

The People Who Influenced Me Most

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In the Fall semester of 2010 Prof. Pattaratorn Chirapravati asked me if I wanted to have an exhibition at California State University, Sacramento. Actually, she said that “we” want you to have a solo show of your work here. I’m not sure how she knew of my work because although we are colleagues, we have never really worked on any projects together. I guessed her reference to “we” meant that she had been speaking with fellow faculty about the possibility of showing my work. It wasn’t until later that I discovered Pat had been on the Gallery Committee of the Art Department and she was speaking on their behalf.

At the time I was first asked, I thought it strange that the faculty should agree to show my work. Usually the shows in the Robert Else Gallery at CSU Sacramento are reserved for graduate students or visiting artists. In the eleven years since the start of my teaching assignments there, I had never been invited to show my work exclusively. As far as I could tell, this was to be the first solo exhibition by a part-time faculty member currently teaching in the Art Department.

For CSU Sacramento to approach me with this invitation to exhibit was a rare opportunity, to be sure. I have had only one prior solo exhibition and that was in 2007 in the Ayala Museum in Manila. Most of my work is publically seen in group exhibitions. These shows are generally juried from submissions of slides or digital images sent by many artists to a distinguished panel of jurors. A call for entries goes out to the public and I respond, as do thousands of others, by sending in pictures of my work. Each year I have between two to six such shows. I’ve made a point of trying to show my work more often through these shows but to have that opportunity means I must be highly disciplined in submitting the images of my work for jurying. I would say that the number of shows that I submit work to every year is probably eight to fifteen. So, the percentage of acceptance to submission is between 25 - 40%. With such odds of acceptance into a juried show I have become aware of the limited appeal of my work. Also, I have had limited opportunity to exhibit in “invitational” shows where well-known artists are shown in groups organized by galleries or institutions.

So, I agreed that I would like to have a show at CSU Sacramento and started to imagine what artwork to show. Among the many types of art I make there is functional pottery, figurative sculpture, and more abstract, expressive sculpture. One of the thoughts I had was to assemble my different kinds of work and make a sort of mid-career retrospective. This idea was sort of pretentious because mostly these retrospectives are curated by museums and galleries to promote the fame of artists who have been officially “discovered”, have gone through a stage of “emerging”, and have been deemed commercially “successful”. A more sober approach in my situation seemed ultimately more practical - to show my most recent work as a sign of artistic maturity. But what to show among my recent work remained the question. Professor Chirapravati offered part of the answer to that question when she told me, “No pots”.

With a bit of disappointment at that time, I had to choose between my recent figurative sculpture and my more abstract work. I realized that I hadn’t been invited to show pottery because of personal bias. It wasn’t because the faculty disliked pottery in general, or my pots specifically. The message that I got was that they thought the discipline of ceramics was capable of creating many forms of art other than pots. On one hand I felt as if I was being invited to exemplify in my exhibition a unique perspective of ceramics held by those inviting me. On the other hand

I felt freed from the critical framework applied to the viewing of pottery in an art gallery. I knew that by showing work not in the “craft” realm I could show art that was less dependent on the conventional cultural tradition of functional pottery and more an innovative expression of personal experience.

With this in mind, I chose not to exhibit my figurative sculpture. Although I feel that it is well framed conceptually, I saw in my own work a formal similarity to that of my colleague Emeritus Professor Robert Brady. I wouldn’t want to show my work and risk an inevitable comparison to his. In addition to my own caution against this I also thought that to comply with the objective of exhibiting formal diversity within the ceramics medium, I had better not to show work that might be viewed as being part of a legacy.

The most recently made artworks I began to consider for exhibition were abstracted spatial compositions made of many assembled parts. I had already made five of these small-scale sculptures in the previous year and as a whole they started to look to me like a body of work. This series of sculptures developed out of a much earlier exploration in 1994–98. The earlier work were part of my graduate school experience in mastering the technical skills of forming stoneware on the potter’s wheel and firing it in the soda kiln. By 1998 many significant changes in my personal life forced me to abandon this exploration. The physical commitment and mental focus I put into the technical exploration of 1994–98 was re-directed for many years in pursuit of smaller scale figurative studies and pottery for domestic use.

Since returning to California from my residence in the Philippines as a Fulbright Scholar in 2008, many things changed in my life and by the winter of 2010 I couldn’t help but recognize that I had assembled a wholly new form of artwork in my studio. It was as though the pieces had spontaneously created themselves. Out of many small scraps and slabs of leftover clay I had composed a rather open sculptural form that didn’t resemble anything I had made previously. As I was working on these sculptures my goal was to express the greatest possible visible volume of space by assembling a limited mass of discrete components. By the end of the 2010 I was satisfied with about six of these small sculptures and it was this work that I decided to exhibit. When I showed a sample to Professor Chirapravati, she said, “Great! But you’re going to make some big ones too, aren’t you?”

“Sure!” I shot right back. This was in late 2010 and by then we had already scheduled the solo exhibition to open in the Robert Else Gallery in August 2011. But I had not even considered that I would have to undertake such a big project in so short a timeframe. It had been almost ten years since I had made large-scale ceramic sculpture and I wondered if I could manage it. By complying with the objectives of this invitation to exhibit I felt like I had taken on a commitment to represent a vision of ceramics that I didn’t already see in my own work. What I knew was that my most recent work was going to be appreciated and that it was up to me to complete a new body of work that was superior in scale and meaning to the smaller pieces.

