

THESIS

HUMAN NATURE

Submitted by

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EXPANDED ABSTRACT OF THESIS

HUMAN NATURE

The nature of post-modernism offers stylistic inclusiveness suggesting an alternative to theoretical consistency. The theoretical and artistic approaches involved in this work do not lend themselves to systematic prose. This expanded abstract is written in the same spirit as the work has been accomplished and is, therefore, somewhat disconnected and at times conflicting, but is provided to identify the internal consistency required of thesis work.

Although disjunctive, the sculpture in this thesis is not arbitrarily brought together. Each piece reflects my responses to the relationship between unsustainable development and the natural environment in Colorado, and in a broader sense the ultimate question of human survival. These varied responses include indignation, anger, guilt, fear, and the struggle for optimism in the face of acutely discouraging evidence. Conflicting feelings, as well as the fragmentation of post-modernist culture, are revealed in this work through formal and theoretical dichotomies. Ambiguities and variations on content and expression

have been required within pieces. Even though I approached the work with some despair based on my observations and interpretations of events, each piece represents a small victory over that despair, an objectification of the victory over the forces that erode our sense of the quality of life.

Each of the thesis pieces is referential to the figure, but the work has, of necessity, developed in two main directions. Four of the pieces are based on the abstracted figure as metaphor. Two pieces offer a more spatial connection with the viewer's body.

All work addressed here is made predominantly of fired clay. Although I have experimented with various materials from cast bronze to projected images, I have an enduring interest in clay, both from the standpoint of personal affinity for the process, and the belief that it is the most appropriate material to use in addressing these issues.

The relationship between humans and nature has been an ongoing theme throughout the history of sculpture, and has often been addressed through the use of the figure. Archaeologists and art historians have various theories to explain the earliest figurative sculpture but there seems to be little doubt that it attempts to explain the natural world. There has long been a metaphorical association with the figure as an embodiment of nature. The Greeks considered the human form to be a natural manifestation of harmony and god-like perfection.

The western tradition of scientific thought which has shaped our understanding of the human/nature relationship, began in the eleventh century

when Greek and Arabic scientific works were translated into Latin. As Christianity replaced animistic theism, the medieval European scientific and religious view became anthropocentric, establishing the dualism of man and nature.¹ Western figurative art such as Bernini's *Daphne and Apollo* is an example of this dualism. An alternating revulsion and fascination with the figure has continued through western European sculpture. Much of this western figurative work is based on human control over nature, emphasizing the scientific approach to understanding.²

In part because of the emphasis on the power over nature in European sculpture, I have looked to the three dimensional figure in non-western art and artifacts. My personal interest is in pre-Columbian art, especially figurative sculpture made of fired clay from the Colima-Jalisco region of Mesoamerica (c. 500 B.C. to 1 A.D.)³ and Peruvian effigy pottery of the Moche and Chancay Valleys (c. A.D. 1 - 1200).⁴ These works have a particular interest for me because they are repositories of history and myth concerning the interdependent and harmonious relationship between nature and human beings of both genders.

¹ Lynn White Jr. "The Historical Roots Of Our Ecologic Crisis" Science (Mar. 10, 1967)

² Michael Gill. Image Of The Body. (New York: Doubleday, 1989)

³ L. K. Land. Pre-Columbian Art From The Land Collection. (Los Angeles: California Academy of Sciences and L. K. Land, 1979)

⁴ Emmanuel Cooper. A History Of World Pottery (New York: Larousse & Co. Inc. 1981)

In addition to this content, I feel contemporary artists share a visual vocabulary with ancient peoples, evidenced by our appreciation of pieces which were chosen for their burials and court collections. Much as the modernist sculptors took a formal interest in composition in "primitive" art, I have also looked at the formal qualities and abstraction of the figure in African, South Pacific, and pre-Columbian sculpture. I am particularly fascinated by the formal elements of the Tellem figures created by the early inhabitants of present day Mali. Although little is known about the culture which produced these figures, formally they describe the body with amazing simplicity and directness, and embody a self-sufficient power of human survival.

