Creatress: A Woman's Hand

Susan Isherwood Gibbs

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CREATRESS: A WOMAN'S HAND

Susan Isherwood Gibbs
Creatress: A Woman's Hand

A Thesis

Presented to

the College of Graduate Studies of

Georgia Southern University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Betty Foy Sanders

Department of Art

by

Susan Isherwood Gibbs

May 2004
April 7, 2004

To the Graduate School:

This thesis, entitled “Creatress: A Woman’s Hand,” and written by Susan Isherwood Gibbs, is presented to the College of Graduate Studies of Georgia Southern University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts Degree.

We have reviewed this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Elizabeth Jane Pleak, Committee Chair

Christina Lemon, Committee Member

Thomas P. Steadman, Committee Member

Patricia Carter, Acting Chair, Art Department

Accepted for the College of Graduate Studies

Charles J. Hardy
Acting Dean, College of Graduate Studies
DEDICATION

To my mother and father, my hoards of sisters and brothers, my three daughters, and Taylor, Nathan, Jackson and Haley-Ryan all of whom have encouraged my art making. And, to my husband, Larry, who has pushed me, and pushed me, and pushed me to get this degree; who has lifted tons of clay for me and, who has questioned my every decision, forcing me to talk about my work.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Christina Lemon and Pat Steadman for their guidance throughout my tenure at Georgia Southern University. I am privileged to have had such talented and patient instructors. I especially want to thank Jane Pleak, my committee chair, for her tireless dedication to her students. Jane has taught me many things, but teaching me to think beyond the obvious, to create question provoking art, and to realize the value of series have been her most valuable lessons.
ABSTRACT

CREATRESS: A WOMAN'S HAND

May 2004

SUSAN ISHERWOOD GIBBS

B.S. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

M.F.A. GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Directed by: Professor Elizabeth Jane Pleak

Using stylized and abstracted sculptural interpretations of She—Great Mother, Mother Nature, Earth Goddess, Creatress, Gaia, female sexuality, and the feminine aspects of nature; a wide range of differing chemicals and temperatures for the development of various clay bodies; and a vivid color palette to reflect ideas, feelings, and moods, I present a story of woman as metaphor for Earth and nature, an immense organic, ecological, and conscious whole. Incorporating found objects (natural and manmade) and fibers (organic and synthetic) with my clay imagery, I offer an awareness of the roles of women from around the world in the spiritual and psychological development of cultures and the impact of those roles on our global society. From a scientific and ecological perspective as well as from an inner, spiritual perspective, I present an often neglected story that spans 30,000 years.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ancient inhabitants of each continent across the globe designated the same four elements, earth, air, water, and fire, as spiritual building blocks of all substances living or dead, organic or inorganic. Each of these building blocks has energies that relate to different aspects of life, different personality types, or different objectives that one might have.

The most solid and stable of the four elements was earth, a specific energy found as a part of the overall planetary system. Earth represented matter in its most hard, concrete, stable form. The energy of ultimate manifestation, the earth represented completion and endings, winter and old age. As the most physical of the elements it was associated with the sense of touch.

Out of the oceans, the bloodstream of Mother Earth, all organic life emerged. Water represented flexibility and change. Magically, water was related to the emotions and intuition—often considered the deepest, most powerful feeling of all, a feeling that transmits knowledge and wisdom through the awareness of the body.

As a gas, air was the most ethereal of the material elements, and therefore closest to the spiritual realm. Air, the breath of life, could become a devastating wind. Air is the element through which sound and aroma are transmitted. Air is the element that governs intellectual ability.
Fire represented the primal spark of divine energy that set all things into motion. Fire represented the force that came into being within the context of the existing form, the primal darkness that is the ultimate womb of the Goddess. Fire which resides to this day at the molten core of the Earth and in the center of the solar system in the great fiery sphere we call sun, as pure energy, is the element closest to the spirit and farthest removed from the solidity of earthly matter.

The four elements represented the four states of matter and energy: solids, liquids, gasses, and pure energy. Together they cover the entire sweep of physical reality. However, Spirit is often considered the fifth element. In many cultures, even today, Spirit is a life force that exists in all that is—organic or inorganic. Spirit is the essence that holds the other elements together.

Throughout history, the four elements have been used in various cultures to ritualize time and space, by relating each pseudoelement to one of the four directions, which have always been identified with the four winds, the four “corners” of the earth, the four guardian spirits, the four quarters of the year with their equinoctial and solstitial festivals, the four seasons, the four ages of civilization and of each individual, the four primary colors, the four bodily “humors,” the four suits of the Tarot, and so through many other quarterly concepts... (Stone, p. 40).

It is in this tradition, I invoke the elements in the creation of my art.

From earth, I receive clay—the solid substance from which creations are formed.

From water, I receive moisture—the necessary element for modeling clay into form.

From air, I receive control over moisture and fire—the necessary element for drying clay
and manipulating heat. And, from fire, I receive heat—the element for creating permanency of clay.
Who is She?

