Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

University of Iowa
Iowa Research Online

Theses and Dissertations

1988

Essays on clay

Lawrence Michael Brow
University of Iowa

Copyright © 1988 Lawrence Michael Brow. Posted with permission of the author.

This dissertation is available at Iowa Research Online: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2797

Recommended Citation
Brow, Lawrence Michael. "Essays on clay." MA (Master of Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 1988.
http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2797.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd

Part of the Art Practice Commons

12/17

BROW ESSAYS ON CLAY THESIS 1988

T 1988 B 877

ART

The
University
of Iowa
Libraries

T1988
B877

ESSAYS ON CLAY

by

Lawrence Michael Brow

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 1988

Thesis supervisor: Professor Bunny A. McBride

Art
T1988
E877

Copyright by
LAWRENCE MICHAEL BROW
1988
All Rights Reserved

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lawrence Michael Brow

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Art at the August 1988 graduation.

Thesis committee: _____
Thesis supervisor

_____
Member

_____
Member

The University of Iowa
LIBRARIES

To all of those who have been patient with me,
especially Marcia, Bill, and Ellen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I hereby gratefully acknowledge the essential contributions of Merle Zirkle and the late Louis G. Zirkle, teachers, without whom I would have never found the satisfactions I currently enjoy.

I would also acknowledge the members of my thesis committee: Professor Wallace Tomasini; Professor Charles Hindes; and my thesis supervisor, Professor Bunny McBride.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES v

ESSAYS

I. MAKING CLAY 1

II. FAILURE 7

III. THE THREE WRONGS 11

APPENDIX 18

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Tea Ceremony Vessel [wood-fired stoneware with bronze lid, 1988]. 17

ESSAY I

MAKING CLAY

Every profession has its jargon, and Ceramics, being an older profession, has more than its share. "Throwing pots," and "firing kilns" are common enough, but some people may also wonder about the phrase "making clay."

No one actually makes clay. Clay is made of microscopic flakes of rock, shaped something like playing cards. The planet just makes clay as part of the natural weathering of rock. Because the parent rocks vary, and the travels of the particles vary, no two clays are exactly the same. Each deposit has an individual combination of particle size, physical purity, texture, color, and temperature range. For potters, this provides both an opportunity and a problem.

The problem is that clay from a single deposit is only rarely suitable for making pots. Often the clay matures (vitrifies) at too low a temperature or cracks too easily or shrinks too much. Maybe its trace impurities give it an undesirable color. The complete range and subtlety of native clays are beyond numbering.

However, the opportunity exists for the potter to alter one clay by combining it with another clay. Each clay then moderates the properties of the other. Of course, more than two clays can be used and this leads to the use of "clay body recipes." These recipes are often exchanged and collected by potters in the same way that cooks exchange and collect food recipes. Each clay body (clay of a specific mixture) has known properties to meet known needs. The process of mixing the individual clays together to create the final clay body is what potters refer to as "making clay."

For potters working in different cultures, making clay involves many different techniques. Most spend a lot of time digging it out of the ground, pulverizing, drying, slaking (mixing with water to a thin soup consistency), sieving out the twigs and pebbles, and eventually letting the best of what they started with dry into a consistency for making pots. Few observers pause to consider the labor that takes place before the lump of clay can be made into a pot. It is one of those unseen parts of the job.

To make our clay, we buy finely powdered clays from mines all across the country and have them shipped to us. Rather than arriving by dumptruck or wheelbarrow, the clay comes in paper bags, like dog food, each bag weighing fifty or a hundred pounds. Stacked neatly on wooden pallets, several tons can be quickly removed from the delivery truck and stored inside by fork-lift. For most ingredients the total cost is less than fifteen cents per pound.

To mix a particular recipe, the measured amounts (measured by weight) are emptied into an old industrial dough mixer and thoroughly combined. This is dusty, physical work, requiring ventilation systems, dust masks, strong bodies, and a certain willingness to get dirty. Once mixed dry, water is added and mixed in to create the desired consistency (firm or soft).

The recipe I most often use involves APGreen Fireclay (white bags with gree lettering), Goldart (a bright yellow bag marked "Cedar Heights"), Ball Clay (a dull brown bag marked simply "OM4," for "Old Mine #4"), Redart (a bright red bag), powdered Silica (often called "Flint," in a blue and white bag), and so on. A normal batch

makes about three hundred pounds of throwing clay, the amount of clay a hard-working professional potter might make into pots in a single morning.