The figurative work in this thesis follows in the modernist tradition of the organic abstractions of Arp's "concretions" and Moore's "vitalism".⁵ Moore's work was inspired by natural objects as well as the human body, emphasizing mankind's harmony with nature rather than discord. There are also obvious modern precedents for representation of the human body as volume rather than mass, for example, the works of Gaston Lachaise, Louise Bourgeois and Magdalena Abakanowicz.

I have also looked at the content and formal qualities in the more contemporary bronze sculpture of William Tucker. His recent figurative works reflect post-modern disillusionment with technology, focusing on the life-like

5 Herbert Read. A Concise History Of Modern Sculpture. (New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1984)

qualities of volume and mass of the body, rather than the geometrical and mechanical shapes of his earlier minimalist work. Like the Tellem and Peruvian sculpture, Tucker's figures, such as *Demeter* (1991) and *Tetbys* (1985), contain a presence of strength and survival.⁶ I am drawn to the internal spirit of Tucker's recent work, and the subtle aggression which seems to be generated from within.

The figurative pieces in this thesis encompass historic and contemporary content and formal qualities through ambiguous references to the female torso. The use of anthropomorphic abstraction seems appropriate because of the corporal nature of my response to this content. In *Form 4*, *Form 5*, *Form 9*, and *Form 11*, for example, the size and proportion relate to the torso and even though the body is incomplete, the pieces do not look truncated. (See Plates I - VII)

Without being retrogressive, I share an interest in the content of "primitive" art and artifacts with the neo-primitivists of the 1970s. Our culture cannot be returned to the agrarian subsistence level of living which created the "primitive" art I admire, but I feel that through their art, these early people might speak to us about respect for our environment. In response to present ecological problems, in all of the work, I am exploring that connection more from the standpoint of the results of dissolution of the bond rather than an idealization.

I am fascinated by the formal qualities of African and Pacific Island art and artifacts. The influence of Mexican and Peruvian pieces may be more easily recognized in my figurative work, however, because they share an emphasis on

6 Robert Taplin "Body Doubles" Art In America (Nov. 1996)

distortion of the figure and the sense of contained volume. Organic volumes are assembled in a way which enables associations with the human figure without describing it specifically. As is evident in *Form 4*, *Form 5*, *Form 9*, and *Form 11*, like the pre-Columbian sculptures as well as Tucker's recent work, my approach to the shape of the figure is from the inside rather than an exterior understanding. In *Form 5* and *Form 11*, for example, the surfaces suggest damaged or unhealthy flesh, but the supporting shapes offer the feeling of life through internally generated movement. In *Form 5* (see Plates II & III) the volume of the chest-like area suggests inflated lungs. The organic volumes in *Form 11* (see Plates VI & VII) have a Moore-like unity through the repetition of shapes. This is countered by the surface which simultaneously suggests diseased skin and a view of the landscape from space. In *Form 9* (see Plates IV & V) the size and proportions and feeling of volume suggest a torso but the surface is deteriorated and alludes to a burnt landscape. The small volume at the top suggests the possibility for regeneration of life.

Like Tucker, I resist an emphasis on physicality as an end in itself. I think of the tactile, literal presence of the material as a theoretical foundation for the object as a vehicle for interpretation of perceptions and personal expression. Contrary to emphasis on instantaneous experience, I prefer that the nature of the object reveals itself over time, going beyond the immediate and specific, in order to make contact with something more significant and beyond my immediate understanding. In *Form 4* (see Plate I) the opening refers simultaneously to a

violation and to a naturally occurring opening offering only a glimpse of the interior. Body parts have an unapparent, submerged order. This approach to process was consistently employed in all thesis work.

