



Form Following Function

The Ceramics of Sarah Spencer White

*Article by
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Myon. 2000. Earthenware. 40 x 30 x 17.5 cm.

A FRIEND JOKINGLY CALLED SARAH WHITE'S CERAMIC sculptures "dysfunctional pottery," but, in a way, the joke conveys the essence of White's work. With their distended shapes, alternately bulbous and attenuated, here earthenware forms recall the discomforts of sickness. Her recent body of work consists of 13 vibrant pieces that hover on a wall and are named with anatomical terms such as *Striate* and *Myon*. Shown in 2001 at Pewabic Pottery's Stratton Gallery in Detroit, Michigan, they are the result of "lengthy musings and curiosity about the way our bodies function and malfunction." The series is based on human organs and is, White says, "fuelled by this interest in the body and the urge to express what is going on underneath the thin tarp of our skin."

There is something alien about these insect-like sculp-

tures, but they evolve from inner space, not outer space. When poring over anatomical drawings from different eras, White became interested in how unfamiliar the insides of our bodies are to us. "The historical drawings were interesting because they were often incorrect. They might show the heart as if it were as big as a football, based on the perception that because you could hear your heart beating, it had to be larger than we now know it is." White's sculptures convey this sense of confusion and uneasiness about our bodies, partly by showing the correspondence between the valves and tubes of internal organs and those of hospital machinery. Thinking of artificial respirators, dialysis machines and radiation treatments, White questions our blind faith in the ability of these mechanisms to cure our ills. Furthermore, she is



Obtund. 2000. Earthenware. 45 x 45 x 25 cm.

constantly considering the changes of the body—its natural daily functions as well as the mutations and abnormalities brought on by disease and injury.

Handbuilt of red earthenware, many of these pieces share a basic torso-like shape from which smaller forms protrude, some of them quite tenuously attached. The glazes—grey-green, amber, a veiny blue—are reminiscent of colours found within the body. Her glazes are unsieved to allow specks of colour and are layered on thickly. She often fires the pieces several times, experimenting with overfiring and underfiring. The result is interior glazes that are often smooth, while the outer surfaces are scaly or pebbly, conveying the sense of something whose rough outer shell has been cut open to reveal a vulnerable core. Fleishy or sandy in hue, the inner surfaces also

have a slight metallic shine that suggests wetness. “The contrasting glazes are meant to heighten the oddness or unfamiliarity,” Whites says. “I want them simultaneously to attract and repulse. We don’t think of bright colours as negative, but inside the body bright colours often signify disease or infection.” Indeed the sculptures elicit from viewers the same uncertain perverse fascination we have with our own wounds.

One work shows the amber yellow of a fading bruise, mottled with a lighter yellow reminiscent of old teeth. Its shape is basically torso-like, where one might imagine legs there are only two protuberances connected by a looping coil of clay; where the chest should be is a folded-over flap. Though the shape is evocative of a body that has lost its limbs, it is obviously a whole. The loop at one



Striate. 2000. Earthenware. 25 x 45 x 30 cm.



Foramina. 2000. Earthenware. 40 x 27.5 x 30 cm.

end connects it to itself; the flap seems to protect whatever is hidden inside and has a revolting economy of form that is utterly like an organ, yet it is unidentifiable as one.

The same economy is apparent in other sculptures whose parts interact via several channels that lead to pierced bulb cup-like forms hanging beneath them, ready to catch whatever might drip from above. The bulb serves as a receptacle for the channels leading from larger vaguely oblong shapes out of which openings spout. The visible interior of one spout is a smooth watery blue passage from which something can flow easily. Its pale colour is at odds with the blue crusty exterior of the rest of the piece, suggesting that a delicate process must take place inside this strangely armoured object.

Viewers often wonder about the origins of these surprising sculptures. White works from what she likes to call her "philosophy of inundation," gathering ideas from a variety of sources. She reads, looks at all sorts of images, and sometimes makes sketches. Generally starting with a vague idea of the general orientation of a piece (vertical, round, long), she then invents the work as she makes it, trying to reach "some sort of compromise between gravity and a denial of gravity." Sometimes experimenting with smaller forms will lead her to the right way to make a bigger sculpture. "Physically the clay doesn't have as much pressure on it, so I can take more risks. My explorations on a smaller scale let me investigate ways to make larger work."

Her work has been shown at galleries and in juried shows throughout the US, including at the 1999 NCECA

Clay National. Her previous work has drawn from similar themes and referred to the forms which enthrall her – bodily organs, microscopic organisms, medical instruments, household tools and industrial machinery. This earlier work tended to be glazed in the same or similar tones, each piece part of a larger series. Her new work is different in that each piece stands alone as a complete thought. Though organs must work together to keep a body going, White says "each is a contained system for a specific function."

A native of North Carolina, White received her BFA from UNC-Chapel Hill and went on to earn an MFA in ceramics from the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she studied with Scott Chamberlain and Betty Woodman. She has taught drawing and ceramics to students from middle school through college, and now teaches at Durham School of the Arts in Durham, NC.

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