Time started to compress the working process. Ceramic sculpture demands it’s own rigorous process of deliberately slow construction, drying and firing. The commitment I made to myself to make larger work in time for the exhibition started to present itself in my imagination as a burden. I thought that if only I could limit my imagination of what I would make then the show would come together. I told myself that I could probably make six large-scale sculptures by August 2011. That meant I had to work on them at Sac State, not at my home in Berkeley. The logistics of arranging the space required for large work, transporting the pieces in the fragile unfired state to the kilns for firing, and finally firing them would only be accomplished if I could work on campus, not at home. By placing these and other limitations such as space, time, materials and process on the work I thought I could surely complete the pieces for exhibition.

I believed the limitations or constraints that I began to impose on myself could make the work

conform to the vision with which I had complied. As I understood that vision, it was of a type of formalist sculpture that wouldn't be didactic. In effect, I had forced myself into making artwork that was completely different from about 90% of all the other artwork I had ever made. I knew that I had been the one to choose the small-scale formalist work for exhibition. But I had never imagined that I would make more of that work in large scale until it was suggested to me. What happened in the making of the large-scale work is that the meaning of that work changed entirely. Whereas the small-scale sculptures had been about the spectral articulation of the mass/volume continuum, the larger works became more symbolically expressive of my recent life experience. This realization came about during the construction of the larger pieces and became a concrete understanding once the work was completed. One small example of the process in making this work will help illustrate my inability to separate the art from life.

I began working on the first large-scale piece as part of a demonstration of technique in a ceramics class I was teaching at CSU Sacramento in Spring 2011. I got the piece up to its maximum dimension and my mobile phone rang in the class. I took the call from the nurse at my father's retirement community and she told me that he had fallen badly. I knew I could not stay with my class and work on this sculpture but that I had to leave to attend to my father's needs. So I carefully wrapped up the sculpture, safely put it in storage, and spent the next five days with my father. He got better quickly in my care to the point that he could stand and walk again. I returned to Sac State to find that during my absence my sculpture had fallen over and broken. I picked up the pieces and rebuilt the sculpture. In the following weeks another telephone call came from the nurse saying my father had fallen again, I made another journey to help him back up, and yet again my sculpture collapsed in the interim.

I experienced these events as determining factors in the making of this artwork. I have now come to a better understanding of the influence of material decomposition as an integral force in the development of artistic content and concept in my sculpture. As I had to find my own way with this new work, it was necessary to work through the sculptural process as more than just a metaphor for my life experience. It was through a process of structural restoration before and after the ceramic firings that I was able to animate an enduring physical presence for each sculptural form. In the process of structural restoration I had to first build up and then strip away the polychrome envelope of ceramic glaze, exposing the durable core of terra cotta.

Maybe maturing allows for changes of mind without worrying about negative consequences because one is able to make better-informed decisions. And perhaps a greater ability to positively adapt to unforeseen circumstances comes with maturity. The decision I took to make and show this type of artwork took me down a complicated path to its completion. The constraints I placed on myself to accomplish this work started out to be of some use logistically but ended up by stifling my imagination. I came to realize that working within my creative limitations was practically impossible because they forced me to make artwork that was inconsistent with my character. I was only able to complete this work once I made it a part of my life's story.

Notes

"No doubt it is useful for an artist to know all the forms of art which have preceded or which accompany his. That it is a sign of strength is a question of looking for a stimulus or recognizing mistakes he must avoid. But he must be very careful not to look for models. As soon as one artist takes another as a model, he is lost. There is no other point of departure than reality. Why should I copy this owl, this sea urchin? Why should I try to imitate nature? I might as well try to trace a perfect circle. What I have to do is utilize as best I can the ideas which object suggests to me, connect fuse and color in my way the shadows they cast within me, illuminate them from the inside. And since of necessity my vision is quite different from that of the next man, my painting will interpret things in an entirely different manner even though it

makes use of the same elements.” Pablo Picasso (1948), excerpted from Twentieth-Century Artists on Art, edited by Dore Ashton, Pantheon Books, 1985, pg. 4

“...the development of the ongoing and complex relationship between art (which is traditionally thought of as visual) and other aspects of culture (that have a visual component but are expected to be primarily functional). Art is supposed to be at the top, less useful but more pure. But something has happened to art, so we no longer expect to find that old intensity. Instead, art’s great thing now is to opine with emotionally distanced, ironic comments on how we live. Its big thing is not necessarily beautiful, moving or full of passionate belief.” Matthew Collings (May 2009), “Roll Call”, pg. 086, Wallpaper magazine

Acknowledgments

I’d like to acknowledge the support and guidance of the following colleagues, friends, and family without which this exhibition would not have been possible:

Dr. M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati

Dr. Daniel Frye

Prof. Andrew Connelly

Prof. Scott Parady

Prof. Evri Kwong

Dr. Catherine Turrill

Brenda Strong

Sherry Arrowood

Kevin Ptak

Steven Higginbottom

Tricia Ialeggio

Don Santos

Oli Quezada

Tim Holton

Geri Zarate

Mira Decker

Victor S. Decker

Doug Decker