She-who seems to have been born of herself. She-the foundation of all being. She-who has no recorded name. She-whose first images are hand prints on the walls of caves. She-whose works precede history. She-whose ancient personas appear in the cultural forms she takes—she rituals, statues, paintings, hymns, buildings and myths by which she was experienced. She-who was the source of all life and was also the taker of all life. She-who accepted no conventional boundaries: She could be virgin, mother and crone singularly or simultaneously; she could be the universe itself, the Holy Virgin, the Earth Mother-nurturer, the madly hysterical destroyer, the femme fatale, the consort or mother of God, the willing participant in the castration or murder of her husband, even the lover of her son. She was the All-Giving and the All-Taking, the source of life and death and regeneration. She was proud of her sexuality, of her body, of being the source of human life, the producer of milk to feed the young, and the instrument of power that attracted others to her body. She was the source of animals hunted and vegetables gathered. She was the dark place to which both vegetation and people returned, and from which they might be born again. She was soil, wind, fire, and water. She was motion, aroma, color, texture, sound, and word. She was no hidden sky deity; her source was the inner depths rather than the airy heights. She was present in every aspect of the pulsating and cyclical existence of which human-kind, her organ of consciousness,
was aware. She was the embodiment of what we know as life, her story is as old as life itself—for she is life itself.

Throughout the world, the Goddess in all of her manifestations was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature. She was the holistic and mythopoetic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on Earth. She delighted in the natural wonders of this world.

The ancient Akkadians wrote that the Goddess known as Mami pinched off fourteen pieces of clay, and making seven of them into women, making seven of them into men. She placed life upon the earth. The Dahomeans said that the Goddess known as Mawu built the mountains and the valleys, put the sun in the sky, and placed life upon the earth that She had made. Chinese texts record that the Goddess known as Nu Kwa patched the earth and heavens, when they had been shattered, and thus restored harmony and balance to the universe. Mexican records reveal that the Goddess known as Coatlique lived high upon a mountain, in a misty cloud, and there She gave birth to the moon, the sun, and all other deities. Hesiod wrote that the Goddess known as Gaia gave birth to heaven, and mating with heaven, She brought forth the other deities. Sumerian texts tell us that the Goddess known as Nammu was called upon as the mother who gave birth to heaven and earth, and She supervised the creation of all life by Her daughter Ninmah. Australians explain that it is to the Goddess known as Kunapi that our spirit returns upon earth, thus remaining with her until the next rebirth.

Indian records state that if the Goddess known as Devi were to close Her eyes for a second, the entire universe would disappear. In Egyptian hieroglyphics, it was written that the Goddess known as Au Sept was the oldest of the old, She from whom all becoming, came forth. Navajo people know that Changing Woman is sacred Nature, in all that She unfolds (Stone, p.5).

She built magnificent tomb-shrines, temples, comfortable homes in moderately sized villages, and created superb pottery and sculptures. During the 25,000 years in which “She” flourished, this long lasting period of remarkable creativity and stability was free of strife. Hers was a culture of art.
The story of the Great Goddess as it comes down through time, speaks of our most ancient ancestors and the development of the great civilizations of the world, illustrating the once supreme role of the divine feminine and her subsequent decline. The images and symbols She left behind suggest that the parthenogenetic Goddess has been the most persistent feature in the archaeological record of the ancient world. In Europe She ruled throughout the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods, and in Mediterranean Europe through most of the Bronze Age. In the next stage, that of the pastoral and patriarchal warrior gods, who either supplanted or assimilated the matristic pantheon of goddesses and gods, represents a stage intermediary to Judeo-Christianity and the spread of philosophical rejection of the natural world. A prejudice developed against this worldliness, and with it the rejection of the Goddess and all that she stood for. Consequently, women have not only been deliberately left out of the human story, but have been demonized, shamed, abused and murdered in the process, particularly through the practices of the three main world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The mythological perspective is just one thread in the story. Political repercussions for women and changing attitudes towards Life and Nature are also inextricably tied up with her fate.

I have borrowed from my ancient sister, goddess, her imagination, her materials—clay and fibers, her creativity, her symbols, her lust for life, her curiosity, her balance, her humor, and her struggle for survival.
Louise Bourgeois

She is Louise Bourgeois whose mighty roar is the physical manifestation of a powerful archetype—Kali, destroyer of demons. Through a body of work that defies categorization, Bourgeois, confronts her demons. Using materials equally diverse, she wields her power to overcome her confused and emotional childhood—a childhood filled with sexual hypocrisy, and a moral reality split into moral judgments and double standards of good and evil, mine and yours, pure and corrupt—male and female.

In an interview with Paul Gardner, Universe Series on Women Artists, Bourgeois stated, “In order to understand unbearable family tensions, I had to express my anxiety with forms that could change, destroy and rebuild” (p.21). And change, destroy, and rebuild she did.

