

upfront

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Top left: Sculpture #538696, 32 in. (81 cm) in height, porcelain, 1996.
Top right: Spade sculpture #2961091, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, 1991.
Middle right: Cup and blade, two small sculptures #781503,
#778503, #786603, to 9 in. (23 cm) in height, porcelain, 2003.
Bottom left: Sculpture #634399, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, porcelain, 1999.
Bottom right: Large-scale vessel #5911197, 32½ in. (83 cm) in height,
porcelain with glaze, 1997. All pieces by Ruth Duckworth.

review:

Ruth Duckworth: Modernist Sculptor

by Holly Hanessian

In 1964, several important happenings took place in the art world in America. In New York, Pop Art was exploding and, on the West Coast, a movement called California Funk was gaining momentum. It was during this time frame that Ruth Duckworth arrived in Illinois to teach as a visiting artist at the University of Chicago. Savoring the vitality and exuberance of art being created in the United States during the mid-sixties, Duckworth stayed and continued to make sculpture primarily out of clay for the next forty years.

Duckworth had come from a strong formalist background influenced by her artist compatriots in Europe, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Constantin Brancusi, as well as the American artist Isamu Noguchi. Her modernist forms were inspired by both nature and visits to the British Museum where she viewed Cycladic, Egyptian and African art. Initially Duckworth approached her sculptural work using stone, but in the 1950s she discovered a natural rhythm in making organic sculptures in clay.

She attended various art schools where the prevailing Leach-inspired ideal of making thrown pottery dominated, but Duckworth created work that was neither derived from, nor a reaction to this environment. While very few ceramists broke from making strictly functional pottery, Duckworth created gutsy, distinctive sculpture and was determined not to be tied to her contemporaries in the British ceramics community. Her work from this time period has been described as truly original and groundbreaking in both form and surface.

"Ruth Duckworth: Modernist Sculptor," a retrospective exhibition curated by Thea Burger and Jo Lauria, was on view recently at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, (www.cranbrookart.edu/museum). The exhibition covered her early to recent work and encompassed an enormous range of styles and genres. The art in the exhibition varied spectacularly in size and scope, from large wall murals to small delicate porcelain bowls.

I was surprised by the natural fluidity between the hearty and more massive stoneware pieces and the thin, diminutive porcelain pieces. I was equally impressed by her ongoing attention to the ending edges of her work. Her artworks have an intuitive awareness of detail reflected in how she chose to finish the ending edge of



Ruth Duckworth's wall sculpture #761702, 31½ in. (80 cm) in width, porcelain, 2002; at Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

each sculpture. There was a natural sensitivity to the roll of the top lip of each coiled pot. The porcelain slabs were specific, refined, clean and seamless in handling. Duckworth's innate ability to use clay with sensitivity and a keen eye results in work that is varied in size, surface or clay choice (she has worked extensively in both porcelain and stoneware over the years and continues to use these two clay bodies today).

The porcelain work in the show was either left unglazed or lightly glazed with muted, soft matt glazes. A few of the artworks had a darker range of strong blacks, which was also true of her stoneware pieces. These works had a wider glaze palette and some were more masculine in her choice of darker hues and matt and satin matt glazes. A few had horizontal striping that gave the surface a visual strength.

There were two untitled pieces from 1990 and 1991 that were part of a spade sculpture series that I found particularly compelling. These small, delicate pieces in porcelain had half-oval shapes resting on a pedestal with elongated back slabs, which shot forward and punctured into the frontal piece or dovetail holding it up. These refined pieces were glazed in slightly iridescent turquoise or mauve soft tones. One was reminded by these pieces that porcelain and bone can share similar visceral visual qualities. The intimacies of these small pieces felt both feminine and quiet. They were formal and studied, spiritual and pure, yet high modern in form. Duckworth made many small, lovely porcelain pieces over the years and they were fully realized in this diminutive scale. While she is also quite capable of working in large forms (especially with architectural wall murals), these works were never meant to be models for bigger works.

