seal or stamps for texture. The cylinder seal and stamps contain personal iconography and symbols—creating a texture on the figure similar to tattoos. If I choose to use the cylinder seal or stamps, I treat the surface with a few oxide washes and fire several times to achieve the surface I want. These are all low fire processes, allowing me the flexibility of multi-firing. Following several firings and polishing or oxides washes and firing; I look at the piece carefully to determine whether to use more color. This has been an evolution of process for me—I am learning the value of economy.

Symbols and iconography have become an integral part of my work. Some of the symbols I use are universal in meaning; while others have personal meaning beyond what the viewer might comprehend. Most of the iconography or symbols listed below are universal in meaning, but others are loosely interpreted according to my concepts.
KNOT—linkage, connection or attachment to powers

HANDS—create, symbolize physical, artistic abilities, touching, security, love, extension of personality, activity, power

LEFT HAND—graciousness, feminine, respective qualities

RIGHT HAND—Power and activity

LARGE HANDS—denote success in reaching goals

WATER—symbol of the feminine, birth and rebirth, fertility, growth, creative potential, healing, emotions

VESSEL—symbol denoting the function of the physical, spiritual, and emotional of the feminine

My research on clay bodies proved to be quite informing as well as exciting—I found that the dark chocolate clay body that I had developed was very similar to the clay body implemented by the Etruscan clay artists in Ancient Italy. The only difference being that the Etruscan clay artist fabricated mostly functional ware with this clay body. Historical references for my work are most certainly prehistoric in form, color, and philosophy. I pay homage to the ancient earth-mother goddess body shape, the concepts, and meanings of such. In so doing, I honor the material I work with—clay—the gift from Mother Earth. The female figures of the Cycladic Period as well as those of the Ancient Orient have influenced me with the beauty of their simple, but powerful forms. There is a sense of economy in the sculptures of this period—the simplest of gestures and features—only enough information for the viewer to identify the form or representation (figure 1), (figure 2). These figures are basic in concept with flowing contours and significant in my quest for simplicity, power and elegance. While my concepts are at times far more complex than the Cycladic artists’, I wanted to incorporate a minimalist approach to design with a concept that was more intricate and encouraged the viewer to ponder.
(Figure 1) Cycladic Figures c.2500-2000 B.C. www.ou.edu/finearts/art/aegean
However, I feel the strongest kinship with the artists of the Etruscan era. The discovery of my “artistic roots” as an Etruscan was pivotal in my search to connect with a historical reference for my work. While the Cycladic figures influenced me with their simplicity, the Etruscan figures intrigued me. This fascination encouraged deeper research into Etruscan art history including clay body research. During my study of Etruscan art, I was enlightened and thrilled to find that the Etruscan artists’ figures contained the same exaggerated and distorted elements that I was incorporating into my figures to speak the narrative. These exaggerated elements
included oversized hands and feet, and at times the head or body proportions were enlarged or diminished. I feel that the Etruscan artists exaggerated the elements of the figures in order to illustrate the importance of that element. The figures' facial expressions possessed an enigmatic smile or mysterious quality—very much like the facial expressions of my figures. Even though the gesture of the Etruscan figures seems visually restrained, there is an underlying sense of animation within. Certain expressive gestures, such as an outstretched hand, give the viewer subtle information for which there is no concrete meaning (figure 3). I have integrated several of these gestures in my figures—giving the viewer the freedom to interpret at will—perhaps, given the gesture, such as the outstretched hand, their own interpretation.

(Figure 3) Tomb of the Leopards, Otto Brendel, *Etruscan Art*, 179.
Symbolism played a significant part in Etruscan art—each symbol, such as the egg, hand gestures and body form was a clue for the narrative of the piece. The symbols integrated were not only objects, but body language and gesture as well (Figure 4). Symbols and iconography play an important part in my work. I incorporate universal symbols which are simple for the viewer to interpret as well as symbols or iconography that are personally my own. By using these personal symbols, my hope is to create a sense of mystery or intrigue—much as the Etruscan artisans created with their artwork.

As I worked with the essentials of my historical references and the specifics of merging them with my work, I naturally turned to contemporary influences.
I did not have any certain contemporary influences when I began my graduate work. I have always worked from within; making a visible effort not to look at contemporary ceramic artists other than for information on surface treatment and techniques. I have a strong desire to make work that is distinctively my own. While working, observing, learning and exploring, I discovered two contemporary ceramic artists who greatly influenced me.

The greatest contemporary influence I have is Ceramic Artist Ray Chen. Ray’s work spans the globe as well as the disciplines. His experience with functional work, installation work and sculpture give him incredible breadth as an artist.

His work speaks to the human spirit about relationships, emotions, dependency, and devotion (figure 5). Technically, Ray’s work is a remarkable study in balance, engineering, glaze development, and mastering immense work. Conceptually, his work is highly intellectual and provokes deep thought, while seeking to touch the soul (figure 5).