Using powerful imagery she references and remakes familial myths of the male and female. Her breast/phallic representations, both sexually charged and innocent, range from huge steel masculine phallic mechanisms to delicate feminine hands carved in pink marble; to multi breasted latex costumes, reminiscent of the multi breasted goddess, (Figure 1) Artemis; to installations containing three thirty foot high towers guarded by Maman (Figure 2) a thirty-five foot spider.

Through her immense creativity and broad selection of materials, which includes fabric, wood, glass, marble, bronze, latex and plaster, she battles her demons. However, I question whether or not she will, or even really ever wants to, conquer them, as they continually seem to resurrect only to be transformed by new materials.
This mighty crone has gifted me with humor, stamina, persistence, and above all, courage—courage to face sexual hypocrisy and double standards for men and women. Her example has offered me the courage to look honestly at my own sexuality, and the freedom to incorporate sexuality as a theme in my own work. For her “hanging in there” over thirty years without getting the recognition she deserved, her craftsmanship, imagination, and creativity, and her energy, Louise Bourgeois is my heroine.

Niki de Saint Phalle

She is Niki de Saint Phalle, creator of *Yellow Nana*, an outrageously yellow polyester and fiberglass female form clad in an electric blue bathing suit adorned with bright red, yellow, and green imagery who dances proudly on a pedestal midway up the staircase leading to the second floor of the Corcoran Museum in Washington, DC—not the glorified perfect female image of the Greco-Roman period who appears flawless in physique and superior in demeanor.
A woman whose own personal life was less than perfect, Saint Phalle exemplified the struggles of her youth through violent narratives created by shooting firearms at plaster reliefs and sculptures filled with containers of paint buried underneath their surfaces. Rifles, revolvers, and sometimes small cannons were used to shoot at symbols of churches, monsters, politicians, the Virgin Mary. These works, filled with tension, attracted and thrilled her audiences.

"I wanted to forgive my father for trying to make me his mistress when I was eleven. I found only rage and passionate hate in my heart" (Saint Phalle). From the time she was twenty, Saint Phalle had suffered a severe nervous breakdown, and tried all kinds of psychotherapies, which included no less than ten electro shock treatments.

In 1965, Nana (Figure 3), more reminiscent of her ancient Neolithic and Paleolithic matriarchal sisters revered for their spiritual power, rather than their physical appearance as perceived by the Hellenistic patriarchal goddesses, was born. Yellow Nana is but one in a long line of "Nana" figures scattered around the world.

Figure 3 Nana, 1965

Figure 4 Nana Upside Down, 1965
As much a concept as a representation, Saint Phalle’s *Nana* is a goddess full of joy and feminine power. Sometimes she is upside down and green (Figure 4), sometimes pregnant, sometimes black in a skimpy dress. She dances, gives birth to children, and weeps. She comes in many shapes, sizes, and colors. There is nothing standard about her. She is not perfect, she may be rough around the edges, saggy and lumpy, but she has spirit.

She has given birth to the wisdom of letting go. In the tradition of the ancient goddess, Saint Phalle has created, destroyed and reinvented herself over and over again. Through her *Nana* series, Saint Phalle has defined woman in many ways. *Nana* is many things to many people, but for sure, she is always delightful and a positive message to women everywhere. For her risk taking, for sharing her past, for facing her disappointments, for defining her power, for outrageous forms and colors that also define my own images of woman, and for affirming my right and responsibility to be me. Niki de Saint Phalle is my mentor.

**Judy Chicago**

She is Judy Chicago, artist, author, feminist, educator, and intellectual whose career now spans four decades. Her influence both within and beyond the art community is attested to by hundreds of publications throughout the world celebrating her accomplishments. Her works, which are often collaborative, demonstrate an openly feminist point of view. Because her works are often huge, always complex and varied, I have but one word to explain Judy Chicago—audacious. Judy Chicago is the personification of audacity.
If being a feminist during the early nineteen-sixties had not been enough to exemplify audacity, perhaps her accomplishments over the last forty years will qualify. In audacious attacks on the status quo, she has not only challenged art history, but the entire history of western civilization.

She has had the audacity to challenge academia, to enlarge the definition of art, to expand the role of art, and to encourage women’s right to freedom of expression, and to counter the erasure of women’s achievements. Though these accomplishments are lofty enough for one person in a lifetime, she has had the audacity to push the boundaries between fine art and craft; between high art and hobby techniques; to suggest that women’s spirituality, women’s sexuality, women’s values, women’s power, creation and birth, and domestic issues, could possibly be considered as themes; and to redefine materials, tools and techniques used in the making of “fine art.” In “Amazonian” (as opposed to Herculean) projects, she has had the audacity to use materials such as clay and china paint, fabric and thread, needles and sewing machines as media for art-making.

