

Timeless Balance: The Ceramic Sculpture of Anne Currier

In the second century B.C.E., early Han Dynasty scholars at the court of Liu An, the Prince of Huai-nan, wrote in the *Huai-nan Tzu* an account of the creation of the universe:

Before heaven and earth had taken form all was vague and amorphous. Therefore it was called the Great Beginning. The Great Beginning produced emptiness and emptiness produced the universe....The combined essences of heaven and earth became the yin and yang, the concentrated essences of the yin and yang became the four seasons, and the scattered essences of the four seasons became the myriad creatures of the world.¹

So much of what we know of history and ancient cultures, we have deduced from archaeological remains and aesthetic remnants. Architectural structures—or more often their undestroyed components such as columns, foundations, stone blocks and other fragments—suggest cultural history, rituals, hierarchies and social intercourse. Painting survives if the surface upon which it was applied was strong enough to resist disintegration. Prehistoric cave paintings in Altamira were hidden in secluded caves; Egyptian dynastic chronicles and mythology were interred in tombs; figures on Greek and Roman amphorae, kylixes and other ceramic vessels memorialize the dead and tell stories about the gods. Perhaps the most powerful evidence resides in sculpture, particularly figurative sculpture, from the small fecund fetish totem known as the Venus of Willendorf to the colossal mountain-carved Buddhas in Asia. Anne Currier's ceramic sculpture carries with it a weightiness of significance that prevails in ancient sculpture; while at the same time, it projects our contemporary experience. Everything about it evokes a multitude of characteristics: complex yet fragmentary, fleshy but cool as stone, rounded and angular with sharp flat planes intersecting softly curving arcs. This series of contrasts relies on differences to set up the intrigue that pulls you around all sides to discover unexpected vistas unfolding.

In the beautifully illustrated book that documented the comprehensive exhibition *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000* presented by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Anne Currier's clay sculpture *Panel Series #3, Frolic* (1997), from the museum's collection, illustrates the section titled "'What You See Is What You See': A Defining Moment for the Twenty-First Century." The quote taken from American painter Frank Stella refers to the basic premise behind contemporary art: that the viewer must face the challenge to draw upon personal experience and knowledge to read artwork. While the artist creates an object with certain intentions, its meaning cannot be limited to a single vision. Interpretation is subjective. We each bring our individual associations, looking for clues from the artist, but drawing greatest significance from the exchange that takes place. This does not preclude learning anew, being jolted from one's limited sphere of reference to the world that is always greater than we had imagined.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, art historians, academicians and literary critics were influenced by earlier psychoanalytic ideas about the interrelationship of the unconscious, language and desire. To put extremely complex ideology very simply, the prevailing theorist, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) developed original concepts based on Viennese physician Sigmund Freud's discovery around 1900 of the existence of the unconscious, Swiss professor Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of "the linguistic sign," and mathematical structures. Saussure's theory for the linguistic sign, presented in lectures between 1907 and 1911, demonstrated a difference between a concept of a thing, which he termed a "signified," and a sound image associated with the concept, which he called a "signifier." Lacan inverted Saussure's terms to create an algorithm for the function of speech and a paradigm for the structure of the unconscious. He is best known for his statement: "The unconscious is structured like a language." To follow the Lacanian model, each signifier refers to another signifier, linked in a chain of signification. However, language is divided into two functions: metonymy and metaphor. Connections between signifiers are metonymic; meaning one word can be used to connote something to which it is logically associated, such as "crown" for "sovereignty." Metaphor functions differently, drawing connections between two unrelated terms, perhaps unexpectedly. Lacan believed that the unconscious operates in the same manner. Words, even parts of words, and images, including those in our rebus dreams, interconnect in often paradoxical ways that can be examined to uncover separate elements and their evoked associations. This said, Anne Currier's sculptures beg interpretation through perception and analysis by linking associations of its individual parts.

