

Conversations in Clay

Katonah Museum of Art
October 19, 2008 – January 11, 2009

Dear Educator,

Conversations in Clay celebrates this natural, malleable medium that has played many roles in the development of nearly every culture on earth, from Paleolithic times to the present. The KMA exhibition takes a look at the works of ten contemporary artists who use this expressive medium in a very new context, not for functional vessels or sculptures on a pedestal, but for large scale “installation art” that directly engages the viewer. These dynamic pieces activate the space in the galleries – (walls, floor and ceilings) – creating works to enter, to pass under, or to be walked upon.

On their tour, your students will be excited and challenged to look closely, think about, and make personal connections to the art they encounter. They will share thoughts about the uses of clay in history, the properties that make clay a unique artistic medium, and what messages are being conveyed. Some of the ideas explored in these works involve time, space, nature, and civilization. This exhibition provides an exciting and accessible means to enrich your classroom studies in visual arts, social studies, language arts, and earth science.

KMA’s education philosophy is based on the belief that observation and discussion in a group supports acceptance of divergent views, builds confidence in speaking publicly, provides models for critical thinking, and expands the visual literacy skills that enable students to create meaning from art and material culture.

Tours will involve students in active discussion intended to enhance visual literacy skills. All tours will explore the following:

- Personal responses – What words best describe the mood, movement, and feeling of the work?
- Making connections – Where have you seen similar imagery? What does it make you think about?
- Close observation, description, and analysis – What materials are used? How do you think this was made?
- Critical Thinking - How do the artists use scale, color, tone, mood, and composition? How does the artist’s style or technique affect your experience of the work?

Your 90 minute class visit will include an interactive tour of the exhibitions and a clay installation activity in the Learning Center.

To help prepare your students for their Museum visit we have enclosed the following:

- **Teacher’s Guide**
 - Curator’s Essay – “Conversations in Clay”
 - All About Clay – A glossary of clay and art terms
 - Three images from the exhibition for discussion with your students
- **Pre-Visit Activities**
 - Clay Is In Our Lives - Activity Sheet
 - Match the Artist to the Artwork - Activity Sheet
 - Art Word Search
 - Name Tag Sheet – We request that each student arrive wearing a name tag.

Thank you for choosing the KMA for your class visit.



Karen R. Stein
Director of Education

ALL ABOUT CLAY

GLOSSARY OF CLAY and ART TERMS

WHAT IS CLAY?

Clay is a natural material and a special kind of **earth**. Over geologic time, rocks in the earth's crust weather, disintegrate, and are transported long distances to become clay. Clay has tiny particles, hundreds of times smaller than a grain of sand. When combined with water, the particles stick together and can be molded into a multitude of forms. Clay's ability, when wet, to form a solid mass and retain its shape is known as clay's **plasticity**. The natural clay that we find outside usually needs to be cleaned and refined before it can be used.

WHAT IS CERAMIC?

When clay is heated (fired) to high temperatures it transforms into ceramic – a very hard, stone-like material that can hold water. During the firing process, the particles of clay vitrify or become glass-like.

METHODS FOR SHAPING CLAY

Clay working methods have not changed for thousands of years and nearly every culture on earth has its own interpretation of these three basic methods:

PINCH method – Clay is pinched by hand into the desired shape and thickness.

SLAB method – Clay is rolled into flat sheets (slabs) with a rolling pin, cut apart and assembled into a new form.

COIL method – Clay is hand rolled into long “snake-like” forms that are stacked one on top of the other and attached with the use of slip.

Additional methods used by artists in the exhibition:

PRESSMOLDS – Clay is pressed by hand or by machine into simple molds to take direct impressions from the mold.

SLIP-CAST MOLDS – Clay slip is poured into molds for mass production pottery.

POTTER'S WHEEL – A wheel used to spin clay to form pots and vases.

THREE BASIC TYPES OF CLAY

Earthenware: (low fire) Earthenware clay is fired at a lower temperature than stoneware or porcelain. Traditional pottery made by Native American, Mexican, and South American artists was often earthenware. The low fired glazes for earthenware have more bright, primary colors for painted decoration. It is also a favorite for classroom use in American schools. **Terracotta** is a type of earthenware that is reddish brown and gets its color from iron deposits in the earth. The iron oxide gives the clay a rusty color. Clay flowerpots are made from terracotta clay.

Stoneware: (medium – high fire) Stoneware usually has a more gritty texture than either earthenware or porcelain. It is a favorite of many sculptors who wish to work on large ceramic pieces. Stoneware often has the addition of grog – (tiny bits of fired clay) – added to it for strength; it is also a popular clay for very sturdy dinnerware.

