

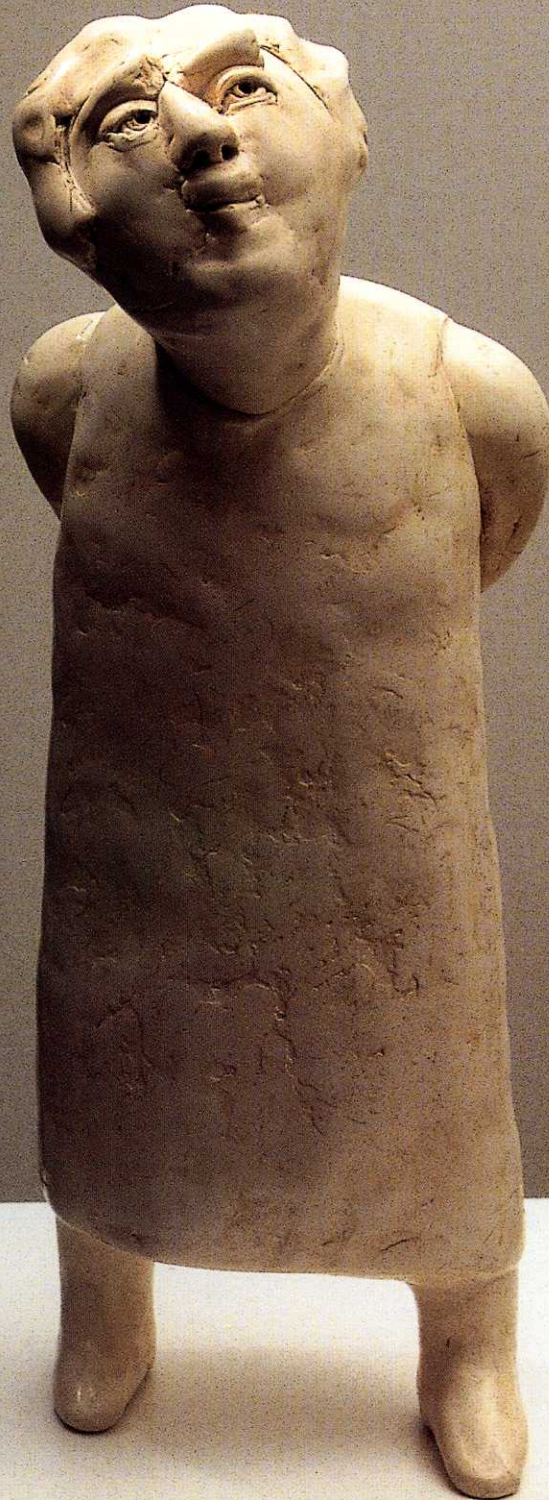
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Megas. 2004. Low-fired white clay, oxides and wood. 97 x 43 x 43 cm.



Mimi. 2003. Low-fired white clay and oxides. 120 x 48 x 41 cm.

Enlightened Clay

The Abstractions of Shida Kuo

Article by Judith S. Schwartz

THERE IS SOMETHING PURE ABOUT SHIDA KUO'S ceramic sculptures. By pure, I do not mean virtuous or innocent, but pure as in intuitive and honest. Kuo's forms are pared to essences. There is no pretension. They are about form – human form with its organic possibilities, and about surface, which he integrates seamlessly.

Perhaps it is Kuo's early painting background (BFA from National Taiwan Normal University) and his Eastern heritage that create this understanding and appreciation of materials and technique. His simple, Zen-like concerns are antithetical to much of the ceramic art of the West – where more often than not, form is articulated with strong imagery, pattern or strident colour. Kuo's message is subtle by comparison, so pared to essentials that the viewer must spend time with the art to fully appreciate and discover what the work is about.

Texture and nuance of colour are literally integrated into the surface of the clay using a laborious process of rubbing oxides and stains for hours into the surface of the work. The result is a soft, elegant, non-decorative appearance. Such subtlety of surface exudes an emotional sensitivity within the walls of the form that goes beyond the narrative and is typically found in the work of Noguchi and Brancusi who, like Kuo, understood truth of material, purity of thought, tranquillity of mind and an enlightened state.

To understand the understated in Kuo's recent body of ceramic sculptures, it might be best to look at Eastern calligraphy, where line to paper is considered 'high art' only when the artist is enlightened. When the ink-laden brush on the page informs the hand, heart and mind of the artist – true spirit is evoked. Tanshu Terayama, in his book *Zen Calligraphy* notes "that art is achieved when the hand is not guided by a conscious effort but when the artist is willing to expose himself. A person shallow in experience or cultivation cannot draw a line that reveals depth. A person lacking vitality will not draw a line that resonates with energy. Even a single straight line can be a mirror of the spirit... it is only then that the line shines with purity."

Kuo's ceramic sculptures resonate with Terayama's concepts as well. One feels that the work is not a product of a conscious effort but rises, instead, out of a state of 'true thought', a state beyond emotion, calculation and expectation. He knows, for example that the porosity of the clay, like that of paper, will absorb colour into the thickness of the surface so that the surface appears to 'breathe.' He knows that what is not said can often be more revealing to the viewer, fully involving them in the interpretive exchange.

His work is primal, mystical and just plain beautiful. While elements of sexual innuendo abound, sexual implication is blended with beauty to attain deeper levels of sensual understanding. There are



Pichu. 2003. Low-fired white clay, glaze, wood.
122 x 33 x 43 cm

mysterious orifices, slits, holes and cavities, which reveal darkness within, yet there is a playfulness and an exuberance in fanciful protuberances that belie brooding or melancholia. In fact, there is a level of mischievousness and secrecy especially when he plays with smaller forms set within larger forms that look suspended in air.

Kuo brings a fresh inventiveness to the art form by often adding the element of wood. Mixing media, particularly wood, is a difficult and complex technique seldom successfully conceived or executed. Coaxing wood to behave in as malleable a manner as clay takes special skill and we are again reminded of his mastery of materials and willingness to spend hours getting it right. But the wood lends a softness and human element to the ceramic edges while also adding content and meaning. The wood is warm, soft, alluring and strategically positioned for maximum effect. We marvel at how well wood and clay blend – again, seamlessly.

Whether sitting boldly on the floor or suspended like a painting, Kuo's forms are precisely controlled, powerful manipulations about the human spirit. He integrates thousands of practiced and cultivated strokes on to layer upon layer of clay coils, controlling shape, controlling form to end with profound philosophical intrinsically-felt sculptures.

Dr Judith S. Schwartz is a writer, critic and Area Head of Sculpture in Craft Media at New York University Department of Art & Art Professions. She is President of the Board of the new Museum of Ceramic Art, which will be based in New York City, and is currently working on her new book *Confrontational Clay: The Artist as Social Critic*. This article is based on a catalogue essay for Shida Kuo's exhibition at the Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York City. Kuo lives and works in New York City, teaching ceramic art at New York University.