Imagine the audacity of using embroidery, weaving, appliqué, quilting, beading, macramé, smocking and needlework as fine art techniques. But, in what could arguably be considered the most audacious act of all, Chicago has placed in the sanctity of our public museums monumental exhibits: Womanhouse, an actual house remodeled by women used to depict the domestic roles historically assigned women in middle-class America; The Dinner Party, a huge multimedia installation celebrating female achievements in Western history; The Birth Project, a handcrafted collaborative, designed by and under the direction of Chicago, utilizing scores of skilled
needle-workers from across the nation to create a series of images celebrating birth and creation.

Chicago stands as a monument to womankind “in her commitment to the power of art as a vehicle for intellectual transformation and social change and to women’s right to engage in the highest level of art production.” For her audacity, for challenging me to follow her example as a feminist, for opening the doors that I might use nontraditional materials in the expression of my own art, Judy Chicago is my example.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Considerations

Making the decision to enter graduate school at the age of fifty-four presented me with many interesting and challenging concerns and opportunities. I felt quite confident with my art making skills, but soon I was challenged with having to articulate a world view and explain my work. All I really knew at the time was that I loved working with clay, I loved color, I have always had opinions, but I had never connected form and world view at a conscious level. Developing and articulating the conceptual aspects of my work has proved to be the most difficult path on this journey.

Initially, I examined in my clay work images of the inner as well as the outer woman in very large, more representational than not, colorful interpretations of the female form. These forms included *They Don’t Dance Like Carmen No More* (Figure 6), a large busted, tiny-waisted, life sized dancing Carmen Miranda with a palm tree and fruit on her head; *Social Suicide* (Figure 7), a rather gaunt looking cigarette smoking socialite dressed in black emerging from a huge tacky green ashtray filled with cigarette butts and sand; *Fertility Rights* (Figure 8), a conceptual woman without a head, whose body is morphing into a plant form covered with fruit and vegetables, whose hands are holding a plate filled with contraceptive devices, and whose stomach is opened revealing a womb morphing into a female face. Though individually interesting, there was little or no connection in style or concept on which to unify these works.
Though I continued to produce a number of monumental pieces, it still took over a year for me to learn what was meant by and the importance of “series.” During this first year I questioned the importance of all the curious women I had created. I began to
read. I focused my reading on women’s mythology, women artists, and women’s issues. I went to Washington D.C. two summers in a row to research and compare the depictions of women by men and women in art, and to examine the artistic accomplishments of women from other cultures, both ancient and contemporary. After hundreds of hours of reading and note taking later, I finally began to articulate my ideas. Curiously, around the time of my thirty-hour review, I, armed with new insights, took a far more abstract approach for depicting my concepts of the feminine ideal. She no longer represents a single individual. She is in each piece an aspect of the evolutionary roots from which she sprang. She is plant and animal. She is organic and manmade. She is amorphic and geometric.

In spite of her gradual suppression, the goddess has never departed from our collective unconscious. Her very nature has always been a cyclical event, one embodied in the nature of life. Like the waxing and the waning of the moon, she returns again and again. Today, the Goddess returns to us through the spirit of the world-wide women’s movement and environmental movement—and, at a most timely moment. With mankind’s impulse for destruction and domination, we are faced with global warming that affects the skies, seas, and weather; over population, extinction of vital plant and animal life or rainforest loss through deforestation and clear cutting and war. Facing such issues as world economy, artificial life, global climate change, vast ecosystems and planetary extinction, Her sustaining power is once more of the essence.

A particularly dramatic vehicle for the revival of Goddess has been a hypothesis that sprang from modern science in the early 1960s. Dr. James Lovestock and Dr.
Sidney Epton, developed insights of the notion that it is not merely geologic forces and elements of the Earth that create the conditions that make life possible. They outlined a hypothesis that the Earth regulates its own condition to make itself more conducive to life. They called this the “Gaia hypothesis” after the Greek name for the Earth Goddess. According to the Gaia hypothesis, because a number of factors on Earth, such as the salinity of the oceans and the mean temperature of the Earth’s surface, have remained relatively constant over time, the Earth is making decisions to keep her own system bio-friendly. This implies that the Earth is behaving as a single living organism: Mother Nature, the Goddess—Life itself (Leeming, 174-178).

Being the organ of consciousness for this huge ecosystem, humankind is responsible for maintaining and protecting the natural course of this living organism. Taking care of the Earth is synonymous with taking care of ourselves. Using universal images, along with symbols from my unconscious and past experiences, I attempt to communicate with the viewer of my sculpture a world view that celebrates the importance of Life in all its aspects.

Philosophically, I consider my work to be social and political commentary. It is usually figurative and frequently humorous or satirical, or a non-humorous more introspective approach, depending on the subject matter. My early graduate work, with rare exception, focused on exaggerated, mildly abstracted representations of the female form. As my work has evolved, it has taken a less physically feminine form. Her form now is far more abstracted, and in some cases, is nonobjective in style. Her form no longer about the physical, is now about the spirit.
Conceptually, her faces and heads are of particular concern. In my works, the head represents a repository for spirituality, ideas, imagination, creativity, and emotions. With the exception of color, faces, a part of the head, are depicted, almost identically. The faces, physically alike, do not represent sexual difference, cultural difference, or ethnic difference. The androgynous depiction of each face conveys an expression that is pensive, contemplative, and introspective.

