

Cheryl Ann Thomas



FRAGILITY



and LOSS

Facing page: Six Relics 154, 178, 179, 180, 190 and 238. 2010. Porcelain. 28.5 x 29 x 24 in.

Above: Threesome Relics 249, 250 and 251. 2010. Porcelain. 19 x 24 x 25 in.

A FEW YEARS AGO, AS CHERYL ANN THOMAS STUDIED a group of her sculptures lined up in her studio, she had a 'eureka' moment; two or three of these objects, deformed and slumped by chance, could be grouped together for a new entity. This assessment led to the 10 assembled sculptures in Thomas' recent solo exhibit of new work at the Frank Lloyd Gallery, 8 January to 5 February, 2011. Previously, the contorted objects were featured individually in exhibition until 2008 when the first assembled forms were shown. By combining several together, Thomas has achieved a sculptural monumentality and spirituality more

vividly present than in earlier work.

Patently coiling thin, long strands of porcelain clay, Thomas piles coils upon coils, constructing large, basket-like vessels, deep bowls and tall columns whose ridges retain her fingerprints as a narrative of the process. Complemented by a palette of warm black and off-white coloured clay, the lightly textured surface is reminiscent of objects in nature such as a similarly labour-intensive cocoon. Allowing the visibility of the process is important to Thomas. In doing so her work emphasises the vulnerability of unfired clay while revealing that this frail material acquires great strength through the kiln's action.

A Review by Elaine Levin



Foursome Relics 239, 240, 241 and 245. 2010. Porcelain. 28 x 29 x 24 in.

Firing each vessel individually at a high temperature allows for surprises and the unexpected. She assembles the resulting forms for a second and, sometimes, third firing, producing multi-layered compositions, providing, in her words, “opportunities for transformations”.

Foursome Relics is composed of two black forms sheltering a base of two pale forms. Viewed from one side, the black, creased, hat-like top sits above white wing-like flared sections. Curiously, the rear view of this sculpture reveals two large, yawning holes, recalling the structure’s starting point as several containers, yet adding a mysterious and haunting space, a lacuna. The word ‘relic’ in this and all but three of the 10 titles is appropriate for work that implies objects surviving from archaic times. Coiling clay to construct a bowl is one of the earliest methods for making pots, an ancient tradition still in use by Native American and West African potters.

The coiling process was the same for all of Thomas’ vessels. Especially evident in *Threesome Relics*, however, is the strain of the firing and the pressure exerted by the weight of the unfired clay as the exterior was formed. The walls of this three part, assembled, grey and sand-coloured porcelain sculpture are torn and nearly shredded into ribbons. The rhythmical swirl of the frayed and



Six Relics 217, 218, 220, 222, 248 and 255. 2010. Porcelain. 30 x 25 x 25 in.

tattered strands creates open spaces for an unexpected lightness. At the same time, the sculpture is the embodiment of fragility and vulnerability.

The most haunting sculpture and one of the tallest at 30 inches, is a combination of a white section sandwiched between a black shape and the black base. The top section of *Six Relics* is reminiscent of a hood or a cowl and thus implies a human presence. It is an ambiguous image, reminiscent

of a monk’s attire, a shroud or the ubiquitous caricature of death, often portrayed as an empty black hood with a bony hand holding a scythe. Black, the colour of mourning in Western cultures, is combined with

white, the colour of mourning for some Eastern cultures. The off-white mid-section flares outward and slightly upward, a gesture suggesting emerging wings or an expression of anguish. One coil, embedded into the surface as a thin blue line, subtly leads the eye around the sculpture’s flowing contours. Symbolically, the colour blue has references to life-giving water, as rivers or streams, perhaps a hopeful note in a sculpture hinting at mortality and life’s eventual termination.

*By combining several together,
Thomas has achieved a
sculptural monumentality
and spirituality more vividly
present than in earlier work.*



Artifact 4. 2009. Bronze. 26 x 43 x 31 in.

Another sculpture, slightly smaller in height and also titled *Six Relics*, is similar in the suggestion of a hood as its topmost shape, yet draped as though on a human head and shoulders. Sitting on a middle section of white, erupting forms, the sculpture projects a related ambiguity. The white, crushed and creased base of shapes appears to personify the burdensome weight of the upper levels, perhaps a metaphor for similar pressures felt in life.

Two bronze and one steel sculpture are included in the exhibition. Their titles as *Artifact 3*, *Artifact 4* and *Artifact 5* also make references to the archeological. Similar to other contemporary ceramists who have worked in clay, Thomas too wanted to experiment with non-clay media and was curious about the consequences for her work. These sculptures retain the appearance and texture of coils but not the effect of collapsed vessels. Instead, composed entirely of thin strands that swirl upward, in one case to 37 inches in height, these structures seem battered by the destructive forces of nature, a hurricane or tornado.

Thomas began as a painter and regards the work of two artists as especially inspirational; the

non-traditional, organic sculptures of Eva Hesse and the abstract and minimalist expression in the work of Agnes Martin. Thomas switched to clay after she took a class in beginning ceramics that exposed her to the work of contemporary ceramists, Peter Voukos and Paul Soldner. Not only their use of the vessel in a sculptural rather than functional context intrigue her but also that these artists, in a sense, gave permission to ceramists to be experimental.

Beyond suggestions of the precariousness and transience of life, Thomas' sculptures become abstract imagery for those forces beyond human control. The artist's childhood experience with the death of her father and her adult battle with cancer is embedded in these sculptures. The unpredictable, the unexpected, the unforeseeable in human life, the occurrence of disease and loss, haunt Thomas' use of this medium.

Elaine Levin is a writer on ceramics from California. She is a regular contributor to art and craft journals and is the author of *The History of American Ceramics, 1607 to the present*, published by Harry N Abrams, New York in 1988.