Over the years, Duckworth completed many commissioned works, and the retrospective exhibition gave evidence of these works through models and photographs. Several wall pieces were included in both stoneware and porcelain offering a glimpse of her larger wall murals. In a piece owned by the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., Duckworth built a square tile piece in four parts jutting from the wall with geometric planes using angular slabs. This work (shown above) had slabs creating tension and depth, which defined the

space around a few central bulging forms and offered a convincing composite of formal shapes.

After observing and thoughtfully considering the entirety of this retrospective, the most timeless and memorable pieces were the clean, smooth porcelain works. These small, delicate vessels, along with the wall murals, resounded clearly and cleanly like the high-pitched sound rung from a high-fired vessel. Duckworth is a masterful artist and this exhibition was an important survey.

“Ruth Duckworth: Modernist Sculptor,” will travel to the Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California, May 5–July 2, and then to the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., September 1, 2006–January 15, 2007.

the author *Holly Hanessian is a ceramics artist and associate professor of art at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida.*

Phil Rogers

“A Single Form: Jugs by Phil Rogers,” an extensive exploration of the jug form, will be exhibited March 18–April 16 at the Pucker Gallery (www.puckergallery.com) in Boston, Massachusetts.

“For British people, the ‘jug’ is synonymous of a vessel with a single side handle and a pouring lip,” said Rogers. “We pour milk on our cornflakes from a jug, we serve beer from a jug, to the amusement of Americans, we add milk to our tea from a jug . . . The jug in America means something else—to Americans a jug is what we British would call a ‘jar’ or a ‘bottle’ . . . an enclosed bottle form with a short, shoulder-placed handle that might hold whiskey, wine, oil, vinegar or the like.

“Making the jugs for this exhibition gave me the rare opportunity to make a large number of one form in a relatively short space of time,” he continued. “It was no surprise to find that, toward the end of the making, I was beginning to find new avenues of expression that were the direct result of the development of ideas throughout that period. In



Left: Phil Rogers’ Jug, 13¼ in. (34 cm) in height, thrown stoneware with local clay slip, Nuka and temmoku glazes and finger-wiped decoration, fired to Cone 12 in reduction. **Right:** Phil Rogers’ Jug, 9½ in. (24 cm) in height, thrown stoneware with ash glaze, salt fired to Cone 11; at Pucker Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts.

pottery, new ideas don’t appear overnight. Development is a slow and natural process. . . . The opportunity to concentrate on one vessel for a prolonged period is a luxury that a potter today rarely finds.”

Microcosms of Memory: Recent Work by SunKoo Yuh

by Don Pilcher

There is much to admire and consider in the comprehensive collection of figurative porcelain constructions on display recently at Parkland Art Gallery (www.parkland.edu/gallery) on the campus of Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois. Each work is populated with numerous people of all ages and their attendant birds, dogs, automobiles, cartoon characters and peckla. Each piece is finished with an array of desirable Cone 10 glazes, applied nearly at random and often without regard to natural coloration, hence red hands and blue faces. The effect is as



SunKoo Yuh’s “Sacrifice,” 22 in. (56 cm) in height, porcelain with glaze and gold luster; at Parkland Art Gallery, Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois.

uncertain as the application and runs from poetic and quizzical to indifferent and confused.

Each of these works is titled, but titled in ways that distinguish one work from another—rather than as descriptors that direct the viewer to actual content. Nothing wrong there, however, we are then left to extract meaning from an unlimited but repetitive array of images, expressions, postures, colors, hand gestures and compositional arrangements. Most of the time the payoff is considerable. It is no mystery why Yuh’s work has been so broadly acknowledged.

Still, upon careful consideration the question arises, “Is there a difference between an artist’s theme and an artist’s formula?” In nearly every case the spinal orientation of each figure is face forward and ramrod straight. Every face is distorted in the same proportional way: a