Porcelain: (high fire) This type of clay is used for fancy dinner plates and sculptures. It is very light in color, usually white or bone color. Some types of porcelain, worked very thinly, allow light to pass through it.

ADDITIONAL ART TERMS

Contemporary art: Works created by artists who are living and working right now.

Installation art: Dynamic works that transform the space inside the museum, including walls, floor and ceilings.

Conceptual art: The viewer is invited to look at and think about possible ideas or *concepts* in the work of art.

Mixed Media: A technique involving the use of two or more materials, such as clay and *found objects* -- string, feathers, etc.

Firing: Clay needs to be heated to very high temperatures, or “fired” in a kiln, to become a durable ceramic material.

Kiln: This is a large, hot oven used for firing clay. A kiln can reach temperatures of 2500 degrees F. and higher. Your oven at home reaches only about 500 degrees F.

Leather-Hard: This is what we call clay that has dried for a few hours. It feels like leather and the surface can easily be carved for decoration. Leather-hard clay is not dry enough for firing in a kiln. If a piece of clay is put into the kiln while it is still wet, the water molecules will expand so fast that it will cause the clay to explode.

Glaze: Glaze is a glass coating that covers the clay form. Glazes add color and decoration to ceramic works. The colors of glaze come from a variety of ores and minerals in the earth. For example, iron makes a reddish brown color, cobalt makes blue, copper makes green.

Slip: Slip is a sticky, muddy substance made by mixing a large amount of water with clay. It has the consistency of sour cream and can be used to attach pieces of clay together. Slip can also be colored and used to decorate the surface of clay.

Vitrify: To become glass-like. When raw clay is fired to high temperatures it is transformed into a glass-like material; the clay has become vitrified.

Charles Simonds
Woodman

Betty

Ann
Agee

Conversations in Clay

At the Katonah Museum of Art
October 19, 2008 – January 11, 2009

Ursula Ilse-Neuman
Janet Kardon
Museum of Art and Design, NYC

Over geologic time, rocks in the earth's crust weather, disintegrate, and are transported long distances to become clay. A mixture of microscopically fine-grained minerals, this common and seemingly unremarkable substance has remarkable properties. When combined with water, sedimentary clay has a plasticity that allows it to be worked with bare hands into a multitude of stable forms. When fired at a high temperature, clay is transformed into rock-hard ceramics—earthenware clay produces opaque, porous pottery with colors ranging from white to the familiar terra-cotta color of bricks, while clays for stoneware and porcelain produce smoother textured objects with gray to white hues. Whether raw or refined, unfired or fired, clay is a material with a history. In the hands of an artist, clay's associations with time, the earth, and human culture inform and enrich the concepts that are conveyed.

While clay has a long tradition in the production of functional vessels, contemporary ceramic art has notably transcended its utilitarian origins and instead values clay as a highly adaptable and expressive sculptural medium. This break with functionality accelerated after World War II as potters introduced images, ideas, and techniques from a wide range of sources beyond conventional ceramics and helped to usher in the American Studio Craft Movement.

The majority of potters in the ensuing decades maintained a devotion to tradition, but others cut their ties in radical ways. Toshiko Takaezu (b. 1922), one of the first artists to explore the possibilities of ceramics as an independent aesthetic medium, revolutionized the field beginning in the 1950s with closed, abstract shapes, painterly glazes, and contemplative groupings. The most dramatic and far-reaching impact was made by ceramic sculptor Peter Voulkos (1924–2002). In the 1950s, Voulkos challenged the concept of utility and the ideal of fine craftsmanship for its own sake and began to consider the vessel less as a contained space and more for its sculptural value. Forsaking the potter's wheel, he attacked large slabs of thick-walled clay—stabbing, pushing, and tearing them—to create what often has been referred to as Abstract Expressionist ceramics. Voulkos rebelled not only against functionality but also against the recognizable characteristics of the medium—particularly the symmetry associated with wheel-turning and traditional glazing—to emphasize mass and volume. The radical departures of Takaezu, Voulkos, and his well-known followers on

the West Coast launched one of the most exciting periods in the development of contemporary ceramics as an art form.

The ten artists in *Conversations in Clay* have employed clay as their primary medium of expression over the course of their careers. Guided by a post-modern aesthetic, they place this ancient material into the contextual arena of contemporary installation art, creating environments that address such disparate subjects as transience and permanence, nature and civilization, microbiology and evolution, social injustice and human folly.

