

We Are The Same: The Work of Elaine O. Henry

Tanya Hartman

"Everyone who wills can hear the inner voice. It is within everyone". Mahatma Gandhi

Sitting in The Mercantile Café in Big Horn Wyoming, I glance out at the wide western street and wait for artist Elaine Henry to arrive. It is an August morning, and the café is mostly empty. Sun dapples the oilcloth-covered tables, and the motor of a refrigerator containing soft drinks hums quietly in the silence. It is a completely unpretentious environment and I am eager to speak with her.

Elaine Henry is warm, intelligent and candid and our conversation ranges from her artistic influences to her profound respect for what is honest and unselfconscious in a work of art. Originally, she had wanted to study with Robert Arneson because she loved his lack of concern about craft in his work. She comments, "he allowed something more genuine and tangible

to be revealed and never let his ego drive his creative process." Ruth Duckworth is also a central influence. The artist admires the fact that Duckworth allowed the adhesive seams to show in her ceramic sculptures.

The drive out to the museum to visit an exhibition of Elaine's works passes through some of the most beautiful landscape imaginable. Reddish earth dusts our vehicles, cattle graze and a pale blue-sky beams warm breezes through the open window. The museum itself is hushed and reverent. The experience of stepping into Elaine Henry's exhibition is like stepping into the cool sanctuary of a church from the secular cacophony of Wyoming's summer hills. Everything is altered and suddenly sacred.

The small gallery is arranged like a chapel filled with arti-



facts. Narrow shelves line the walls. Arranged in great simplicity upon them are vessels of moderate size; hybrid in structure, with organic ruffles and cleats integrated into traditional forms such as the pitcher and the urn. The effect is utterly convincing, as if two animals were spliced together to create something more inclusive and beautiful than the original. Subtle and modest color extends across the surfaces of the pots. The glazes employed by Henry evoke earth and seasons, without ever insisting upon a way of being seen or interpreted. Their aesthetic links them to the natural world and initially I regard them as I would a tree of particular loveliness, or a satisfying vista. Their beauty renews me without having to think analytically about implication. In Henry's work, meaning and form are one, so that as I delight in aesthetics, thoughts that amplify the splendor of the work begin to flit across my consciousness, bringing forth contemplation about human fragility and aspiration.

Almost immediately I am drawn to a vessel titled *Pitcher* (porcelain, oxides, underglaze pencils and glaze, 16" x 8" x 8", 2012). Lighter in coloration than other vessels, it is displayed near the entrance to the gallery, its jubilant proboscis thrust heavenward while its stout base grounds it. Thin underglaze pencil lines in turquoise meander vertically towards an embellished center. These marks are awkward and sincere, their blue coloration against the white porcelain reminiscent of a child's writing tablet. In these drawn lines, the artist lets her hand be felt, whereas the embellished center, composed as it is of tufts and sprockets of clay glazed in the delicate peaches and greens of early spring, feels en-

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opposite **Vessel**, Porcelain with oxides. 22 x 23 x 20 cm, 2013

right **Pitcher**, Porcelain, oxides, underglaze pencils and glaze, 41 x 20 x 20 cm, 2012

tirely of nature and untouched by human manipulations. Tying the two passages together are vertical clay gills in low relief and a simple, white handle that reiterates the pitcher's base in shape. The most riotous passages of clay occur in the pitcher's belly, much in the way that we feel our emotions in our guts. However, this vessel points upwards while grounding to earth with its durable base. Perhaps it urges us to experience the events of the inner life, but to release them towards what is infinite, in order to orient ourselves in the present?

The title of the exhibition, *Guardians of the Secret* is very important, and references works of art by both Jackson Pollack and Robert Arneson. Pollack painted the original *Guardians* in 1943, when he was undergoing Jungian analysis. The painting is rife with coupled oppositions, but its central image is of a white rectangle that is covered in scraffito gestures that cannot be easily interpreted. Elaine Henry ingeniously construes the marks that Pollack creates in paint into the ruffles and clay scraps that adorn her vessels. Pollack's marks are willfully obtuse and are guarded by a she wolf as well as male and female totemic figures. Henry's are embedded into ceramic tradition, protected by a legacy of making pots, making art. Pollack may be trying to say that painting is a generative act that conducts creative energy into images that represent themselves but transcend their visual meanings and point back to the eternal. Elaine Henry's hieroglyphs are similar to Pollack's in that they are partially figurative, partially text, and speak past themselves to reference all that cannot be easily contained in language. Arneson's homage to Pollack created in 1989-90

is an enormous ceramic rendering of Pollack's painting. This brilliant piece is an insane exercise, as there is nothing in the original painting that lends itself to literal transcription. And so Arneson's piece becomes about love. When we love, we labor illogically to create a masterpiece that is our life with another. We wash endless dishes, we share thousands of conversations and cups of tea, all in the face of how love ends—always in loss, whether through death or alienation. Arneson has labored to quote his mentor in clay. His piece is both witty and tragic. But what does this all say about Elaine Henry's art, and her exhibition? Her piece places two female totems at either end of a small wood table that holds one teapot and one urn. The teapot points up, the urn crouches low to the ground. Each have very different aspects: air and earth but are formally unified by their construction which is loose, open, willing to show flaws and to reveal layers. Inside all her pieces, you see the same texture and surface as outside. There is no artifice in her work yet there is embellishment. And thus, like Pollack and Arneson, mentors that preceded her, she is posing questions that have no answers. Pollack pushes his paint far enough so that it becomes an inquiry as to whether mystical energy can be contained in paint. Arneson asks how we can love our legacies, but retain

below

"No secrets", porcelain, 19 x 34 x 17 cm, 2013

opposite page

"Loving Cup" (Detail), porcelain with oxides, 20 x 18 x 15 cm, 2013



identity. Henry asks if it is possible to make ourselves harmonious, allowing inner and outer to be equally visible and working as one in our psyches. Her art asks an important question that incorporates Pollack and Arneson's queries into one true cry: if we are vessels, then what are we filled with? If our inner and outer shells match, then what is the air within? And thus, in her exhibition, *Guardians Of The Secret*, she elevates her work to the status of prayer, and in so doing confers upon contemporary art its status as ministry, inquiry, elucidation and inspiration.

Tanya Hartman studied at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University US. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas and has received numerous awards including a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden.

Artist' Statement

Through my work, I explore the boundaries of excess and constraint within the parameters of the formal issues. I am interested in conversations that take place between me (as the maker) and the material (as a responder) and vice versa. Each toss of the clay or each tool mark elicits a new response, keeping the conversation fresh. Through experimentation with form, (often influenced by Asian and/or Classical forms) I explore the balance of fluidity and stability. In the completed works, the process has included the balancing of control and discovery, excess and constraint, speaking and listening: all are essential.



Elaine Olafson Henry

Elaine Henry is currently the Editor/Publisher of the international ceramics journals *Ceramics: Art & Perception* and *Ceramics TECHNICAL*. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Wyoming in 1992 and a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 1995. She taught for 12 years at Emporia State University and was Art Department Chair from 2000 through 2007. From 2002 through 2004 Henry served as President of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts and is now a Fellow of that organization. She is an artist member of the International Academy of Ceramics and her work is internationally published, exhibited and collected.

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