Making clay is not a lot of fun--I don't know anyone who looks forward to the chore--but it has its peculiar pleasures. Feeling the clay flow out of the bags, observing each clay's individual character, listening to the mixer churn away while the dust ventilator howls, watching the mixed (and aerated) clay swirl and flow like quicksand, pouring in just the right amount of water for perfect throwing clay, none of these are glamorous pleasures. Nonetheless, to make pots you must first have clay.

Once a fellow student/potter spoke to me about his dislike of glazing. It, too, can be a messy job and physically tiring. But the comment got me thinking about all the little jobs that go into finishing the big job. Especially in ceramics, people judge the work by a small part of the total activity. Many people have no idea of what happens before and after a pot is thrown on a wheel. Perhaps they know a little about glaze, and that the pots are fired in a kiln, but most know little more than that, and nothing of the subtleties. Clearly, the more they know about the process, the better their understanding is of the final product.

This principle holds true for any profession from doctor and lawyer, through professor and business executive, to truck driver, farmer, or garbage collector. Each of us has an image in our mind of what these jobs entail, and each of us is more or less drawn to such work based on that image. But few of us really understand the practical needs and aesthetics of each job.

For instance, every Spring I fancy myself a gardener, imagining the pleasures of delicious vegetables and beautiful plants. Each Spring I dutifully re-kindle the dream, putting behind me all my past failures. I plant my little garden of hope and wait to see how things will turn out. But I don't really understand how to prepare the soil, or fertilize, or even properly arrange the different types of plants. There are thousands of tiny little considerations which I fail to see. I don't even have the proper temperament for long hours of weeding and watering and spotting little problems. I want the results, not the process.

Unfortunately, the world of work is about process. The final results, in any field, are a simple matter of necessity, and most often, nothing more than yesterday's news. All the little jobs are what the work is really about, and what the professional must find satisfaction in, in order to continue.

So, I thought about my friend who hated glazing and I thought about all the parts of being a potter, from the heavy lifting and dust of making clay to the long hours and emotional displacements of selling the pots. Some jobs I just enjoyed, like making the pots, and getting them out of the final kiln firing, and using them in my own life. Other jobs, making clay, mixing glazes, firing kilns, I didn't really look forward to, but seemed to enjoy while I was doing them. And finally, I decided that I didn't really "hate" any of the jobs of being a potter. For me, it was all worthwhile and interesting. It was that realization, many years ago, that convinced

me that my interest in ceramics had serious career potential. I knew that my ambition could not just be a matter of 'employment opportunities' or 'starting salaries.' It had to be a job (in all its parts) that I could do with real satisfaction.

Since that time, I've noticed other people who seem to enjoy (even while complaining) all the little jobs of their work. Each of these people seems calmer, more relaxed, and more self-confident than their somewhat disillusioned peers. They are at peace with their professions.

Of course, enjoying something, even in all its parts, does not automatically make you good at it. However, improvement in anything requires attention, patience, and the stamina to continue beyond the inevitable mistakes and failures. Without an enjoyment of the process, a love of the most unlikely things, the only emotion which can see you through to mastery is cold stubbornmess.

I tell myself, with each new garden, perhaps this year's crop will be better. And in time, perhaps I will learn to enjoy all the little jobs in the garden, and the results will then take care of themselves. One must always start with the basics, the smallest parts, the unseen chores, the grubby jobs--like making clay, and the potential to combine all those elements into something worthwhile.

ESSAY II

FAILURE

As a culture, we don't spend much time studying failure, or admitting that we ought to. It's un-American. Traditionally, our nation wins, celebrating victory with lavish glee, and sweeping failures quickly under the rug. We speak to ourselves of "the agony of defeat." Yet within the vast realm of failure lies all the improvement, innovation, and wonder of our future. We already do those things we have succeeded at. Our future depends upon studying those things we have not yet been able to do, our failures.

Failure has allowed us to define the outer limits of our current abilities and to understand the principles underlying our successes. Scientists depend upon broad samplings dominated by negative results. Statesmen review the failures of history to negotiate political solutions. And artists generate dozens of failures for each successful work of art, scanning each inadequate sketch, or photograph, or pot, for the seeds of future innovations and success.

As an example, a potter might formulate an experimental blue glaze and find, after firing a sample, that the glaze did not turn out blue, but rather, black. In the common view, the potter failed and needs to re-consider hundreds of factors (including the glaze formula, glaze materials, mixing procedure, firing schedule, and glaze application) in order to correct the problem. However, in such a situation, "failure" presents many opportunities. Chief among these opportunities is the 'black' glaze itself. The foolish artist might just throw the sample away as being unacceptable as a blue. However, the sample might, indeed, be an excellent black, or the starting point for development of an excellent black.

