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SUSAN YORK

The sculpture of New Mexico artist Susan York is deceptively simple at first glance. Paper-thin slabs of white clay hang on the wall in beautifully crafted metal brackets. They are small. And, yet, they seem to dominate the wall. In one, "Tilting Stack," the metal base is slightly off horizontal. The slabs are stacked on edge—all leaning to the right. There is a sense that they are going to slide and slip, one after another shattering on the floor. The smooth, paperlike, clay slabs invite touch, while the thin edges and sense of fragility suggest you keep your hands in your pocket.

It has been said that to know the adult, look to the child. In York's case, the following story tells volumes about her tenacity and approach to life. She was born in Newport, Rhode Island, and grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When she was eight, her mother told her that she could catch a bird if she sprinkled salt on its tail. For days she chased birds around the yard. "Eventually, I learned to breathe quietly like the birds. I learned to wait silently. One day a bird landed nearby, nudging his beak into the ground beside my foot. I was very still, breathing slowly, silently. Everything around me had receded and time slowed down. The looming Russian olive trees, the green hose coiled against the wall, even the prickly grass seemed very far away. The salt shaker was in my hand and it looked large as I held it above the bird's graceful body. I could feel the salt shifting inside of the shaker as I tilted it upside down. Slowly, very slowly, salt granules sparkled in the air and floated down to rest on the brown tail feathers of the bird. He lifted his beak out of the ground and looked up. I could see every feather of the bird's wings as they opened and floated into the sky."

York attended the University of New Mexico, where she was part of an exchange program with the University of Massachusetts, and received her B.F.A. in ceramics. After graduating, she apprenticed with Los Angeles ceramist Helen Slater (see "Working with an Apprentice" in the February 2000 CM), then moved to Santa Fe where she made pots, was active in New Mexico's artist-in-residence program and was the director of Arts with Elders, a community outreach program for seniors.

It was about this time that York had a kind of epiphany. She saw a show of Russian constructivists, and her work changed radically. She began to explore the golden mean (a ratio for a rectangle of 1 to 1.618 thought by the Greeks to be divinely inspired) through a series of slab pieces. These were made of white stoneware painted sparingly with unfired underglazes and mounted under glass. They looked as if they were done on fine handmade paper. Initially, she modeled her pieces on work by Malevich, Kandinsky, Lissitsky and others. "Later, I discarded these pieces, but in the process of making them I came to understand complete symmetry thrown off by the most subtle line or shape.

"During that series, I enjoyed fooling people with technique. Is it paper? Is it cloth? I airbrushed paper or tape onto the clay, trying to confuse the issue even more. I was more interested in technique at that time," York recalled.

Twenty years after earning a B.F.A., she went back to school for an M.F.A., studying with Tony Hepburn at Cranbrook Academy of Art. Initially, Hepburn would not let her work with clay. He said she was too facile with it. He wanted her to focus on the concepts underlying the work, not on its construction. "In a way, he freed me from clay by not allowing me to use it. Then I could make work that began with the feeling I wanted to evoke in the viewer. It didn't begin and end with an object hanging on the wall or sitting on a pedestal. That kind of thinking and conceptualizing gives the piece life. It becomes more than a beautiful, well-crafted object; it's alive."

What York seems to realize is that picking up something as small as a paper clip off a desk changes a whole room. "It's something that you can sometimes only feel—like the fleeting remembrance and forgetting of a dream."

For an exhibit at Cranbrook where three panes of glass rested against a wall, she "rebuilt the wall behind the glass so that it barely tilted. Not everyone noticed it, but I think nearly everyone felt it. It tilted forward about 4 inches over 14 feet."

In 1997, York had an opportunity to work at the Europees Keramisch Werkcentrum (EKWC) in 's-Hertogenbosch. "I had wanted to go to the Netherlands since my undergrad years. I'd seen a picture of Rietveld's chair and was deeply struck by it. Later, I used his chair image as part of a piece. When I got there, I felt I had come home (in an artistic sense). I joked at the time that I had traveled a very long way to come home.

"While I was at the EKWC, I also did research on Rietveld and the de Stijl period. I worked at the center, then traveled to Amsterdam or Utrecht, and researched in the library or went into the storage depots with the curators to closely look at Rietveld's work. What had looked to me (from a book in Albuquerque) to be almost mechanical was really a handmade work by a craftsman. Rietveld's chairs were each a unique creation. The measurements differed from chair to chair, and he added different things, like cutting centimeter squares out of the back of one.

"As I studied them, I realized that Rietveld took the geometric images of the de Stijl paintings and made them three dimensional. I began deconstructing his chair, first in drawings, and then I made one to scale in translucent porcelain. It laid on the floor. At this point, I really was fascinated by the transition from 2D to 3D. At what moment does flat become form? It's a little like capturing the space in between inhalation and exhalation.

"That's the basis for the shard series. I draw first, finding a shape that works in subtle tension with the wall and the metal form it rests on. The shape is drawn from the pure geometric forms of the constructivists. I looked at their work for a long time (particularly Malevich), and learned about understated, nearly imperceptible tension. It's something that you can sometimes only feel.

For her "shard" pieces, York first makes a drawing, and cuts out shapes holding them against the wall. Slabs are made from different porcelain slips (mostly commercial) poured onto plaster bats. Once the porcelain reaches a leather-hard state, she begins to cut out her forms. Each shard is the same and yet unique, as York is not overly careful in refining the edges or avoiding slight warping. "I cut out the piece over and over. I enjoy the repetition, the mindless repetition, losing myself so that it becomes a purely physical act." The finished shards are fired anywhere from Cone 6 to as high as Cone 14.

"My references aren't physical. They're mostly balance, the golden mean and tension. I often use the golden mean as a container. I know it's a ratio that has beauty for me. I did a series one time using only the golden mean. It was somewhat like trying to understand the transition from 2D to 3D that I'm working on now. I wanted to know what was so great about the Golden Rectangle that the Greeks used it over and over. I came to understand the beauty, balance and tension of its form.

"Now I've distilled the process. Though the viewer may wonder what the material is, my treatment of it is direct. It's just thin, unglazed porcelain. I'm mainly interested in the purity of form and the relationship of the shards to the wall or the floor."

York's work commands attention, not with size, but by sidestepping everything you know to be true. Even a small one can somehow take a shortcut directly into your being. A patch of sunlight on a floor suddenly assumes a palpable presence. Nothing is ever the same.

PHOTO (COLOR): "Porcelain Square," 6 inches (15 centimeters) in height, porcelain shards, with steel base.

PHOTO (COLOR): "39 Shards," 16 inches (41 centimeters) in height, porcelain and steel.

PHOTO (COLOR): "Seventy-Three Shards," 9½ inches (24 centimeters) in height, porcelain shards and steel.

PHOTO (COLOR): York cuts "shards" from thin sheets, made by pouring the porcelain over plaster.

PHOTO (COLOR): "Tilting Stack (75 shards)," 6 inches (15 centimeters) high, porcelain and steel.

PHOTO (COLOR): "Center of Gravity," 20 feet (6 meters) in width, porcelain, steel and graphite, installed in the Van de Griff Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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