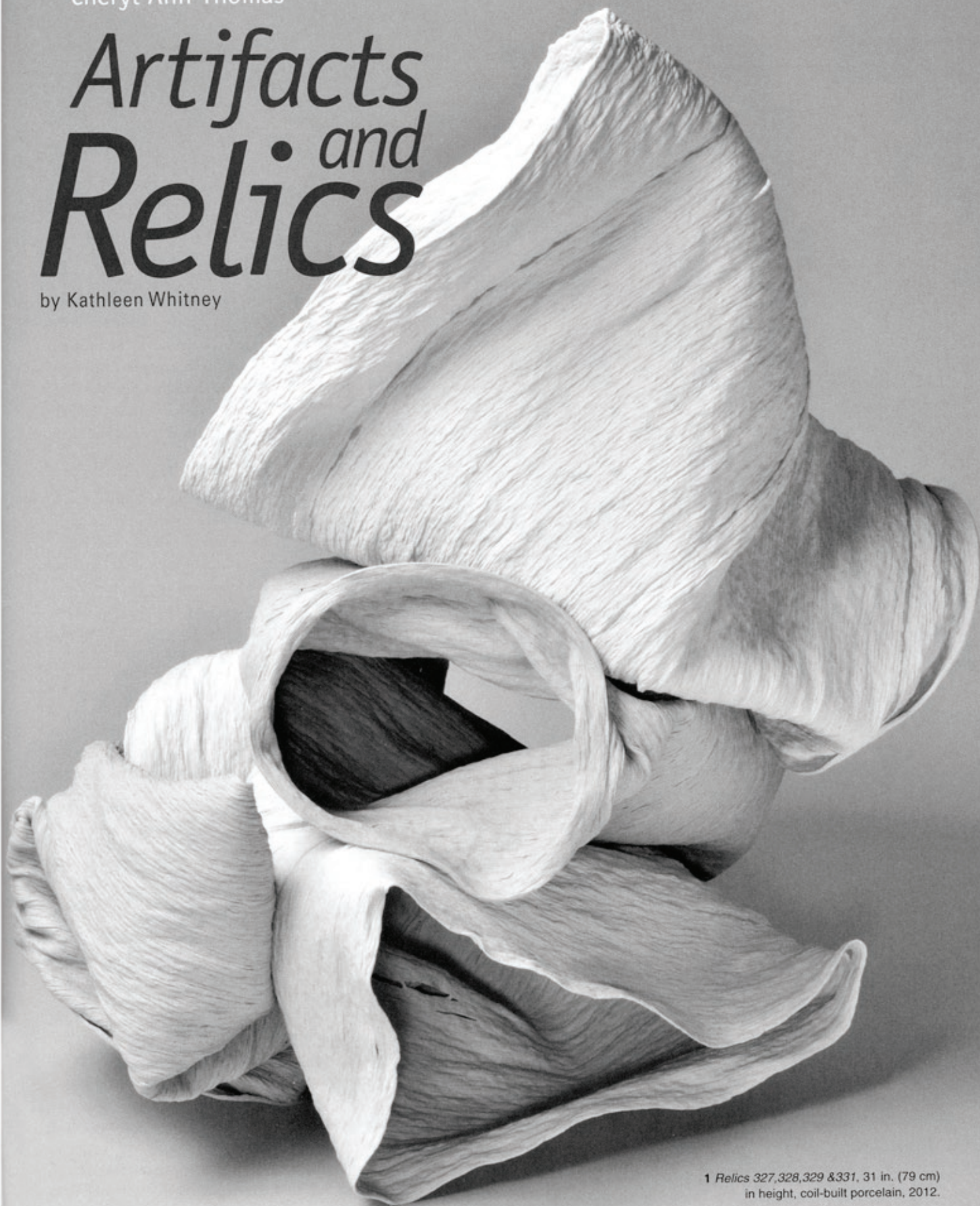


Cheryl Ann Thomas

Artifacts and Relics

by Kathleen Whitney



1 Relics 327,328,329 & 331, 31 in. (79 cm)
in height, coil-built porcelain, 2012.



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Like a three-dimensional Rorschach test, Cheryl Ann Thomas' work is totally abstract; a blank screen receptive to memory and association. Nothing she makes refers to the history of art or ceramics; it's process art ruled by transformation through chance and accident. She's more concerned with fabrication than with a specific final object; she starts with one form and ends with an accidental other, her end product is a discovery not a goal. It's work that can only be done with porcelain stripped of preciousness and historical associations.

Thomas produces objects that are richly expressive of time, nature, and human activity but have no overt content. Viewers frequently associate her objects with textiles; funerary wrappings, decayed ancient cloth, articles of discarded clothing, hats, or scarves. Thomas refers to her work as *relics* or *artifacts*; apropos because the meaning and use of ancient objects is often a matter of guesswork. Equally unknowable, Thomas' ornately twisted and multi-layered objects resemble *something* but can't be definitively identified. These objects are made even more mysterious because they are numbered. The numbering reflects the order in which they were made; a piece may be titled with a series of numbers separated by commas, and formatted like this, 202, 301, 32, as it's made of parts created at different times. There's a great deal of confusing topography in Thomas' pieces; interiors become exteriors, certain areas seem to have been turned inside out; everything is displaced and realigned.