The two works (*Form 7* and *Form 8* - see Plates VIII and IX) in this thesis which are based on variations of a sphere offer several appropriate symbolic connections. "Sun wheels" appeared in rock engravings from the neolithic period and are believed by some archaeologists to refer to mankind's dependence on the sun for survival. The circle is used in Tibetan mandalas to symbolize ultimate wholeness. The Zen circle represents enlightenment and relates to the body in the attainment of human perfection. The circle or sphere has been used symbolically in modern western painting in works by Kandinsky and Matisse. In recent times, the sphere continues to carry references to the sun and the earth as well as mankind's relationship to nature, as in James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, for example. The sphere is also a symbol for the self, expressing the totality of the mind and soul, including the relationship between humans and the whole of nature.⁷

Formally, the static nature of the sphere exemplifies the highest possible order a system can assume - an equilibrium of forces. In contrast, the sphere has an uplifting feeling of volume and suggests the potential for movement as a result of its limited contact with the plane.

7 Aniela Jaffe. "Symbolism In The Visual Arts" Man And His Symbols ed. Carl Jung (New York: Del, 1961)

A sectioned sphere makes the inside visible and allows access to interior space and volume, and thereby carries a reference to pottery. Pottery's historical content is derived from its use as a real container for food but also from the metaphorical sustainment of life. As a powerful aspect of daily life, there is a benevolence inherent in this life sustaining reference. Pottery is associated with the means for human survival, physically and metaphorically.

Pottery has also historically been a metaphor for the body. Parts of a pot are referred to in anatomical terms like foot, belly, shoulder, and lip. Many pottery shapes resemble the proportions of the body, allowing projection of the viewer's own bodily identity. "A pot, thus, contains both the reality of materials and process, and the inner realities of man's sense of identity in relation to his own world of meaning."⁸

The spherical pieces (*Form 7* and *Form 8*) refer to pottery through the tensions of external and internal pressure and the containment of volumes. The reference to an oversized bowl in *Form 7* suggests abundance and also contains pottery's historical association with the body. There are also subtle references to an oversized human head or eyeball, alluding to the western scientific idea of separation of mind and body. Both of these pieces also relate to the body's spatial orientation, emphasizing impressions of the world received from without, rather than an understanding coming from within as in the figurative pieces.

8 Philip Rawson. Ceramics. (London, New York: Oxford University Press. 1984) p. 8

In *Form 7* the accessibility to the interior and the size of the piece offer a dichotomy between the visibility of space and the repository nature of volume. This containment heightens the feeling of violation of the interior which is aided by the reference to pottery. The integrity of the sphere is maintained until it breaks randomly at the rim. The exterior surface reveals organic fissures in opposition to the rationally latitudinal lines. In addition, both pieces draw on the formal dichotomy of stability/instability of the sphere, as well as the qualities of surface color and texture.

At the same time, *Form 7* and *Form 8* also make reference to landscape. There is a suggestion of mankind's unity with nature in this work, but it also contains the idea of opposition and attempted control over nature. Treatment of the surface deals with micro and macro views of landscape, with some areas receding and other surfaces pushing forward. There is a tension between the interior surface as having a sense of presence and a sense of atmosphere. Tension also exists between the interior and the exterior surface. *Form 8* suggests a darker view. The integrity of the sphere is in a state of disintegration, being held together by deteriorating industrial material. The conflicting systems contribute to the feeling of chaos but the repetition of visual elements holds the sphere from complete dissolution. Approaches to these pieces include both pastoral and apocalyptic visions of the course of events on earth, and involve varying levels of optimism.

I have looked at the content, and the formal qualities which express that content, in western European, pre-Columbian, neo-primitivist, modernist, and contemporary sculpture. Rather than accommodating the work to existing images which have become conventions, I have looked at historic sculpture with the idea of expanding on individual and collective sensibilities.

The general nature of an MFA thesis requires that the work should evidence some harmony or unity resulting from explorations guided by some consistent conceptual and/or technical direction of interest with the expectation that exploration may lead to unexpected results. The post-modernist approach to art and ideology offers us the opportunity to give up the quest for a single perspective in favor of a complex and fragmented one, allowing contradictions to emerge and offering new understandings. The work in this thesis represents a check point in my continuing search for a new understanding, and the renewed realization that human nature sustains an obdurate sense of hope.

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Dedication

This thesis work is dedicated to my husband Adrian who has encouraged me in all the years of our marriage, to be all I can.