As an artist, it becomes necessary to see not only what is not there (blue), but what is there (black). This applies to every aspect of an art.

This also applies to science, as well as other fields. For instance, the 3M Company produces a handy type of notepaper which sticks to a wide variety of surfaces. Notes need not be held in place by paperweights, clamps, pushpins, or tacks. Rather, an adhesive strip on the back of every sheet of paper holds it in place. The unique feature of this notepaper is the adhesive, which is actually a rather ineffective glue. Just strong enough to hold the notepaper to a vertical surface, its bond is so weak that the notepaper can be easily removed without even leaving any adhesive residue on the surface.

To the scientists, trying to develop a stronger adhesive, such a weak result constituted a failure. However, by studying their results, and thinking creatively, they saw a success in that failure. What had failed as a strong, permanent bond, succeeded as a special purpose product, of great convenience, never before available.

Not only can one type of failure become another type of success, failure can also become its own success--the old Chicago Cubs, or the 1988 Baltimore Orioles, for example. (Teams, for whom losing became a trademark, a point of perverse pride to their die-hard fans.) I think we find something inherently relaxing about learning to expect and enjoy failure.

For centuries, Japanese Tea Masters--influenced by the teachings of Zen Buddhism--have admired and cherished pots that traditional

Westerners would describe as hideous failures. These pots, tea bowls and jars, are quite often asymmetrical, roughly textured, scorched by the fire, and covered with the most dramatic and irregular of ash glaze deposits. Beyond being merely 'blemished,' these pots have been completely altered by the stresses of the fire.

And therein lies their beauty. Each pot is an absolute individual (impossible to duplicate), documenting fully the stubbornness of the clay, the guiding hands of the potter, and the elemental force of the fire. Its imperfections bind it to all the native imperfections of the world around us. Its rugged sturdiness reflects the human spirit.

Inherent to that human spirit is the strength to endure and the courage to take risks. Doctors 'lose' patients, lawyers lose cases, machines break down, and so do people, but no one loses more than when they fail to examine their mistakes or to risk making more. Life can not be just 'win or lose' but, rather, each of us must, inevitably, fail, and learn, and try again.

ESSAY III

THE THREE WRONGS

The sign reads: THE THREE WRONGS

NOT DOING ENOUGH WORK

NOT DOING YOUR OWN STUFF

NOT ACCEPTING CHALLENGES

It's not an elaborate sign, nor is it an elaborate message, but it speaks volumes. It might adorn the office or workspace of any hard-working person, but it happens to hang in the studio of a graduate student studying ceramics.

For most people, Graduate School brings to mind intense scholarship in almost any field except that of ceramics. Making pots, with all its traditions of folk craft, and its many menial aspects, hardly seems like the work of University professors and expensively educated intellectuals. Nonetheless, the field of ceramics has been advanced to the realm of Art, and Art to the realm of higher education.

Of course, the three wrongs apply as well to life in general, regardless of the intensity or flavor of each person's particular niche.

Most people do not really get enough work done, no matter how busy them seem to keep themselves. Much of our time is spent on simple motion, comings and goings, or wasted on the immobility of electronic entertainment. Even when we 'work' our results are often woefully impermanent or unnecessary.

'Work' implies difficulty and effort. For the potter, that often means long hours and a large quantity of finished pots. But it can also refer to extensive reading, research, experimentation, and the struggle to achieve quality. It can mean the heaviest of

physical labor and the most subtle of aesthetic explorations. And the work of students often extends into coursework in other fields, financial jugglings, and exhausting self-doubt.

For some, work also includes family, a spouse and children, whose needs you can not go back to satisfy at some more convenient time. The same holds true for pots. You can not go back and do the job correctly later; clay dries, kilns get filled, and the season passes. There can be no adequate or sufficient level of love to devote to such things. It is simply wrong to devote too little.

Always, when a person is working, there are a variety of forces influencing that work. For students, their teachers dominate; for employees, their bosses; for the self-employed, their perceptions of the market. So often, people do what they think other people want done, even when originality is eagerly sought.

The classic example is the politician, saying the things that each audience wants to hear, stroking each set of special interests, and softening all public statements to avoid offense. Compromise and tact are very civilized attributes, but each of us must realize that our integrity (or more importantly, the public perception of our integrity) is at stake.

Art, especially, has come to focus narrowly on the artist, on issues of authorship, authenticity, and individual genius. Lacking any single standard of quality or beauty for works of art, patrons must now consider the market value of the artists themselves. Originality and individual character become the artist's products,

even more than craftsmanship and skill.