Her body, too, is of particular concern in my work. It represents the aspect of Life that celebrates differences. Her varied form comes in many disguises. She may appear male or female, plant or animal, organic or inorganic, gigantic or minute. She comes in many forms, textures, and colors. While observing my work, it is hoped that one will be reminded of the most valued aspects of what it means to be a whole human, that which exists within every male and female, the feminine spirit.

She is sexual. She is spiritual. She is psychological wholeness. She is creative growth and potential. She challenges the status quo, celebrates nature, and champions ecological causes. She is Life.

**Formal Considerations**

In formal terms, my works reflect the qualities of craftmanship, creativity, and emotion. Primarily, I work with clay, but I call myself a sculptor working in mixed media. Clay is my discipline. Clay grounds me. But, my thirty years of teaching in public school have afforded me the opportunity to become acquainted with many processes, techniques and materials. This has proved to be both a blessing and a curse. I can do many things well at an elementary level, but having worked eight hour days, and
raised three daughters, there has been little time to develop many skills in depth. It is not uncommon for non-traditional processes, techniques and materials to creep into my works. Sometimes they are slightly noticeable, and sometimes they dominate the piece.

On occasion, I have been accused of being obsessive-compulsive. Repetition as a design principle has a particular hold on my approach to art making. This characteristic reveals itself in many ways.

I most often use coiling, mentioned here, not so much as a building technique, but as a formal aspect in the designing of much of my work. On occasion I do not smooth the outside of the piece and the building coils are actually seen by the viewer. This repetitive act is displayed on the surfaces of many of my works not only as form, but as surface embellishment—spirals, unexpected twists and turns, strong textures, or subtle imagery (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Shorty. 2002
Color and texture, too, are repetitive elements in my work. Bold bright colors are often applied in dots and dashes on the surfaces of the coils. Texture patterns are created from repetitiously placing lumps of clay onto human like forms, creating patterns of irregular surfaces. The lumps of clay are emphasized by drawing around each lump and are embellished by adding holes, impressions, or bead-like appendages to give the work an organic appearance.

Face shaped forms are often repetitious elements. Multiple faces may be crocheted, knotted or woven together—techniques that require an action done over and over again. Ninety-six clay faces crocheted with hemp and yarn into a bed-sized blanket; dozens of human-like figures made of bottles with clay heads covered using a mosaic application of found objects; and several nonobjective life forms woven from fabrics and fibers are examples of the repetitious nature of my art.

Given my strong urge for repetition in design, it seems quite natural that I would select clay as my medium of choice—a medium that invites kneading, wedging, rolling, mashing, mixing, slicing, coiling, spinning, throwing, slamming, paddling, pounding, pouring, scoring, pinching, stamping, incising, extruding, carving, centering, coloring, smoothing, and burnishing, to name a few acts, the very nature of which are repetitive.

Clay, the most ancient of materials, the medium of the goddess, the mythological stuff of life, and the provider of functional, spiritual, and aesthetic evidences of our history, appeared on earth long before living beings. Given its rich 25,000 year history, its mythological connection to creation, and its apparent use for creating votive figures
for celebrating life, clay, in all its repetitive aspects, seems perfectly suited for my
examination of She and her connection with the earthly dimension.

**Technical Considerations**

Clay, found all over the world, comes in many forms and colors. It may be found
dry or moist, and the range of colors varies from the purist of whites, to a full range of
reds and browns, to blacks. Various clays require different firing temperatures for
creating vitrification, the point at which clay becomes nonabsorbent, mature, hard,
glasslike—permanent. For utilitarian purposes, vitrification is of utmost importance.
For sculptural works, vitrification is less important. Experimentation with firing
temperatures can afford the artist an infinite range of possibilities, especially as glazing is
introduced to the process.

Though I have worked to some extent with several of the clay choices, currently, I
am using a terra cotta colored clay. My preferred firing range is between cone 06 and
cone 6 in an electric kiln.

This is a beautiful red color that deepens in richness as heat is increased. Its
texture is creamy and sensual. Though clay can be used just as it comes from the ground,
a clay body is often developed by the artist to create desired characteristics such as color,
texture, plasticity, strength, or density. For the clay sculptor these combinations can be
extensive. However, being a child of the “Keep it Simple” theory, my clay body formula
usually consists of only two main ingredients plus ten percent by weight sand for
increased strength, controlled drying, and shrink reduction.
This clay body lends itself beautifully to my theme of feminine aspects of nature. With its earthy red color and its sensual texture, it is perfect for my vision of femininity. Used without added color, this luscious clay is beautiful.