The works of Marek Cecula call attention to the often ambiguous records of ancient worlds that have been maintained in clay. Using dry, unfired clay for his 2008 site-specific installation *Klepisko*, Cecula compresses time to create an “archeology of the future” in which geological processes are accelerated through the participation of visitors to the exhibition. Embedded within the clay floor lies a cache of artifacts recalling ancient and modern cultures, more and more of which are revealed as visitors walk on the friable surface and break down its structure.

Charles Simonds has called attention to clay’s metaphoric potential and its structural properties since the 1970s, when he began building his miniature brick habitations for “little people” with red New Jersey clay. These poetic evocations of landscape and culture were placed in niches on streets throughout Manhattan, and most famously on a window ledge in the stairwell of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In his Katonah work, *Mental Earth* (2003), Simonds makes a switch worthy of *Gulliver’s Travels* and creates an alternative realm in which the viewer, rather than looking down on the artist’s small worlds, is dwarfed by an imposing monumental form that hangs disconcertingly in mid-air like a menacing asteroid.

The materiality of earthenware clay and its long association with human civilization are central to the humanity projected by Arnie Zimmerman’s scenes of unending and seemingly meaningless toil. In *Walled City* (2008), his figures labor anonymously, cast into a nameless urban environment whose walls merge with those of the gallery. Zimmerman uses age-old forming techniques that he learned as a potter, and the marks of his labor are clearly visible in each of his hand-built figures.

Several of the artists in *Conversations in Clay* reference clay’s time-honored use as the material from which vessels and decorative ceramic objects are formed. Michael Lucero uses clay as a sculptural medium but alludes to its early identity with the ceramic vessel. Lucero often employs familiar cast and molded objects, painting and glazing their surfaces with vibrant color. However, he subverts their original function by joining them together into new configurations and then providing an environment for the display of his creations. In *Light Project* (2008), he treats a wall in one of the Katonah galleries as if it were a theatrical stage, introducing spotlighting both to remodel his clay objects with dramatic light and shadow effects and to engage them in an ongoing performance in which their surfaces, structures, and spatial relationships change as the viewer moves around them.

In her ceramic pictures *Vividareum* (2007), *Internal Courtyard* (2007), and *Villa A Capri* (2006), Betty Woodman reinterprets the vessel form, breaking it apart into flattened shards covered with exuberant colors. She celebrates the decorative nature of ceramic objects, choreographing her components into flowing compositions that exploit the negative space between their irregular shapes. Her installation, which suggests an internal courtyard, combines elements of sculpture, painting, and architecture to create an environment that reverberates with energy and fantasy.

Ann Agee introduces mainstream culture and contemporary socio-political concerns into the tradition of ceramic figurines in her installation *Boxing* (2005–08). Covering the gallery walls with painted wallpaper, she creates a backdrop for small, glazed terra-cotta figures that recall eighteenth-century porcelain table ornaments. In her very contemporary tableau, Agee delights in juxtaposing American mall chic and scenes from everyday life with refined classical decorative styles.

Judy Moonelis and Denise Pelletier take human biology as cues for their works, but from very different points of reference. Fascinated with anatomical development and the senses, Judy Moonelis leads us on an exploration of the marvels of the body and its evolution. *Mirror Neuron Strands* (2007–08) and *Evolutionary Wall II* (2005–08) suggest connections between our existence as individual biological entities and as members of wider social and physical communities. Moonelis makes clay central to her work because it responds to and retains the artist’s touch and because clay, along with life itself, has its origins in the earth.

In the complex network of interconnected forms that comprise *Hygeia* (2008), Denise Pelletier focuses on the flow of fluids that nourish and purify the body. She alters and reworks slip-cast porcelain molds that are based on actual historical medical instruments to create ceramic objects that bridge the biological and the inorganic.

Jeffrey Mongrain’s understated wall piece and Sana Musasama’s anthropomorphic tree forms operate on a metaphorical level, calling attention to events in our nation’s history. Both works express the artists’ sensitivity to long-standing social issues that remain of concern today.

The simple curvilinear forms of Jeffrey Mongrain’s eloquent 2008 wall-mounted ceramic sculpture, *Our Eyes are Opened (1805)/We Are Truly One(2008)*, invite the viewer to participate in a silent dialogue between the object and its setting. To honor Katonah’s rich Native American history, Mongrain took a phrase from an 1805 address by Seneca Chief Red Jacket and memorialized the sound patterns as concentric ridges on one of the two conjoined disk segments. For his “echo” disk segment, he chose a phrase from Barack Obama’s speech on race, delivered over two hundred years later. To create the smooth, lustrous, yet mysterious surface of this poetic sound object, Mongrain carved and wax-polished the ceramic disks after firing them.

