Indeterminate Clay: Inessential Material in Essential Speculation

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Material speculation construed as a reflexive strategy—the positioning of a material for reflection on its own materiality rather than its role as medium—might at one time have been the obvious focus of an exhibition such as this. After all, the field of American ceramics absorbed at least an ephemeral influence from late-modernist aspirations to isolate material essence through self-critical action. The current exhibition, however, is clearly unconcerned with clay as such. It takes clay for granted as a medium, a mediating and therefore essentially indeterminate substance although with a certain determining power. Clay exerts a kind of persuasion over speculation, but it does not itself become specular, does not reflect itself back to itself as an object of speculation. Its properties are of value to speculation, but in a conventionalized rather than essential capacity—in other words, for their rhetorical value in a system where things mean and not just are. Clay is not in this exhibition inevitable but rather heuristic, in general indicating speculation on an entirely different material, or more properly an essential aspect of materiality itself—its hold over the incorporeal aspects of human being.

A propensity to speculate on materiality as the tragic flaw in human being—as the source of anxiety, debility and ultimately mortality—accounts for the air of pathos attendant upon much of the exhibition. Walter McConnell's *Itinerant Edens,* for example, invokes through both title and cloaked imagery the elusive object of the sovereign human desire. Eden symbolizes the eternal, godlike existence to which consciousness aspires yet which remains forever unattainable under the ponderous burden of the body. McConnell's plastic-shrouded bounteous spire of moist clay conveys the impression of a fertile hothouse garden, self-contained, beyond the pernicious effects of blight, drought, or wanton mutilation. Similarly encapsulated, and thereby estranged from Eden even as it aspires to an Edenic state, is an imperious figure of raw clay. Like all Utopias—all marks of the human affliction to conceive that which cannot be achieved—the inhabited biospheres are necessarily insular, intangible because of their unreality. At the same time, there is something all too precarious about the sweating forms languishing in their oxygen tents. Intuitively one understands that rending the prophylactic plastic would be equivalent to pulling the plug of a life-support system and dispelling the tenuous dream of perpetuity.

Human ambition to stem the influence of materiality over the latitude of spirit is equally an object of speculation in Frances Whitehead's obsessively tabular installation *Arguably Alive (the virus taxonomy)*. Cryptic—both sepulchral and obscure in its attitude toward death—the orderly arrangement of 20 ersatz canopic urns on stainless-steel pedestals (a detail from a set of 81) simultaneously conjures the dry air of a tomb, the climatic control of a museum storeroom and the antiseptic environment of a laboratory. Whitehead's use of Egyptian paste to mold the large urns—a technical feat nearly unprecedented in this notoriously weak material—can only be construed as a comment on the hubris implicit in

the attempt to inject feeble flesh miraculously with resistance to decay. The lids of Whitehead's urns are appropriately contemporary, with viruses, not gods, now jealously securing the portals of eternal life. The virus, the Nemesis of the modern would-be immortal, is, ironically, "arguably alive" partly because some strains can be "killed", suggesting in this respect that even the merest intimation of life is contingent upon susceptibility to death.

For Mary Jo Bole, the mutually definitive nature of life and death—perhaps, as Freud argued, no complementary dyad is more fundamental to the psyche—implies for such human conventions as the funerary monument an inherent ambivalence. On the one hand the monument emblematizes finality, acknowledging the ultimate conquest of the material body by forces conspiring for its disintegration. On the other, it implies through its mere existence, the potential relevance of the deceased to a future forever alienated from the material side of his or her being. It is, in other words, simultaneously a symbol of certain extinction and possible immortality. This kind of ambivalence envelops Bole's memorial *Granny's Necklace*. Incorporating a pearl strand of Victorian portraits that borders the central image like the guilloche of an ancient mosaic, the composition—pieced together from broken-tile tesserae in nostalgic gray scale—suggests the genealogical ties of an individual to generations of dead, the compost of innumerable cemeteries but also the invisible links of a biological chain reaching unbroken into the present. As in all Bole's work, absence is in this instance irreducible to the mere antithesis of presence.

The concept of vicarious immortality through biology—through genetic projection of the self into the living material of future generations—is also implicit in the erotic intimations of Jeanne Quinn's *Soft Things Made Hard*. Composed of phallic q-tips, some actual, some cast in porcelain, set perpendicularly into the wall in the loose lines of a vaginally stylized festoon, the work links the libidinal impulse not only to perpetuation of the self through the medium of flesh but to the production of art as the genesis of a surrogate self calculated to escape the body's normal acquiescence in aging and death. The quotidian obsession to enhance bodily longevity is suggested by the myriad q-tips, which link routines of hygiene to a determination to resist the body's inevitable descent into inertia. Concurrently, through the suggestiveness of their disparate forms—soft and real, hard and ideal—the q-tips comment on a cherished convention in ceramic rhetoric. If the drying of clay—the negation of its plasticity through a slow dehydration—suggests moribundity, the firing of clay reflects aspirations to symbolic rebirth in a metamorphosed and more demonstrably durable form.

