



Charmed. Porcelain. 30 x 60 x 17.5 cm.

Holly Hanessian Fate, Luck, Chance, Choice

Article by Marie Hopfensperger

QUE SERA SERA. WHATEVER WILL BE, WILL BE. BUT why? Doris Day's voice isn't humming in the background, but thoughts on the dichotomy between destiny and choice stream through the delicate line and whimsical feel of Holly Hanessian's porcelain pieces. "I continue to ask what we lose and gain at different times in our lives," Hanessian ponders in her current artist statement. "As a woman in the US in 2005 in middle age with a middle income, how much luck do I have in this life and how far do I throw the dice for what I want? I continue to question how, why and where we end up in life. Are our experiences the result of luck or fate, or do they come only from conscious choice?"

The ceramist and college professor's most recent work investigates the roles of fate, luck, chance and

choice through word play, handwriting and symbolic objects. Handbuilt script and thrown body parts are intertwined as a conceptual and aesthetic exploration. "I have a set of ideas that are based on fate and luck and chance, and there's this other sense of playfulness and order and beauty," Hanessian said. "I'm letting myself be seduced by the beauty of the object, and I guess I want people to be seduced by the idea."

Thematically Hanessian's fate-based focus developed from her experiences with both luck and misfortune facing a life-threatening illness and infertility. "I started thinking about the choices we make. When we're young, we think the world is our own – in terms of what options we have. Over time, there are certain things you don't have a choice in," she explained. Hanessian's new focus took form during a residency at

the Banff Centre for the Arts in Calgary, Alberta, Canada in 2002. "That's where the idea ignited," she explained. "It was seven weeks of uninterrupted time to consider what my work is about and work on it. And I started thinking about the notion of fate and luck and about the word play."

According to Hanessian, the initial exploration of chance and choice was as much a cathartic process as an artistic one. Today, in good health and an adoptive mother, Hanessian is veering away from her own saga, but still exploring thoughts derived from her experiences. Now Hanessian has begun to focus as much on form as on emotional function, while she continues to interplay ideas and objects to discuss fate and to create structure. Sculpted and thrown forms such as breasts, figs, cradles and horseshoes are the hooks for handbuilt letters. The symbolic objects and word play are linked conceptually, physically and aesthetically.

"I am looking at form and shape, and letting the word play give me the intellectual satisfaction," she explained. Each piece is a testament to detail. The textures are precise – sanded smooth, sensuously slipped – and each letter is created as many times as necessary to ensure that it dangles as an extension of the symbolic object or hook and so that the words appear as fluid as cursive writing. Each porcelain object or letter is stained or has terra sigillata applied to it before bisquing. Encaustic and pigment complete the process. Hanessian's palette is light and flesh-coloured, but the colour of each piece's has a distinct relation to its content. The forms are not complete until they are hung on the wall and lit, creating a double image of the text. "People won't have any choice but see a word. But because it is literal and because I don't really want to work in a literal fashion, I try to add other thoughts through the forms to make the ultimate ideas more subtle," Hanessian noted.

Hanessian is trying to create a little vagueness and not be overly blatant. "I want to use specific words that have a particular connotation for me and then let the viewers decide how they experience it," she added.

Holly Hanessian has been subject to the vagaries of fate and chance on both sides of the scale. "My response to fate, chance and luck is affected by past experiences but I have been a lucky person," she said. "Dealing with hurdles in my life has left me thinking optimistically, and time has brought me back again to a new positive attitude."

Having come full circle in her feelings, Hanessian remains interested in exploring the idea of fate. "I have continued with my research so I can now go in different directions and generate ideas that have to do with destiny or being unlucky or even circumstances beyond our control," she explained. "The conceptual idea is what now pushes me forward."



Chance or choice. 30 x 40 x 15 cm.

And Hanessian finds fulfilment in transforming thought into structure. "I feel happy doing my work on two levels. I like to use my hands in a way that is satisfying, and yet on an intellectual level, it is satisfying to be able to put those things together," she said. "I make work I feel is important to be made, not work that is fashionable."

Hanessian's exploration of fate, luck, chance and choice in life and in ceramics has produced considered work and determined thoughts. "Ultimately, I think choice is also an important concept along with chance and luck," she said, "We make choices, which in turn affect the outcome of one's life."

Hanessian has chosen to work in clay. She is also a teacher, an associate professor of art at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, and is the current exhibitions director of the National Council of Education and the Ceramic Arts (NCECA).

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