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- Plate II & III Untitled Form 5 (yellow horizontal figurative)
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, acrylic paints
9 in. high x 29 1/2 in. wide x 14 in. deep
- Plate IV & V Untitled Form 9 (black vertical figurative)
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, mixed media
29 1/2 in. high x 18 in. wide x 21 in. deep
- Plate VI & VII Untitled Form 11 (blue horizontal figurative)
fired clay, multi-fired glazes
17 1/2 in. high x 28 in. wide x 15 in. deep
- Plate VIII Untitled Form 7 (beige hemisphere)
fired clay, multi-fired glazes
14 in. high x 24 in. wide x 24 in. deep
- Plate IX Untitled Form 8 (black hemisphere)
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, mixed media
14 in. high x 32 in. wide x 29 in. deep

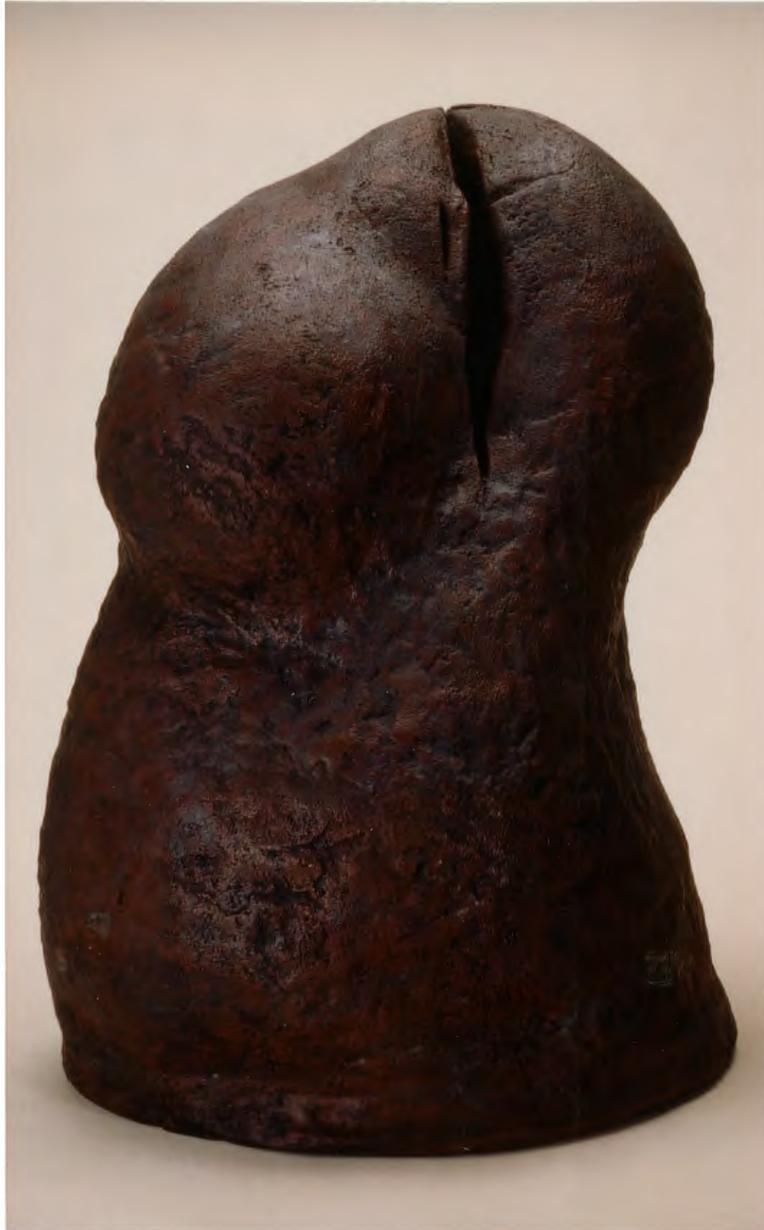


Plate I. Untitled Form 4
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, acrylic paints
23 in. high x 17 in. wide x 16 in. deep



Plate II. Untitled Form 5 View 1
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, acrylic paints
9 in. high x 29 1/2 in. wide x 14 in. deep