In the context of Quinn's profusion of salutary q-tips, McConnell's protective enclosures, Whitehead's canopic urns, and Bole's ambiguous sarcophagus/bench, James Melchert's *November Yield* and *Bob* seem similarly wistful speculations on the transience of the material body. *November Yield*—significantly, a part of the Phoenix Series—appears pointedly about resurrection, the evidence of which in fact accounts for the semblance the work possesses of a composition. Produced by deliberately fragmenting nine prefabricated porcelain tiles, reuniting the sherds, and emphasizing the reconstructed nature of the product through glaze dots strategically applied at the points of fission, it

yields a picture of material loss and symbolic, if not actual, redemption. *Bob,* with its endearingly familiar title, implies an intimate portrait, yet one clearly haunted by absence. Consisting of glaze on a kiln shelf, *Bob* conspicuously lacks the clay body normally intervening between the two in the form, for example, of a vessel. This disembodiment, the implicit flattening of the contours of an individual being into a mere residuum, creates the impression of a memorial skin—something like a set of old clothing still neatly hanging pressed and empty in the closet of the departed.

As in Melchert's work, broken tiles offer poignant commentary on the futile obsession with preservation in Jamie Walker's *Natura Morta,* literally "dead nature"—a reference to the admonitory still life of the *vanitas* tradition. A dark sculpture of flowers, ordinarily ephemeral in their beauty and thus quintessential memento mori, sits, serene and detached, atop a pedestal of stacked tiles at the installation's center. A magnet to inquisitiveness, the carefully crafted floral arrangement, in its solemnity—its aloofness and implicit transcendence of touch—piques desire with the irresistibility of the Grail, an intimation of the everlasting in a fugacious world. The elusiveness of this dream of eternity is made clear through the profusion of thin, botanically shaped autumnal tiles extending outward from the pedestal and forming an implicit obstacle to advance. Some choose never to venture out onto this brittle plain. Those who do are confronted, out of the very desire to grasp a fleeting sensation of eternity, with a crackling of ceramic that disperses the mood of transcendence as decisively as if one had let slip the Portland Vase and "bid the spring adieu."

The affective quality of desiccated clay, the evocation of pensiveness from its scarred skin, is similarly exploited in the mixed–media work of Sadashi Inuzuka, whose implicit uneasiness over mortality is displaced onto lugubrious hints of ruined ecosystems. Inuzuka's *Substrate* floats between an intangible layer of light—a video projection of the undulating surface of Lake Michigan—and a heavily fissured ground of thick white slip. In this invisible space between rippling waves and inert lake bottom—a space intermediary to powerful metaphors of life and death—Inuzuka envisions a thriving world of minute organisms. The circular format of *Substrate*, suggestive of the field of vision under a microscope, is ringed by an array of imaginary aquatic creatures, the tiny denizens of Inuzuka's watery world. Fanciful in inspiration, they are tendentious embodiments of pathos, reflections of the artist's speculation on the inevitable. If the survival of these diminutive creatures is contingent upon the tenuous stability of their environment, the fossil-like rigidity of their fired-ceramic bodies insinuates that their fate is already beyond influence.

Intimations of the microscopic become synecdochic in Annabeth Rosen's *Untitled (Sample)*, which conjures both an archive of preserved tissue specimens and a living space crowded by a proliferating humanity. Although their associations with tile making are overt, the components of Rosen's installation relate even more intimately, both physically and conceptually, to the vessel. A conglomerate of hollow forms, each "tile" suggests both an archaeological stratum of kiln wasters and a magnified cross-section of living vessels, the porosity of a dermal excision or a resection of bone. The biological character of these surgically precise extractions, implicitly portions of a larger body, is

heightened metaphorically by Rosen's working method, which consists of repeated cycles of breaking fired pieces, reassembling them, adding additional wet clay and refiring—a process vaguely analogous to the regeneration of cells. On the macroscopic level, the figurative nature of Rosen's work—both its rhetorical potential and its connections to the human body—is equally strong, evocative of the cycle of life and death that insures a material balance between organism and environment through the termination of the individual but perpetuation of the species.

Unique among the works in the exhibition, Deborah Sigel's *Rotation* derives from an avowed speculation on the properties of a *specific* material—or rather materials, since her sculptures pose questions in the context of a symbiosis of Egyptian paste and steel. The latter provides a physical framework, an armature for a desiccated mass, while the former imparts a visual vitality to the whole in terms of color. In a certain sense the product of this marriage of materials is undeniably objective and, as Sigel asserts, aesthetically formalist. But a key aspect of the material in her work—ironically, its specificity as Egyptian paste rather than clay, an obvious medium rather than an ostensibly primordial, natural and self-evident substance—invokes an implicit ambiguity that is heightened by proximity to the other brooding works of the exhibition. On the one hand, Egyptian paste has acquired—through its use in hobbyist jewelry and the Funk vessels of ceramists such as Howard Kottler—associations with ephemerality and kitsch. On the other, it is historically linked to the triumph over death extolled in the glyphs and self-glazed surfaces of ancient Egyptian ushabtis.

In the end, the nonconformity of Sigel's work—or rather the fact that it must be made to conform if thematic unity is to prevail in the exhibition—is a useful reminder of the constitutive role of context in interpretation. Life capsules, canopic urns, corporeal vesicles, broken tiles, and even the depths of a body of water may together produce a stronger impression of existential speculation than in isolation. The value of a group exhibition is, after all, precisely the occasion it affords to extract ostensibly latent meanings from otherwise unrelated objects. Exploiting this opportunity, and overlooking the irony of forming conclusions about an exhibition that is self-stylized as speculative, I offer the following observation. *Material Speculations* seems ultimately about a bind in which the artists that it unites are caught by the very nature of their speculation. Their object seems an indeterminacy that paradoxically can only be grasped in a material context—that, in other words, can only be incompletely grasped (and therefore not truly grasped at all) because it cannot be known apart from its antithesis in the material. This bind, of course, suggests the tragic condition of human being itself, of consciousness condemned to mere speculation on transcendence, an inescapably material speculation.

End.