

Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making

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Virginia M. EICHHORN

There is something about the Canadian psyche that responds to art in "groups." Canadian Art 101 foundations are built upon the Group of Seven, Painters Eleven, Regina Five, and the London scene from the 1960s. There's the Isaacs Group in Toronto, the Woodland School for First Nations, and the Rankin Inlet printmakers and carvers. Our need to affix a designation, an order if you will, is perhaps somewhat entrenched in human consciousness.

We have a need to create order, to understand, to mark points of reference. It's also understandable that many artists would want to rebel against those categorizations, however illustrious they might be. For to create art is (generally) to want to create something distinct and unique – to make one's mark as an individual in vision and technique – not to be lumped in as a component part of something else.

The exhibition *Regina Clay: World in the Making* undertakes to explore a seminal point in Canadian art history – a point where art and craft not only sat comfortably together, but bumped, grinded, and fed off of each other in a frenetic and stimulating burst of creativity, culminating in a range of work that hadn't been seen before. The source of inspiration was the material itself – clay – evinced in the ceramic medium. A medium which, "despite its versatility," as curator Timothy Long writes in the exhibition brochure, "has struggled to win the respect given to metal and stone. As a medium with too much and not enough history, with abundant promise but no esteem..."

In the 1960s and 1970s in the small prairie city of Regina, Saskatchewan, a remarkable fusion of energy and vision took place amongst a group of fourteen artists: Lorne Beug, Victor Cicansky, Joe Fafard, David Gilhooly, Ricardo Gomez, Beth Hone, Ann James, Margaret Keelan, Marilyn Levine, Lorraine Malach, Maija Peebles-Bright, Jack Sures, David Thauberger, and Russell Yurist. These artists came from a myriad of backgrounds. They came from across national divides and differing cultures, eventually

setting up practice in Regina. This was the generation that directly experienced the social changes and upheavals of the 1960s, for whom challenging conventions and mores – whether societal or aesthetic – was a given. And in the early seventies, when young faculty and students from the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus (University of Regina since 1974), and the annual Emma Lake Artists' Workshops challenged the prevailing modernist orthodoxy, that challenge became identified with a single medium: clay.

This seminal exhibition has been organized and circulated by the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. Fortunately, it is on tour and will be shown at such venues as Museum London and the Burlington Art Centre, in Ontario, and the MacKenzie and the Kelowna Art Gallery in British Columbia. The dissemination of this exhibition is crucial as it is a part of our visual and cultural history that many people are unfamiliar with. A veritable cornucopia of artwork – bringing together almost 200 art works –, the exhibition explodes with form and colour. Some of the artists have become iconic figures, and some – such as Fafard, Sures and Levine – are still very active and well known. Others, less well known, are nonetheless important and integral parts of the Regina Clay experience.

The exhibition, as mounted at Museum London, demanded many viewings – so vast was the range and material presented, from Joe Fafard's sometimes world-weary figures, sitting at a diner, or alone in a room, evoking a sense of recognition for those who live solitary existences (not necessarily by choice), to the effusive irreverence of David Gilhooly, whose *Frog World* seemed to thumb its nose at the temple of modernism.

Maija Peebles-Bright's work was a revelation and a delight. There is a certain insouciant charm to her ceramic pieces that unorthodoxly and effusively combines fabric and ceramics in her crocheted *Woofishes*, named in honour of her dachshund, Woof. Her clay pieces also give free rein to wild plant and animal fantasies with such alliterative titles as *Peacock Peaks*.

Ann James was known for the ceramic and rigid polyurethane foam with which she created work

that critiqued various kinds of social hypocrisy. Rejecting the term of "feminist" – though feminist concerns certainly make up part of her content –, James's work is for all people, depicting shared cultural and social issues, not just those having a sexual designation.

Structure, perspective, and architecture are a main concern for Lorne Beug. His sculptural environments evidence his knowledge of anthropology, archeology and geology; psychoanalysis, architecture and primitive art have had a profound influence on his work.

Margaret Keelan's figurative sculpture, invariably uses the image of morphed women as a symbol or metaphor of interior landscapes and memories. A fleshy reclining figure calls to mind Odelisques and Venuses of art-history past. Yet, rather than act as an enticement to desire, the inclusion of clawed feet, grayish pallor and flaccid structure provoke a certain disgust.

Marilyn Levine's mind-boggling trompe-l'œil sculptures don't just evoke the appearance of the tactility of leather; each crease and fold captures the essence of the person who wore the shoes or coat or carried the satchel every day. A sense of the person is implied, though only the object is rendered. It comes as no surprise to hear that at one opening, at the end of the

evening, a pile of coats were found on top of a Levine sculpture of a leather jacket – gallery goers had thought it was a coat on a table and merely followed suit.

The works on view are incredible in their diversity – united in their variety, and in their adamant dismissal of any line between ceramic as "fine craft" and ceramic as sculpture. Not only does Long's curatorial thesis locate the group of artists within the cultural or aesthetic milieu, it also examines the work as an example of nascent regionalism of far-reaching influence. The Regina clay scene never developed into a full-fledged "movement" *per se* – there were no manifestos, no membership –, but as the work in *Regina Clay* demonstrates, these fourteen artists changed the way that not only Canadians, but artists everywhere, understand the potential and power of clay, as means, metaphor, and material. ←

Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making
Museum London, London, Ontario
March 11th to May 29th, 2005

Virginia Eichhorn is the Curator of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery. She is a board member for both Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in Performance and Visual Arts. She has contributed numerous articles to many prestigious Canadian magazines and lives in Kitchener with her husband and three sons.

David GILHOOLY,
Well Balanced Fertility Goddess, 1972.
Ceramic, 78.7 x 29 x 22.5 cm. MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection (1973-002). Photo: Don Hall.