Having the opportunity and honor to work with a master from another culture has given me new eyes—I observe art, life, and moreover, the world in a very different way. Ray taught me to actually see by looking beyond the form. I have learned to appreciate the beauty that lies in the unanticipated gifts from the kiln as well as the gifts from the clay and the quiet elegance of hand-built functional ware. More importantly, Ray inspired me to think of my thesis work as a very cohesive body of individual works creating the larger form—creating an environment and landscape space for the figures to interact with one another as well as the landscape.
Another contemporary clay artist whose work has influenced me is Eva Kwong. Eva is known in the field for her sensuous surfaces and forms. In addition to these, Eva makes intriguing installation works. Eva’s work comes from the heart—whether it portrays emotion or questions our very existence. Ray and Eva inspired me to have part of my thesis work involve an installation.
My work and spirit have been influenced greatly by the cultural landscape of Taiwan. I have learned to see beyond the form and what makes the form. Asian culture is conservative and landscape is vastly important in Asian philosophy as well as art. In comparison to Western culture, which is one of technology, Asian culture is intricately connected to the landscape—especially the mountains and water. Asian culture is indirect and subtle—its influence is the same. The mountains and water are seen as part of the learning environment influencing all with their spirit. Landscape is part of the growing process spiritually—hence the creation of a landscape for my figures. The landscape relates to the figures in a quiet, serene, and peaceful way---while creating an undercurrent of indirect activity.
This indirect activity originates from the forms created by the sand, lotus bowls and lilies. These are layered—forms within forms—creating figurative elements of their own communicating with the figures. The lilies' curved stems flow with rhythm and movement with the figures creating a dialogue as they dance and sing with the figures and themselves.

(Figure 7) *Lotus Bowls and Lilies*  2011  Photo Courtesy of Rebecca Prato
Water—life’s blood, symbol of the feminine, fertility, growth, creative potential, new life and healing; lotus bowls hold the water, reflecting the environment as they perform their function as a vessel; symbol of woman. The white sand forms create the environment for the lotus bowls, part of the earth, part of clay—sand is silica. All of these forms are tangible—the inner vision brought into outer reality.

With the assistance of the environment, the figures tell a collective narrative as well as individual narratives. Beginning with Searching for Balance (Figure 9), which depicts the struggle and growth process in the second year of graduate school. This figure also speaks of the intensity of trying to find a place of balance between two worlds—that of the “making art” world and the “real” world in which we must learn to survive.
(Figure 9) *Searching for Balance 2009*  

Image Courtesy of Rebecca Prato
Conversations Over Tea I (Figure 10) speaks to frustration, the discussion of art, theory, and concept; in addition to social, political, and relationship issues. This figure has a determined hand gesture as well as a directional conversation of both arms, with a desire to deliver the message with body language and form.

(Figure 10) Conversations Over Tea I 2010  Image Courtesy of Rebecca Prato
Conversations over Tea II (Figure 11) conveys a more settled, relaxed, serene figure moving forward. This figure sits in a reflective pose reminiscent of Buddha—the hand gestures are open to represent sharing, caring, and giving to reflect the conversation of Asian philosophy. The ivory color represents purity of the human heart.
Tie a Knot and Hang On (Figure 12) is the piece that bridges the gap between the learning and growth process to Bethany Blooms (Figure 13). In contrast to (Figures 10 and 11), this figure, in an open form, grabs the capacity of her own weight to complete her own gesture.

(Figure 12) Tie a Knot and Hang On 2011

Image Courtesy of Rebecca Prato
*Bethany Blooms* (Figure 13) represents Mother Earth and all of her promise. From the earth, close to the earth, birthing new concepts, ideas, and cultures—the union of all creates and renews.
These figures document my birth as a professional artist as well as the evolution of my spirit.

(Figure 14) Overview of Figures and Lotus Bowls  Image Courtesy of Rebecca Prato
The influence of the landscape of Taiwan is evident in my tiles as well. These tiles are expressive but still sensitively capture the mood of each place they represent and its influence upon me (Figure 15). The mountains are in each one as the spirit of the mountain resides within me.

(Figure 15) *Eternal Springs* 2011; *Arches of Danshui* 2011; *Turtle Island* 2011

Image Courtesy of Artist
My visual language is the figure—personal embodiment—the expressive potential of which continues to pursue human emotion. From historical reference to contemporary influence, the human body and language are the evidence that present the body of work of human conversation. Historical point of view and contemporary society provide a link between my own connection to the work and my artistic cultural influence from west to east. The structure is powerful and the gesture of body language, as well as the dialogue, represent those elements that co-exist between human beings. This experience of transformation as a personal element will push me to the next stage of development as an artist.
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