Setting the stage, many of Currier's sculpture friezes from the late 1990's openly acknowledge sensuality. Titles corroborate what we see in fragments as light spills across surfaces, creating form-defining shadows in deep folds and cavities. *In the Shallows* portrays a Botticellian Venus emerging from the sea, coaxed by attendants made visible by a flexed arm and bent knee. Full, fleshy forms sink into soft surfaces in *Embrace*; the intertwined interior and exterior curves of limbs suggesting the psychological depth of lovers' impassioned exploration of their bodies. A kneeling figure straddles a reclining female nude in *Arousal*. Such voluptuousness has its precedents, like the undulating marble figure, *La Danaide*, by Auguste Rodin, believed to have been inspired by his lover, the artist Camille Claudel. Currier's figurative eroticism is even more reminiscent of the stone friezes of the tenth century Jain temple of Khajuraho in Northern India. Covering the outer walls, Shiva and Shakti, as well as other Hindu gods and goddesses, demonstrate sexual postures and positions that are meant to evoke the "perfect godly union" that combines Tantric spirituality with physical pleasure. In addition, Currier loves the iconic temple friezes from the Greek Parthenon for their "limitations of compression" of the figures within the geometry of the triangular pediment.²

While concave and convex curves might still convey a sense of human anatomy, Currier's columnar forms become more abstract and architectonic beginning in 1999. *Juncture*, for example, is a twisted body of truncated and tapered cylinders defying gravity. Caught in motion, although not as flared or human as Boccioni's Futurist sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), *Juncture* has a

kinetic quality. Its mysterious parts seem to rise, tumble or spin from various axis points. *Set-Up* introduces elegant architectural forms, such as the flared cone we associate with Frank Lloyd Wright's temple to Modernism: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Its outer surface suggests the circular structure of space within. This volumetric play of interior space as defined by visible outer dimensions continues to drive Anne Currier's aesthetic.

Homage from 2001 evokes many associations. That date haunts all Americans; so naturally we first think of this sculpture as homage to the fallen towers and lost lives in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania. The blue-black mottled surface resembles marble, the stone associated with funerary memorials. Yet, the three graceful interlocking planar masses suggest unity, like the three linked Borromean rings of topological mathematics.³ At the same time that this sculpture holds personal references for the artist (in deference to an inspirational sculpture), it also visually summons up prehistoric, megalithic Stonehenge, a mysterious earthwork that continues to motivate interpretation five thousand years after its creation. Because of both its title and its composition, Currier's *Homage* operates as a powerful universal symbol, capable of representing something or someone of significance whom we respect and honor.

From that point on, Currier's work has grown increasingly sophisticated. Paradoxically, as she uses fewer elements, the forms themselves are surprisingly complex. Is it possible to call her sleek Modernist forms Baroque? Diagonals, flared shapes, trapezoids, ellipses, oblique angles, and intersecting volumes continually offer unanticipated drama. Among her free-standing sculptures of 2002, *Contraction* offers a sensuous contrast between smooth, rounded forms and impossibly sharp anvil and spear-like angles. A lower portion of *First of June* hovers buoyantly over the pedestal, jutting out from enmeshed turbines and cavities. *Pivotal Moment* hugs the ground, yet arches up as if defining geometric movements in space caught in stop-action photography.

Currier's amazing precision in sculpting makes us momentarily forget that she is hand-building forms out of clay. Her work appears monumental, as if it were solid stone or metal. It would be easy to imagine it weighing tons, similar to Richard Serra's torqued, Corten steel slabs dwarfing our existence. Currier has said that engineering her pieces is a challenge. Once she realized that her hand was always inside of her work during its creation, she has thought of the mass as being "pushed out by the voids."⁴ She likened her technique, in part, to have been inspired by the dance troupe known as Pilobolus, which she saw in Boulder, Colorado, pulling off latex clothing as part of their act. The dancers seemed to be "caught inside and moving slowly."⁵ This choreographed movement of creative pressure from the inside forces the formation of the virtual skin of her hollow sculptures. For the past year or two, she has been "really trying to pare it down"⁶ so that the forms are minimal, but not quotidian geometric archetypes.