Being an artist with a less than “potter’s ethic,” I had been using a variety of coloring methods. I have used everything from standard commercial glazes, colored slips, and cold glazes (acrylic and oil paint) to produce predictable color effects for my works. With limited time, learning to make my own glazes seemed to be a time consuming task that more often than not produced unpredictable results. I had locked myself into trading the potential for a personal palette of glaze colors for the convenience of predictability. I could devote my time to form development, and not worry about color. However, after taking Glaze Calculation, a class in which I learned far more than I anticipated, it still took me a year to put what I had learned into creating my own glazes.

At the time of my thirty-hour review, my concepts of the feminine began to change. As my forms became more abstract, the concept of predictability seemed less important. It was at this time I met Steve Glazer who shared his beautiful clay body with me. It seemed to be the perfect time to experiment with new surface colors. However, I was skeptical of how this new clay body would receive the glaze formulas with which I had been experimenting as I had been trying my glaze experiments on another “Keep it Simple” clay—the standard 50-50 ball and talc formula that produces an almost pure white surface when fired. This white clay canvas gave me true color results.
My glaze experiments applied to the white clay body proved to be successful. The colors are rich, and deep, and only slightly unpredictable. But, after applying these wonderful new colors to my new red clay body, the colors on the white clay body paled by comparison. This red clay body rich with iron produced the most magnificent colors. The excitement these new colors has generated cannot be easily expressed. I began to create new and experimental forms and it was exciting to see how the new colors reacted to texture. With three very simple formulas (see Appendix B), coupled with a broad firing range, I have created a color palette of which I am immensely proud.

During this time of glaze experimentation, I introduced metals like pewter, bronze and copper into my works—through application during and after the glazing process. With new knowledge about metal and new perspectives for utilizing nontraditional materials such as fibers and found objects gleaned from my jewelry and sculpture classes I began to take my work in many new directions. With earth, water, air and fire I develop my craft. With spirit I develop my art.
CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF WORKS BY THE ARTIST

Changing Woman

*Changing Woman* (Figure 10), a conceptual form that becomes new with every move. She began as an irregularly shaped sheet of hardware cloth thirty-six inches long and eighteen inches wide. Though these are the measurements of what is usually considered two-dimensional works, with the addition of thousands of twelve inch strips of jute twine looped and woven through thousands of half inch holes in the hardware cloth, and the threading of long three inch paper beads strung and knotted onto each end of the looped pieces of twine (Figure 11), an additional five inches of depth developed.

The hardware cloth, usually a very rigid construction material, became very flexible with the additional weight of the jute twine and paper beads. My initial intention was for the piece to be a wall hanging. It was apparent, after several hours of work, *that* this piece was developing a life and mind of its own. Looking somewhat like a huge hedgehog, I noticed that when attempting to move the form it would change forms. Not only does every one of the thousands of red, green, and purple beads move individually, but the now flexible metal hardware cloth droops when lifted. With each lift and placement it becomes a new form. Just as Her form changes, so do Her dimensions.

From the Navajo concept of She, *Changing Woman* is the process of nature. It is to *Changing Woman* that we look as we search for the meaning of life. She understands that life is in a state of flux, ever changing, never constant. In my quest for meaning I
have learned acceptance of change. I have no control over the patterns of nature, including human nature, and any attempts to change the ways of *Changing Woman* will destroy all life (Leeming, p.93-95).

Figure 10 *Changing Woman*, 2004

Figure 11 *Changing Woman* (detail), 2004
Gaia

*Gaia,* Mother of all things, oldest of all beings, All-Giver, had once been an incarnation of Earth Goddess. It is said that Gaia formed herself into the world out of chaos, and danced herself into life. She, also known as Demeter, Kali, Eurynome, and Isis, the golden, glistening, generous womb of the earth and all that sings and dances, who moves and ponders in its folds and on its hills, joyously ruled before all others.
Appearing to suspend in space the eighty-two by twenty-two by twenty-two inch *Gaia* (Figure 12) bursts into being. A rather abstracted pod form modeled from metal hardware cloth is woven into existence from various found fibers including hemp rope dyed red, cotton mop thread dyed red, silk fabrics torn into half inch strips, natural jute twine, raffia, red, purple and yellow cotton crochet thread, and oozing with large grape-like clusters modeled from purple dyed cotton knit fabric (Figure 13).

Red, a dominant color throughout the piece, represents the blood mysteries of the feminine including the first menstruation, transforming girls to women. With pregnancy, blood feeds the growing fetus, and “at birth it is blood that seemingly transforms itself into life-giving milk” (Getty, p. 72).

Representing the feminine mystique, *Gaia* is depicted as a womb or pod-like form out of which all life emerges. Her anthropomorphic appearance captures the spirit of the natural world from which all cultures, all vegetative and animal life have evolved as opposed to the more idealized human representations of this ancient Greek mother.

