

ARTS

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ART REVIEW

# *Working in Clay, a Sculptor's Many-Splendored Career*

By **Grace Glueck**

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If that old question -- is it fine art or is it craft? -- has not quite been laid to rest in the minds of some diehards, seeing the work of Ruth Duckworth should give it another blow. A sculptor whose basic medium is clay, she makes everything from tiny, delicate vessels to monumental outdoor sculptures (these in stone or metal), and a distinction between artist and artisan makes no sense.

Now 86 and still hard at work, she is the subject of a six-stop cross-country retrospective that is appearing first at the Museum of Arts and Design. Its 90-odd pieces range from the 1940's, with a blocky half-figure of a nude carved in stone, to very recent endeavors, like the monumental bronze of a seated man and woman whose full-scale model is placed at the museum's entrance. Besides sculptures, there are many vessels and a few examples and photographs of large-scale ceramic murals that she has done on commission for several sites.

Though her work fits in -- but not too neatly -- with the modernist tradition, Ms. Duckworth's eye has roamed everywhere, resulting in a bewildering variety of styles and influences. These include Brancusi, Henry Moore and Noguchi; ancient Egyptian and Cycladic sculpture; and even a beef bone found in her soup.

Sometimes the influences combine awkwardly, making her work seem a little strained and quirky, or too reliant on others' ideas. But often enough her venturesomeness pays off, producing images of eloquence and power. One, which I found myself returning to several times, is a large, black sculpture (untitled, as are most of Ms. Duckworth's works). Made in 1993, it possibly derives from Stone Age and Bronze Age tools seen in the British Museum.

The rounded body of the piece, swelling from a plinthlike bottom, has figural implications, but its "head" is a flat wedge, sharpened at one end like a tool. Its dark, primeval presence conjures up visions of guardian beings whose function is protection from enemies and evil, both spiritual and physical. Although its material looks like bronze, it is actually made of stoneware.

The once largely discounted possibility of using ceramic for sculptures as well as vessels was explored by Ms. Duckworth during her student days at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, which provided that city's best ceramics curriculum.

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As a teen-ager named Ruth Windmüller, she fled to England with her family from Nazi Germany. By 1960 she was recognized as a ceramics artist of promise, and her work began to sell. In 1964 she accepted a teaching job at the University of Chicago. In the belief that opportunities to produce and market large-scale work were better in the United States, she moved to Chicago permanently in 1966 with her husband, Aidron Duckworth, an English industrial designer. (They later divorced.) Chicago has remained her home, although she retired from teaching at the university in 1977.

Among other arresting pieces in this show is a strong one from a continuing series she calls mama pots, because a small boy, attracted to their round femaleness while visiting her studio with his family, threw his arms around one saying, "Nice mama, nice mama."

Built of stoneware in overlapping slabs, this 1993 example is a rough-textured, earth-toned orb with a hole in its top, bisected by a deep, dark cleft in which sexy bumps and lumps can be discerned. The cleft evokes both the division of a brain and, of course, the female genitals. Looking as if it had been dug up from ancient layers of soil, the pot also suggests a hulking bulb, long buried, that has done its bit in giving birth to serious organic matter.

In contrast to the rough, earthy side of Ms. Duckworth's art are the delicate, sophisticated objects of white, unglazed porcelain that she has also produced over a long period. These are considered an aspect of her work that is without sculptural precedent.

A "cup-and-blade" series that she started in the 1970's was born, according to the show's catalog, from her desire to balance "hard-edged order with sensuous organic form."

In them, lean, lithe blades counter or point up the mass of a cup or a sphere, as in "Untitled (Cup With Triple Blades)" from 1988. Three razorlike planes cut across and bite into the diameter of a cup shape, playing curves against straights, pitting grounded against airborne and throwing delicate shadows. Come to think of it, the geometric aspect of these porcelains doesn't seem so far from that of Cycladic forms.

To this viewer, they also carry on the light, playful side of Ms. Duckworth's work. Although fully abstract they do not belie the spirit of the small cheerfully grotesque figures she made early in her career, some of which were as flat and

thin as blades.

Porcelain, and stoneware, too, figure prominently in the wall sculptures made from 1968 to the present, which are an important part of this show. Totally abstract, using basic shapes, they hold geometric distillations of organic forms in smooth, sleek, almost colorless settings.

One of the best is an untitled porcelain wall sculpture of 2002, its four panels cut out to accommodate a central, irregularly shaped indentation, like a shadow box. A disc with a round aperture holds the center of the niche; above it hang two heavy teardrop shapes that bear a resemblance to testicles. A formalization of male and female? It's a subtle and mysterious work.

A departure from the modernist ideas she has embraced is "The Creation," an impressive 16-foot ceramic mural in colors, based on the book of Genesis, that she completed in 1984 for a synagogue in Indiana. (It is shown here in a photograph.) Made of glazed stoneware in a flat, snail-like spiral, it incorporates realistic vignettes.

If Ms. Duckworth has not emerged as a signature artist, one whose work forcefully proclaims its own individuality, blame that on the many influences that play into it. Gracefully assimilated as they are, as a whole they don't meld into a powerful artistic identity.

"Ruth Duckworth, Modernist Sculptor" is at the Museum of Arts and Design, 40 West 53rd Street, Manhattan, (212)956-3535, through April 3.

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