Clay’s embodiment of the life force that unites mankind and nature is central to the evocative tree sculptures that welcome visitors as they enter the Katonah Museum. Created in the 1990s as part of Sana Musasama’s seminal Maple Tree series, these works explore themes inspired by the abolitionist Maple Tree Movement that began in the eighteenth century. The human and tree-like features of these colorful and richly textured forms constitute a metaphor for remembrance and liberation.

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The Katonah Museum serves as the stage for the installation of eleven disparate art works proclaiming clay’s remarkably versatile properties and hailing its earthly origin and its importance to civilization. The artists in *Conversations in Clay* engage the visitor in dialogues in which meaning and medium are bound together, addressing topics that are at once of the moment and timeless. Each “conversation” offers a distinctive experience of scale, time and space, with the viewer becoming a part of the dialogue through a sensory encounter that merges the artistic realm with the real world, palpably bringing the ideal down to “earth.”

CLAY IN OUR LIVES

Clay has been used for thousands of years to make things that we use every day.

LOOK AROUND!

Can you name 3 different things around your house or school that are made from clay?

What is it?

What is it used for?

1. _____

1. _____

2. _____

2. _____

3. _____

3. _____

DID YOU KNOW?

~ Aboriginal peoples have used clay for hundreds of years to treat cuts, abrasions, swollen limbs, fevers, and insect bites.

~ The pre-historic Anasazi people of the Southwest (ancestors of today's Pueblo peoples) created and perfected ceramics and clay dwellings between 750 – 1300 CE.

~ Sewer pipes, sinks, toilets and kitchen floor tiles can be ceramic.

~ Some tennis courts are made of rolled clay.

~ Ceramic is used as a heat shield – in ovens, in firewalls, and even on the outside of the Space Shuttle which uses clay tiles to shield it from the heat of lift-off.

~ Clay can filter out many unwanted things. It is used to clarify water and wine, and can purify sewage.

~ Artificial bones and teeth are sometimes made from ceramic materials.

ART WORD SEARCH

On your visit to the Katonah Museum of Art, you will learn about these words. Do you know any of their meanings?

Discover the art words in the word search below!

- | | | | | |
|------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Installation | Kiln | Ceramic | Slab | Stoneware |
| Abstract | Glaze | Fire | Coil | Terracotta |
| Representational | Surface | Vitrify | Texture | |
| Pinch | Symmetry | Porcelain | Sculpture | |

N B Y F Z H A S E E S S K L Z R
 I L C F C V U P R L O Y I T E F
 A K U N I R A U A U W M W P T I
 L D I A F R T B W E D M R C Q R
 E P Z A T P T S T O N E W A R E
 C H C E L T A I B S S T H R K B
 R E D U T O O T V E Y R L I O C
 O A C X Q C K C N I D Y M Y E R
 P S B W N O I T A L L A T S N I
 A K F S G L A Z E R Z T Z E R M
 W B I L T T P S I K R R Y R K C
 D E A L I R C I M A R E C U P T
 Z Z U O N E A E M N U H T T J I
 X K N B N W C C I A W T N X Z P
 D A D H K X L N T O A K B E A R
 L W O Y Y E L A P S Y U Z T V B



Ann Agee, piece from
Boxing 2005-2008



Jeffrey Mongrain,
*Our Eyes Are Opened (1805)/We
Are Truly One*(2008)



Charles Simonds, *Mental Earth*



Betty Woodman,
*Ceramic Pictures of Roman
Paintings: Internal Courtvard*, 2007



Judy Moonelis, *Mirror Neuron Strands*

MATCH THE ARTIST AND THE ARTWORK

1) This artist takes a heavy, rough clay medium and makes it seem to float in the air.

2) The forms and patterns found on ancient vessels are featured in this artwork.

3) This delicate artwork uses many different materials that hang from the ceiling.

4) This artist portrays the funny things that people do.

5) This artist is interested in making sound waves visible. Hint: The artwork is symmetrical.

—



Diegueno funeral jar

A CLAY CREATION MYTH

In many cultures it was believed that the world or the first people were made from clay. Below is a story from a Native American tribe of southern California.

CAN YOU ILLUSTRATE THIS STORY?

