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Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making

Greg BEATTY

"Make Pottery Not War!" may not have been a rallying cry for anti-Vietnam War protestors and other counter-culture types in the 1960s, but given the subversive nature of clay as an artistic medium at that time, at least among professors and students at the University of Regina, it might well have been. That's just one of the subtexts in "Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making," a fascinating survey of clay practice in Regina in the late 1960s and early 1970s curated for the MacKenzie Art Gallery by Timothy Long.

"The genesis for the show came from a visit I made to the U of R archives in 1998," Long recalls. "I thought I'd do a small show of ceramics Vic Cicansky and David Thauberger had given to the archives, supplemented by a few works from the MacKenzie's collection. But then it struck me 'Maybe we should do a bigger show looking at that entire period?'" Long proceeded to do just that, gathering over 130 works from fourteen artists, including such nationally and internationally known figures as Joe Fafard, Marilyn Levine, David Gilhooly and Vic Cicansky.

According to Long, the stage was set for Regina's emergence as a clay hot-bed in the 1950s when the Saskatchewan Arts Board's Norah McCullough hired Patricia Wiens to make pottery from local clays in the Saskatchewan town of Eastend. Wiens subsequently set up the first ceramics program at the University of Regina, overcoming resistance from then Dean of Fine Arts (and Regina Five member) Kenneth Lochhead to do so. Beth Hone, wife of long-time Saskatchewan artist MacGregor Hone, was one of the first teachers. "Those people haven't been recognized, so this exhibition gives them some credit," says Long. "Then, of course, when Ric Gomez arrived [from California] in '64, his job was to set up a sculpture department, and to advise in the setting up of the ceramics department. He [and Marilyn Levine were] instrumental in hiring Jack Sures. Once you had Jack and Ric, you had the makings of a [first-rate department]."

Sures, who received his BFA from the University of Manitoba in 1957, and his MA from Michigan State in 1959, was trained as a painter and printmaker, but turned to ceramics shortly after graduating. He subsequently spent a year in Europe as part of his self-education process. "I found this place in Chelsea," he recalls. "They made decorative plates that they shipped all over the world. They had a few wheels that they rented out. So I paid sixpence an hour, and another sixpence a pound for the clay. I got friendly with the guy who loaded the kiln, so I got free firing." Upon returning to Canada, Sures worked for three years as a studio potter in Winnipeg before being hired by Lochhead's successor as dean (and fellow Regina Five member) Arthur McKay in 1965. "It was a great opportunity," he says. "I was struggling to make a living. At the university, I had this great salary – I think it was $8900, which in 1965 was pretty good. I only had to teach 18 hours a week, and the rest of the time was my own."

While doing research on a related topic a few years ago, I heard an anecdote from one prominent Saskatchewan artisan about a fire inspector touring the university's old College Avenue campus shortly after the ceramics program was established. Upon

Russell CICANSKY, *Self-Portrait (Aries)*, 1973. Earthenware, glaze, paint. 28.8 x 23.6 x 29.8 cm. MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection. Photo: Don Hall.

entering one room, he saw a pile of bricks in the middle of the floor. He happened to glance up, and spotted scorch marks on the ceiling. He put two and two together, and shutdown the makeshift kiln. While Sures doesn't recall that particular incident, he agrees that the ceramics department's beginnings were modest. "We got one room in what is now the Extension Building. It was in the basement, and was used for storage. We branched off into the next room. There was this old incinerator. It had a big chimney that went up three floors. That's what we fed our kilns into."

Thanks to the influence of the famous Emma Lake workshops in the 1950s, which spawned the internationally acclaimed group of abstract painters known as the Regina Five, the university, at the time of Sures' arrival, was a bastion of formalism. Clay, with both a functional and decorative aspect to it, was not consistent with this aesthetic. "I had to carve out a space for myself at the university," says Sures. "But I never had a big brawl with them. Ted Godwin used to say 'Craft is something you piss in, and art is something you piss on.' There was that attitude, it still exists today. But I think most intelligent people understand that a vessel can be as important an art object as a non-vessel." The formalist mindset, adds Sures, extended to the MacKenzie Gallery itself. "When Ron Bloore and Terry Fenton [who

Russell CICANSKY,
Prairie Waterworks, 1973.
Earthenware, glaze, wood, sand, enamel paint, epoxy, plastic flowers. 48.3 x 71.1 x 45.7 cm. MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection. Photo: Don Hall.

served as assistant director from 1965-71, before assuming the director's post at the Edmonton Art Gallery] ran the MacKenzie, they were strictly New York . . . that kind of 'Five' mentality. It was painting. Ted Godwin also used to say 'Sculpture is something you back into when you're looking at painting'. That was the attitude then. It wasn't until Nancy Dillow in the early '70s . . . I don't know, saw the light. Then Carol Phillips."