In addition to developing variations in forms, Currier has been experimenting with different glazes and finishes that often relate to the smooth, weathered and lichen-covered stones, such as gray shale, from her Allegany County home in Scio, near the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University where she is a professor and former chairperson. She is intrigued by other natural surfaces surrounding

or incorporated in her home and studio, like oxidized tin lamp shades or the dark iron of a pot-bellied stove or mellow wood tones of a handmade cherry table. One of her favorite artworks inspired her dark, nearly black glazes. Every time she is in Chicago, she goes to the Art Institute to see Raymond Duchamp-Villon's bronze *Horse* (1914); and when she is in Washington, DC, she visits another cast of the same work at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.⁷ (This French Cubist work no doubt also aroused her interest in abstract, kinetic form.) However, Currier's sculptures are not always monotone. The sharp edges she achieves on her sculptures are sometimes enhanced by applying a lighter or darker color to the perimeter to contrast with the main body of the work. This outlining, so to speak, incorporates Currier's graphic skills. It brings her drawing into the third dimension, subtly accentuating form with line.

Spare abstraction that still evokes a graceful human presence can be seen in the obsidian hued *Belmont* (2004), which calls to mind Constantin Brancusi's early 20th-century portraits of *Mademoiselle Pogany* or other female muses, with a gently tilting curve of its cranial form resting on a supple shoulder. *Wadsworth* (2004), on the other hand, appears more like a glyph, something fallen from an architectural monument, akin to elements from urban aluminum and neon sculpture by Chryssa. *Wadsworth* is a conundrum of a rune from an unknown language, its puzzle piece curves suggesting how it might nestle within a larger entity.

The cosmic blackness of the works from 2004 is gone in Currier's newest sculptures from 2005. Seductive surfaces reflect a lighter palette of ivory, shale green, terra cotta, granite, sandstone, and hornblende. *Angelica* recalls some of the tilted planes of *Belmont*, but it veers from human proportions. While suggesting the monumental quality of ancient Cycladic figures (c. 3000-2000 B.C.E.); the triangular slab's angularity makes it more nonrepresentational. The unique purity of gently arching, pristinely fitted, organic yet igneous forms of Currier's new work summarizes the advancements she has made technically, as well as conceptually. Each perspective yields a succinctness exclusive to the experience of viewing her wall pieces from side to side or circumventing her free-standing pieces in the round. The names refer to towns, but can have multiple meanings, as would delight Marcel Proust who introduced the idea of "Place-Names" in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, known in English as *In Search of Lost Time*.⁸ *Shongo*, for example, refers to a town in Allegany County, an African god of fire (appropriately relating to firing a kiln), and mathematic network theory derived from Congo Basin games in which you must redraw patterns without retracing your path or lifting your pencil from the page (and sometimes there are more than one solution.) The enduring quality of Anne Currier's balanced sculptures leads us back to the initial idea of their containing the yin and yang, the concentrated essences of the world. Her exquisite work articulates space with an understanding of human vitality while speaking individually with the brevity of a discriminating language of light, shadow, surface, and mass.

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¹ From *Huai-nan Tzu*, 3:1a, 14:1a, quoted in *Sources in Chinese Tradition*, Volume I, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan and Burton Watson. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1960, 1964 edition, pp. 192-193.

² Interview of the artist by Nancy Weekly, September 7, 2005.

³ The Borromean rings, or knot, appear in art of various cultures and were also used by Jacques Lacan to illustrate his theory.

⁴ Interview, September 7, 2005.

⁵ Interview, September 7, 2005.

⁶ Interview, September 7, 2005.

⁷ Interview, September 7, 2005.

⁸ It previously had been translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*.