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In the beginning there was no earth or land. There was nothing except salt water which covered everything like a big sea. Two brothers lived under this water and both of them kept their eyes closed, for the salt would blind them. After awhile, the oldest brother, Tcaipakomat, went up on top of the salt water and looked around. He could see nothing but water. Soon the younger brother came up too, but he opened his eyes on the way and the salt water blinded him. When he got to the top he could see nothing at all, so he went back down.

When the elder brother saw that there was nothing around, he made little red ants, miskiluwi. They filled the water up with all their bodies and so made land. Then Tcaipakomat created black birds with flat bills, xanyil. There was no sun or light when he made these birds, so they were lost and could not find their roost. So Tcaipakomat took three kinds of clay - - red, yellow, and black, and made a round, flat object. This he took in his hand and threw up against the sky. It stuck there. It began to give a dim light. We call it the moon now, halya. The light was so poor that they could not see very far. So Tcaipakomat was not satisfied, for he had it in his mind to make people. He took some more clay and made another round, flat object and tossed that up against the other side of the sky. It also stuck there. It made every thing light. It is the sun, inyau. Then he took a light-colored piece of clay and split it up part way. He made a man of it. That is the way he made man.

Adapted from *Religious Practices of the Diegueno Indians*, by T.T. Waterman, 1910

The Native American residents of southern California were called Diegueno Indians by the Europeans who first encountered them. They called themselves Kawakipai, or southern people.

SEEING POETRY IN CLAY

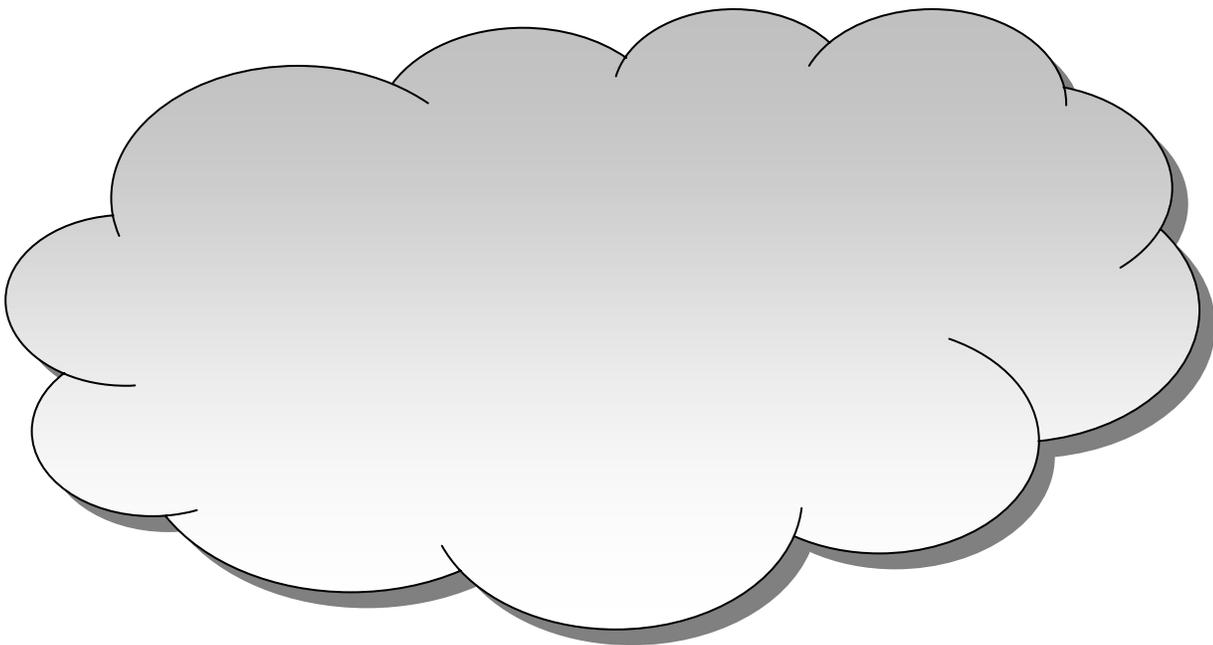
Poetry is an art form used to express thoughts or emotions about what we experience. In ancient times, poems were written on clay tablets!

Write a poem about what you saw and experienced during your visit to the Katonah Museum of Art.

You can write about:

- A work of art that you liked – or disliked
- Playing with the clay in the Learning Center
- Walking around the museum and looking at the clay sculptures

To start, brainstorm by listing words inside the cloud.



Some tips about writing a poem:

- A poem doesn't have to rhyme
- A poem can be short
- A poem uses strong words to "shape" or "build" a feeling or memory

Use the space below to write your poem – or use the back of this page if you prefer.