The way Thomas uses coiling exposes the amount of time and effort necessary to make her work. This is the reverse of what most artists do; they obliterate the evidence of fabrication and labor because, unlike Thomas, their processes involve increasing levels of refinement. Thomas' work is finely made but uses a single, unaltered construction technique taken as far as is needed to produce a stable structure; she does nothing to refine it. Once the coils are attached, she simply maintains a columnar shape. She uses hundreds of narrow, hand-rolled porcelain coils. The surface is not uniform; the unevenness and variety of the coils give it a rhythmic, constantly changing quality—the eye is drawn to the multiple differences in length, width, and shape. As she says, her "sculptures are the permanent record of my interaction with the material."

Although she frequently uses the porcelain as is, she also colors the clay body with varying amounts of oxides; for a long time, her preference was for blacks, whites, and blue-grays. She used this limited palette in order to make the work seem more serious and to discourage interpretation. Her use of color began when she added white to black clay expecting the result to be another gray; the clay got bluer instead. She developed a brown in a similar way. Her most recent objects exhibit a much more extensive use of subtle color; she likens her new palette to the colors of wet river rocks.

Thomas begins by constructing tall, wide, symmetrical and bottomless cylinders. She does not bisque fire her work. She fires them once to between cone 5 and 10, aiming for cracking, separation, and slumping; all the pieces are vitrified. She fires a number of pieces singly, picks out

2 *Coupled*; *Relics* 124 & 127, 20 in. (51 cm) in length, coil-built porcelain, 2007.

3 *Foursome*; *Relics* 78, 99, 140 & 149, 26 in. (66 cm) in length, coil-built porcelain, 2008.

4 *Relics* 319, 321, 322, 333, 25 in. (64 cm) in length, coil-built porcelain, 2012.

5 *Relic Heap—Black*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1 m) in length, coil-built porcelain, 2011.

6 *Relics* 348, 349, 350, 351, 27 in. (69 cm) in length, coil-built porcelain, 2013.



color combinations, stacks the single pieces on top of each other, and fires again. The pieces, anywhere from three to nine layers high, slump, intertwine, and fuse together. Repeat firings follow if she's not satisfied with the forms. Regardless of porcelain's fragile nature and because she has no preconceptions about outcome, Thomas rarely experiences loss during firing. The final work is not delicate; she breaks away any fragile parts or extended ledges and smooths the edges. The pieces can weigh up to 30 pounds.

Coupled (Relics 124 & 127) is the first of Thomas' fused pieces. The piece was created in 2007 after Thomas discovered the potential of combining pieces. The idea occurred to her when she saw that these two pieces lined up as they were sitting side by side on a worktable. As she could not duplicate this kind of fit again, she tried re-firing pieces and discovered that the parts continued to slump as well as fuse. The intensely matte black piece is comprised of two crumpled adjacent vessels. The slumping makes the form seem dense and heavy, the delicacy of the coiling is almost lost in the thickness of the folds. The inward areas seem even darker than the dark black of the surface. There are several openings that allow glimpses of the interior but otherwise the impression is of an object that has been compressed by an uneven, extreme force.

Foursome (Relics 174, 176, 177, 191, 192), has three layers of black and one each of a pale bluish gray and a warm white. These are extremely slumped, one layer seemingly crushed and penetrated by the next, you can see into the pieces' interiors through folds and openings. This piece is strongly horizontal and the entanglement of the pieces seems natural. This is one of the elements that make her work so evocative; nothing seems forced.

Relic Heap-Black is one of the largest, most dramatic pieces Thomas has made. It consists of six fused pieces, three black and three deep blue-gray. Although you can see glimpses of the insides, the impression of compression and meltdown is particularly intense. The contrast between the horizontal paler form and the black one leaning above it is a consequence of Thomas' obsessive arranging and rearranging of colors and sections before firing.

Two pieces, *Relics 327, 328, 329 & 331* and *Relics 348, 349, 350 & 351* are examples of Thomas' new use of subdued color, representing a significant change from her previous, somewhat severe, palette. *Relics 327, 328, 329 & 331* seems to defy gravity; the topmost piece, a warm white, sits at a dangerous tilt on top of a pile of three equally softly colored sections. The tapered top piece has only a slight distortion, you can see all the way through it, its delicate interior is completely exposed. The insides of the other sections are revealed through large gaps in their sides. Regardless of the delicate colors, the piece is reminiscent of the crushed fender sculptures of John Chamberlain and has the same dynamic structure and implication of weight and compression.

Relics 348, 349, 350 & 351 is a beautifully simple and direct piece consisting of four open-ended tubes, each one propped horizontally above the next. The inside of each cylinder is completely exposed, emphasizing both delicacy and strength. You can see completely through several of the pieces; this makes the whole structure seem to float. The same forces are at work as in her other pieces, but this sculpture in particular seems to have resisted the crushing effects of firing. Its pale coloration lends it a sense of buoyancy; unlike much of Thomas' work it has a soft, almost botanical, quality.

Thomas' work is made more exceptional by the fact that she has no formal training as a potter. She took an introduction to ceramics class during which she was introduced to coil building; she has been using the technique exclusively since 2001. Her work can be seen as three-dimensional abstract paintings; the thrust and movement of the sections resemble abstract-expressionist brushstrokes. Because no aspect of her work is deliberate, her pieces have the beauty of found objects like sea glass, driftwood, river rocks. You look at her strange, refined, and extraordinary sculptures and think, "I have never seen anything like this before."

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