Of course, if your name is the unique commodity, your works must be clearly recognizable as yours, and yours alone. To work in someone else's style, no matter how exemplary that style is, means falling into their shadow and losing your significance as an individual. This is, of course, short-sighted and unreasonable, but nonetheless, it exists. The highest prices in the art world are only tangentially related to the direct importance of the object. The bulk of the "value" relates to the historical and fetishistic importance of the artist.

In the academic setting, students often have difficulty finding an appropriate distance between their own work and that of their teachers. At one extreme, the two products are identical, differing only in the greater craftsmanship and experience of the teacher. At the other extreme, the student rebels completely, refusing to accept any limitations, guidance, or teaching. Though the image is romantic, recalling icons of misunderstood artistic genius, in practice, the attitude is short-sighted, ignorant, and wasteful.

Any teacher may pose a problem, even a fairly restrictive one, and the good student can find room within the limitations for an individual solution. The obligation remains on the student, as well as on the professional artist, to find solutions that reflect their own values and experiences. No two people would naturally, without external constraints, draw the world the same, or debate an issue the same, or run their homes the same. Often, however, we forget to

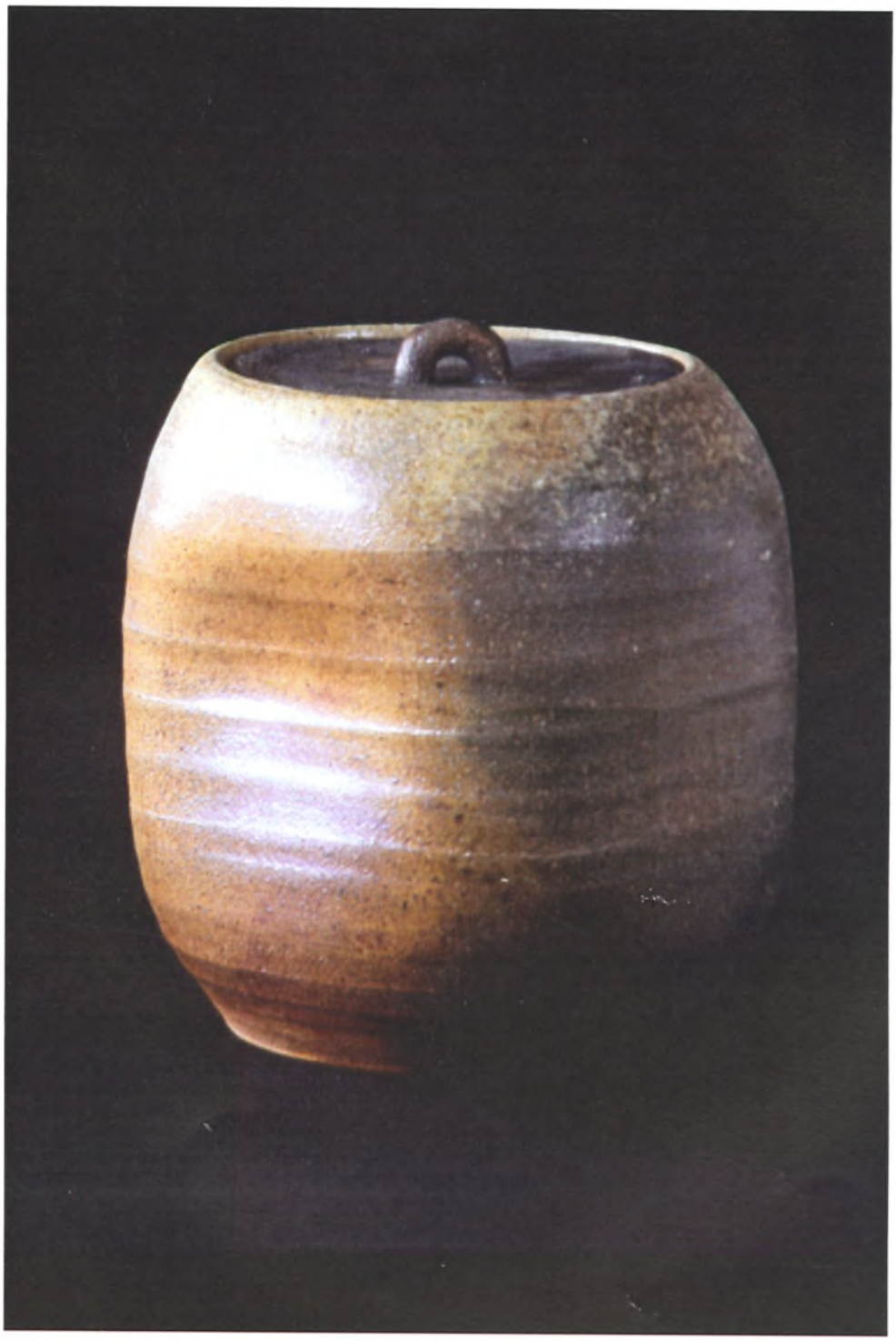
define our true limitations and creatively utilize the spaces in between. We just meet the minimum requirements, or submit what we know will be acceptable. We get by, wasting opportunities to challenge assumptions, to expand the potential of materials, and to do our own stuff.