**Earth Blanket**

*Earth Blanket*, a fifty-seven by fifty-four inch wall hanging, utilizing the most ancient materials and techniques used in the creation of art, woven fibers and modeled clay, celebrates humanness. Fiber weaving and clay modeling, attributed to the most ancient cultures on every continent across the earth, have been interconnected into a blanket form depicting ninety-six clay faces crocheted together with cotton yarn and hemp fibers.
The ninety-six faces, twelve across and eight down, were made by pressing clay into a plaster mold of a stylized face that appears neither male or female but rather androgynous. Except for the ninety-six color variations and the individual flaws in the clay as the faces were forced from the mold, the faces are almost identical. To celebrate equality the faces were made from the same mold. To celebrate differences the faces were represented with their own colors. To celebrate the imperfections of all humans, the flaws in the clay were intentionally allowed to remain.

Figure 14 Earth Blanket, 2004
Around each clay face, depicted in relief form, holes were perforated to enable the crochet process to integrate with the modeled clay. Crochet, also known as finger weaving, is a process for making fabric, and is not usually associated with clay processes. In this case, the unlikely fabric of fiber and clay is transformed into a blanket (Figure 14).

![Image](image.png)

Figure 15 Earth Blanket (detail), 2004

Using neutral tones, representing the Earth, of cotton yarn and hemp fiber the faces of humanity were woven together. Fiber weaving and clay modeling have both been associated with the creation stories of many ancient cultures. The blanket, too, has had a connection to creation as a womb symbol for security (Stone, p.295). As a prayer for the Earth and all of humanity, I offer Earth Blanket for keeping the sacred dream of life alive.

**Shelia**

Without shame, in fact, in open delight, Shelia “struts her stuff.” In Celtic Britain, Shelia-na-gig, as She was known, adorned old Irish churches built before the sixteenth
century. Using both hands to open her vagina, Shelia-na-gig squats shamelessly with her knees apart, displaying her object of great mystery. “The first right of passage of all human beings begins in the womb and ends between the thighs of the Great Mother” (Getty, p.66). From every age and every culture, images of the “object of great mystery,” celebrating the body of woman, have been found.
Shelia is a series of four organic forms each displaying two arm-like appendages. In the place where arms, shoulders, neck, and head would meet in the human anatomy, a vulva form appears bridging the arms (Figure 16). Below the vulva form is a small round opening. Though in no way does this Shelia series resemble the physical representation of the Celtic Shelia-na-gig imagery, it is the spiritual aspects of this ancient female figure that I exemplify.

First, there is She Who Dances to a Different Drummer, also known as Dana. She who deals with contraction, wounding, grieving and endings. She who speaks to opening up, sorting out, and focusing inward. She who nurtures wholeness. She stands tall with pride in her purple gown. This mystic color, suggests her path of spiritual growth.

Next, there is She Who is Opened to Possibilities, sometimes known as Shelley. She grins at you provocatively. She invites you to join in her opening. She is open to new experiences, people, places, and things. She is energetic and creative as her orange form implies. Her small white developing eggs, seen in a large opening in the torso area, await opportunity.

Then, there is She Who Soothes Life, also known as Gari. She appears when opposing energies meet. She balances the powers of Land, Sky and Sea. She is protection—the calm and stillness in the center of the hurricane. As Chaos dances around us, she is the silence that enfolds us, the moment before moving into a new realm. Dressed in black, the color of mystery, She opens and leads us to the center of sacred space, a place of peaceful surrender to life’s circumstances.
And, lastly, there is *She Who Ages Gracefully*, also, known as Susan. In her liminal dwelling between birth and death, lives the paradoxical crone. The gray mist swirls around Her. Nothing is as it was. Nothing is at it seems. She reveals to you the gateway—the vulva of Woman—through which all of us has entered the world. A wise woman in all her glory, vibrant and defiant in the beauty of age—the right of all women to claim. She faces her fears of aging, looks every challenge in the face, meets all changes head-on and laughs. Her golden aura suggests an evolved being—a being whose spirit has merged with the flesh.

**Awakening**

*Awakening* is a series of seven clay pod-like forms displayed in various stages of development. These forms range in size from six inches to twenty inches in diameter to suggest growth and transformation. As these pods transform in size they also begin to sprout. With each pod the sprout reveals itself as more than a plant form. At one point in the progression, a head with sleeping eyes begins to appear. In the next stage the whole head appears with an arm. The eyes are opened and the flailing arm suggests a struggle to get free. In the final stage, the human figure is replaced with a flower (Figure 17)

The act of awakening into the world is manifested through the process of giving birth. The act of giving birth, whether to a child, an idea or a piece of art, is never without pain. *Awakening* personifies the period of incubation required in order to bring something beautiful into the world.
Series 1 Triple Goddess

Series 1 (Figure 18) consists of three freestanding clay figures that are neither human or plant, but rather a morphing of each. As a grouping they represent the triple goddess in her three stages of life— the virgin (maiden or daughter), the matron (mother), and the crone (grandmother or wise woman).