Plate III. Untitled Form 5 View 2
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, acrylic paints
9 in. high x 29 1/2 in. wide x 14 in. deep



Plate IV. Untitled Form 9 View 1
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, mixed media
29 1/2 in. high x 18 in. wide x 21 in. deep

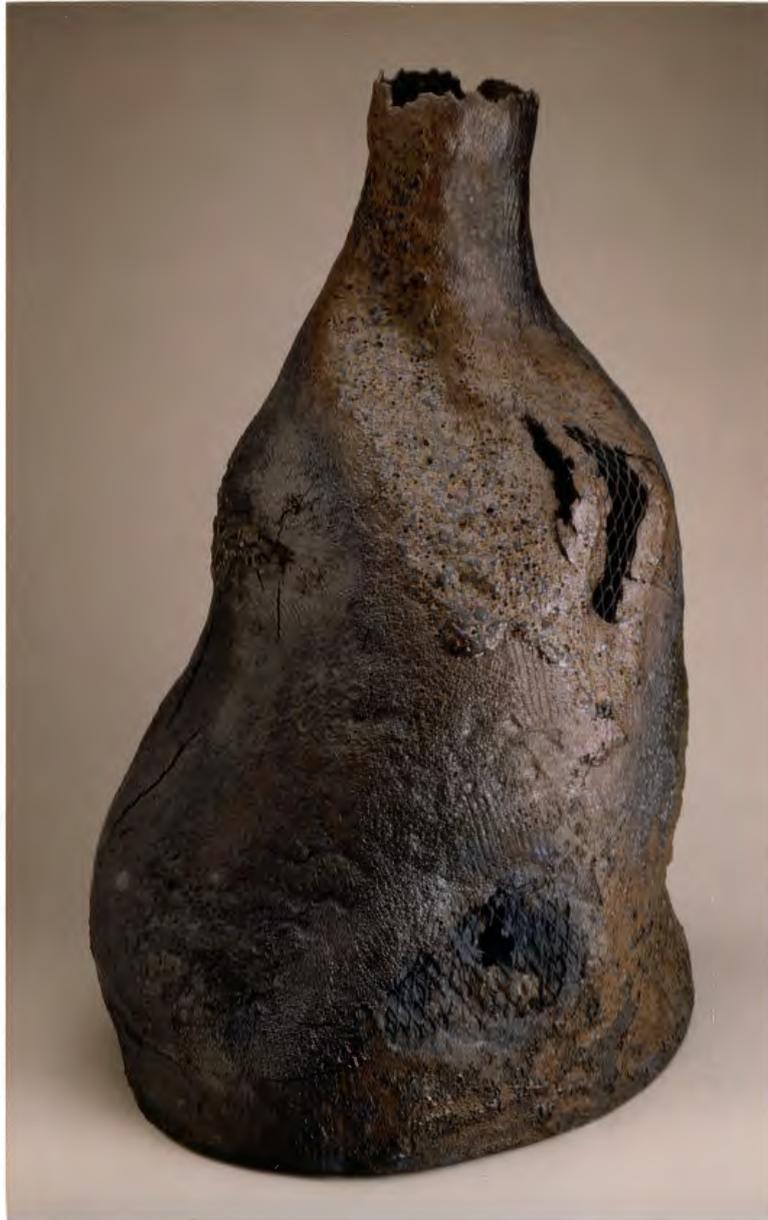


Plate V. Untitled Form 9 View 2
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, mixed media
29 1/2 in. high x 18 in. wide x 21 in. deep



Plate VI. Untitled Form 11 View 1
fired clay, multi-fired glazes
17 1/2 in. high x 28 in. wide x 15 in. deep



Plate VII. Untitled Form 11 View 2
fired clay, multi-fired glazes
17 1/2 in. high x 28 in. wide x 15 in. deep



Plate VIII. Untitled Form 7
fired clay, multi-fired glazes
14 in. high x 24 in. wide x 24 in. deep



Plate IX. Untitled Form 8
fired clay, multi-fired glazes, mixed media
14 in. high x 32 in. wide x 29 in. deep

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