Sometimes this waste, this failing to do our own stuff, is a matter of fear. So often I have heard myself explain to others that, "I was going to do that, but I was afraid that...." The phrase has even started to ring alarm bells in my mind, for it reeks of cowardice and waste.

If I had a legitimate justification for my inaction, I would say, "I was going to do that, but I realized that something else would be better, or something definite would make it impossible." I would have a reason. I would be operating from knowledge. The phrase "I was afraid that," implies ignorance, doubt, and an unwillingness to test the situation to reach actual results. "I was afraid that," is a clear statement of defeat, defeat without so much as a struggle.

Not accepting challenges can be a problem in any life. Even as artists, we can not do everything that comes to mind. But we do not grow, as individuals, without trying to increase our capabilities from day to day. Perhaps, the challenge is like the Olympic motto, "Faster, Higher, Stronger," or maybe it's just a matter of something new and unfamiliar. Whatever the life, we do not get much credit for those things we can already handle easily. Nor can we give ourselves the right to be content with those skills. The excitement in life--one might even say life, itself--is solely driven by the joys of the new and the old seen anew.

The idea that children are immature, or incomplete, adults can be very damaging in this regard, for it conditions us to believe that childhood is for learning and adulthood is for something else. However, our minds and bodies never really stop developing and changing. Adulthood is merely an increasingly vague point rather near the beginning of that lifelong process. Work, personal expressions, and a variety of challenges await each of us, every day, and it will always be wrong to fear or deny them.



Tea Ceremony Vessel [wood-fired stoneware with bronze lid, 1988]

APPENDIX

I've found my attempts to write about my work to be unusually difficult. Perhaps this is because I've learned to judge such statements by other artists so harshly. Perhaps it is merely because I'm too young to really understand myself.

Nonetheless, I enjoy making pots, and I also enjoy writing (or as it is often said, "having written"). My work expresses values of simplicity, order, and utility. All my work depends upon people, and I hope that people learn to depend upon my work (as reliable, capable, congenial).

For almost a year now, these values (and those expressed in the previous essays) have lead me to experiment in the direction of ceramic chairs. These are functional objects, intended to be comfortable, attractive, and uniquely durable. I make these chairs for the same reasons I make coffee mugs and other pots: as vessels; as simple, sculptural forms; and as objects that touch people.

I have yet to really please myself with any of the chairs I have made so far, and thus, considered them inappropriate for this thesis. I will, necessarily, focus on them in the next.

I find the chairs interesting, but still significantly unsuccessful. The mugs I find successful, but somewhat uninteresting. The water jar is both successful and interesting.

The bronze lid--a choice of material suggested by the work of Prof. Robert Archambeau, of the University of Manitoba--was cast using a resinated sand mold and wax melt-out process developed by Prof. Julius Schmidt of the University of Iowa Sculpture Department. David Koslowski, a fellow graduate student, provided invaluable assistance during the actual bronze pour. The top surface of the lid still bears the texture of the sand mold, as well as the marks of the heat patina I applied to it later.

The body of the jar was thrown on the wheel, altered by a simple dimpling to create four sides, and fired in a wood-fired kiln without any glaze or colorants of any kind. Professor Charles Hindes and his guest, Prof. Maynard Tischler (of the University of Denver), were kind enough to include my piece in a kiln primarily filled with their work and fired by them (with minor assistance). The surfaces of the jar, inside and out, are the result of the ash and flame of the kiln, and the minerals of the clay itself.

The mouth of the jar, and its lid, are asymmetrical, and each was stamped (during their manufacture) with the Japanese character for "dragon." These marks allow the lid to be correctly aligned with very little difficulty, and the "dragon" serves as a signature (referring to elements in my life much too numerous and intricate to be covered here).

I am very fond of this jar, and fervently hope that it will enjoy a long and happy association with the University's collection.