These figures work best as a group as their varying sizes, and facial features help to suggest their relationship to each other. At first sight the individual pieces look alike except for their sizes, but upon further examination, one will see in the faces distinct age differences between each. The heads are each mounted to what appears to be stems rather
than necks, which extend from large hollow pod-like torsos. The torsos are suspended from four, five, and six foot steel rods threaded with large clay beads resembling bones that form columns supported on the floor with weighted clay stands. Hanging from the inside and below each clay torso are numerous hemp cords in various stages of ravel.

The virgin, *She Who Has All the Questions*, the medium sized figure of the three, is depicted with a youthful face adorned with cosmetic dots and dashes gouged into the clay across her forehead and down her nose. The hemp cords hanging from her torso are beaded with very long turquoise spiral shaped beads that slightly resemble swimming sperm.

*She Who Has All the Answers*, the matron, is a tall regal standing figure. Her head is the largest and the adornment, carved across her forehead, appears to be a crown. Threaded on the hemp cords hanging from her torso are clusters of round glossy beads resembling large seeds.

The shortest of the three figures is crone. Crone or *She Who Knows That the Questions and the Answers Are the Same* has begun to wither with age, wrinkles have replaced her crown, and her once fertile torso has become baron and raveled. She no longer questions, she has no answers. The wise one waits patiently and quietly.
Figure 18  *Triple Goddess I*, 2004
Series 2 Triple Goddess

Once again the triple goddess is evoked for interpretation. In Series 1 each goddess represents the same figure in its three aspects. However, in Series 2 (Figure 17) each figure is depicted independently of each other.

Using a process reminiscent of the additive works of Judy Onofrio, I have used three old table lamps of varying shapes and sizes as forms on which I have glued found objects that exemplify femininity at various ages.
Maiden is a curvy lamp with a long neck on which her lemon-yellow clay head is attached. Her brightly colored body is covered with iridescent glass beads, brass brads, multicolored glass flowers and paper beads. She is the bright spring day. Her youth sparkles with femininity.

Matron, a much taller lamp, is covered with seeds, cones, shells, dried fruit—natural things. A fertile woman is she. Her colors are of the earth—browns and golds. Her spiritual color is red, picked up in the bright red berries surrounding her lower torso.

Crone whose spiritual color is black, is the middle sized figure. Her dark wrinkled head is attached to a short neck giving her a slumped appearance. Around her neck is a collar made of two coffee stained lace doilies. Her chunky shaped body is completely covered with deep gray steel wool on which is attached old twigs, a dead frog and fish, bones, old shells covered with barnacles, an empty cocoon and miscellaneous rusty metal objects. This imagery is meant to depict many years of experience, and the acceptance of her age.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My Master of Fine Arts research has followed two distinct paths combining the highly technical study of the chemistry of various clays and glazes with the very human study of the female condition, which has ultimately culminated into a third path of examination—human stewardship of our planet, Earth.

The body of work presented in this thesis is the result of many hours of experimentation with differing chemicals and temperatures on various clay bodies. Coupled with an emotionally charged glaze color palette, I have incorporated found objects and fibers with my clay imagery to convey the spiritual story of woman as metaphor for earth and nature, an immense organic, ecological, and conscious whole.

For whatever reason, my primary inquiry for this thesis has taken a feminist path. This was not a difficult decision. I have always believed and fought for the rights of all human beings. It is my deepest conviction that all that exists in nature is of equal importance, but not until my decision to study in depth female mythology and history, and examine political issues affecting the 21st century female, did I really begin to understand about how little I actually knew of women’s struggles outside my own. In the process of following this quest for understanding the female condition, I have developed an even broader understanding of the interconnectedness and importance of all that exists—an interconnectedness that creates a total living ecology of the earth within which all humans, male and female, are an important, but not the supreme, element.
Through my art, I wish to follow the examples of She—Her 25,000 year traditions of remarkable creativity and stability, her culture of art and beauty, and her supreme reverence of the natural world—the Earth.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Clay Formulas

Simple White Clay:

Ball Clay 50%
Talc 50%
Grog as needed

Steve Glazer’s Red Clay

Red Art Clay 2 parts
Hawthorn Gray 1 part
Grog as needed
APPENDIX B

Glaze Recipes

Susan’s Formula A (glossy at 06)

- Boric Acid: 60 grms
- Talc: 20 grms
- Kaolin: 20 grms
- Color oxides: 4% outside formula

Susan’s Formula B (buttery at 06)

- Frit 3124: 60 grms
- Talc: 20 grms
- Kaolin: 20 grms
- Color oxides: 4% outside formula

Susan’s Formula C (matt at 06)

- Colemanite: 50 grms
- Talc: 30 grms
- Silica: 20 grms
- Color oxides: 4% outside formula

Each of the glaze formulas have been tested both clay formulas at temperatures ranging from Cone 06 to Cone 01 with varying results.