During our interview, Long described 1969 as a "miraculous" year in the development of Regina's clay community. It began in February when the Hone-James Studio [operated by Beth Hone and Ann James] hosted a workshop by California funk artist James Melchert. A concurrent exhibition at the MacKenzie exposed Reginans to leading ceramists from the then burgeoning California scene. That summer, one of the artists in that show, David Gilhooly, was hired by Sures.

"In 1969, I became chairman of the department," Sures says. "I didn't want to teach as [my other responsibilities] were too much work. So we decided to hire David Gilhooly. Ric Gomez knew of him because he went to school with Jim Melchert, Richard Shaw – all these big California people. [Gilhooly] was a big influence on Joe Fafard and Russell Yuristy. But he was only here a couple of years. I went back to clay and we let him go."

Abstraction in its various guises—abstract expressionism, post-painterly abstraction—was then entering its fourth decade as North America's dominant art movement. But because it was heavily theory-driven, with little sense of pleasure or play in both its execution and viewing, and an overarching concern for the universal and ethereal at the expense of the local and personal, many artists who grew up in its wake came to regard it as a profoundly alienating form of art and rebelled. Neither was this intergenerational dispute confined to the artistic arena, reports Long. "It was the era of student power. A lot of the conflicts that emerged in the department, like around grading practices, were perceived as a breakdown of academic tradition by the existing hierarchy. With that kind of mood in the air, clay, which as a medium was considered of secondary importance to painting and sculpture, was a great thing to be doing if you wanted to thumb your nose at the Establishment because it allowed you the freedom to do what you wanted, to break the rules."

Another touchstone of the counter-culture movement was also present, he adds. "The 'Back to the Land' movement had a significant role to play when you consider that of the fourteen artists in this exhibition, at least six moved out of Regina to small towns. The artists were interested in living where it was cheaper, but also in raising their own produce and living a more natural lifestyle." Six of the fourteen artists in the show are also women. "The whole question of feminism was in the air at the time," says Long. "Some of these artists were actively involved in feminist organizations like the Regina Voice of Women. The work that was created wasn't necessarily 'feminist' in its intent. But it does have some interesting connections to feminist art practices [particularly in the use of a non-traditional art material to subvert the privileged position accorded painting and sculpture in the art pantheon]. If there was a stereotype, it was that men were more interested in throwing clay while women preferred hand-building."

Ultimately, some of the values championed by the ceramists who emerged from this strange amalgam of prairie practicality and California whimsy—a concern for local identity and history; ironic detachment; playful engagement—came to be associated with the post-modern movement. So despite the decidedly retro nature of their medium, they were definitely ahead of their time. "This was a movement that arose without a theory attached to it," says Long. "Artists in the late '60s and early '70s were making things that were far in advance of what the critical thinking was. And I think that's really interesting. It wasn't until the late '70s that people began to write critically on this work in connection with the emerging discourse on regionalism."

In this regard, Regina, as it had been during the reign of the Regina Five, was again at the forefront of artistic exploration in Canada. "I wouldn't say Regina was the leading [centre for clay production in Canada]," says Sures, "but it was the most innovative. There was a lot of ceramics coming out of Nova Scotia, Quebec . . . but it was very handcraft [based]. Toronto had a lot of ceramists too. But it was vessel-orientated across Canada, except here." In Regina, conversely, clay was employed primarily as a sculptural medium. Albeit with a nod to traditional ceramic practice. "Even when I was making wall pieces [like a mural commissioned by the Canadian Museum of Civilization for its Group Visitor entrance in 1990] and more sculptural pieces I never got away from pots," says Sures. "I'm trained as a painter and printmaker. When I do functional ware – plates, mugs and stuff – they're surfaces to decorate, that's how I see them."

"There was this notion [across Canada] that Regina was this place of Funk ceramics," agrees Long. "Trajectoires '73 [which was exhibited at the Musée d'art moderne in Paris in 1973] included a whole section on Regina ceramists."

Since then, Regina, thanks in large part to the university's ongoing commitment to ceramics, which included the establishment of a first-rate facility when a new Fine Arts building was constructed in 1997, and the creation of the first ceramic art history course in Canada in 2002, has continued to be a leading centre of ceramic excellence, with artists like Jeannie Mah and Ruth Chambers pioneering the field of ceramic installation.
"Saskatchewan has a very strong history in ceramics," says Sures, who retired from the university as Professor Emeritus in 1998. "It's well-known all over North America, and Europe too." ⟵

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