

THE CLAY PAINTINGS OF MARYLYN DINTENFASS
FREDERICK TED CASTLE
ART AND PERCEPTION
NO. 8 1992

Abstract art permits us to visit the reality of another person's soul. Many people are disturbed when they see abstract art because it is, for them, too near to the truth. These people would rather have truth mediated by something familiar. The abstract artist is both courageous and foolhardy in undertaking to display his or her innermost being because the exposed soul is at once indecent and literally incomprehensible. One does not get to see parts of the soul; one sees or feels, rather, the whole thing altogether. At the same time it is inappropriate to analyze a painting say, as if it were really the soul of the painter - it is really a painting, not a representation of inner chaos.

The work of Marylyn Dintenfass is surely abstract and clearly personal and most of it is made in clay. It is wall sculpture or assemblage in which numerous elements interact, some being more in the background, some on the surface, some even barely visible like the layers of which meaning are said to be composed. It is work that is undeniably made of clay - usually porcelain or ironstone - yet the only mode of art that it evokes is painting. Dintenfass is a painter who works in clay. It isn't that she is simply making a painting that is more durable and more fragile than it might be on wood or canvas; she is making a painting out of clay and it's unique temperament. The paintings, if you will, or sculpture, if you must, of Marylyn Dintenfass could be thought of as notebooks of the soul but that is too easy an idea to deal with these complicated works. Dintenfass and I talked about her work during the preparation of this article, and quotations from these notes appear in *Italics*.

Why does a painter turn to clay? Because the dialogue with the material is so much more intense than it is with paint. Clay represents reality, not simply for dimensional illusion. Clay is process. Clay offers the challenge and opportunity for expression because of the mutable quality of the surface: when soft, it can be pressed in; when leather hard, it can be incised; when bone dry, scraped; bisqued clay can be sandpapered and when fired it can be drawn on. This ability to respond to an aesthetic desire is endlessly fascinating, rewarding, satisfying. Clay provides mental gymnastics. It combines alchemy and aesthetics. It is necessary to hold and remember: colours as applied have no relation to the fired results, physical dimensions change romantically, and surfaces transform during the working cycle. The process also offers an opportunity to say something different at each stage. The keeps my attention and I have to be constantly aware of what message I want to send at each stage - sometimes a whisper, sometimes a shout, sometimes a story.

All people who work with ceramics are aware of an alchemy that changes what might be called "the protein of the earth" into something that can endure millennia of use or neglect. Much of the research into pre-historical cultures is made possible by the durability of fired clay in a vast array of developed civilizations. Clay is almost metal. It is more tractable, and paradoxically, fire - which

makes metal workable - makes clay almost eternal. Everything we know, even aspirin and automobiles, ultimately arises out of the ground. Ideas are furtive elements, stolen from the matrix, so as to be reformed by human genius into something unforeseen - a poem, a painting, a game of dominoes, a television set, a brick, a tile, a cup. Marylyn Dintenfass is a master of the transformation of ideas into palpable form.

The initial sensuous and responsiveness of clay is endlessly appealing. There is delight in detecting and determining the right approach to a particular problem, like being an explorer charting new earths in virgin territory. Which riverbed should I follow? Where will this canyon take me? How can I take the material, which I know well, to the aesthetic place I want to be? Sometimes material itself provokes aesthetic decisions.

For most of the past ten years, Marylyn Dintenfass has been working on corporate and architectural commissions, as well as on more personal work. The challenge of creating works on a large scale taxed her ability to use clay to the limit, and it is through this trial that she learned about the properties of different clays - how thin they can be rolled, how highly they can be coloured, how they shrink and shatter and shine. She developed a modular sculpture in which repeated clay elements are posed on a wall in a certain configuration, thereby making out of manageable and fire-able parts a work, which looks in correct scale on a big wall. But it is not these public sculptures that I would refer to as her painting in clay.

Scale is a visceral thing. I don't believe small maquettes can be enlarged automatically. The right scale for each piece will cause a physical response in the viewer. There are three basic scale relationships: wrist to fingertip, fingertip to shoulder, and the full size of the human body. Each of these induces an emotional response and the individual units in a large modular work are keyed to this first or primal reaction.

It is useful to use the words visceral and primal in relation to Dintenfass' work one feels that one is being awarded secrets. Her work is about her own life in its myriad of detail but it does not burden the viewer with all this content; the meaning of the work is open to interpretation, which is indeed the genius of all the best abstract art. It is not a representation of the difficulties of life, it is a substitute for such vicissitudes, the changes we anticipate throughout our lives. The paintings in clay by Marylyn Dintenfass give form to express our feeling that everything is acceptable if it can be transformed into something we love; they are encouraging. They evoke this at modest scale with masterful use of pigment, clay and drawing.

Colour plays an important part in my work. I use a palette of colours, whether in my drawings or in my fired work, of the mined pigments - cobalt, copper, iron. I use dry metallic oxides as a watercolour wash, as a dry pigment, as a slip like a tempera, and to colour the clay body itself.

The terminology of ceramics probably inspired other

artists as well, but I know that manifold characteristics of clays, as well as the words associated with ceramic work, form a medium for art that is subtle, evocative, useful and under-utilized. Marylyn Dintenfass is a master artist working in clay. I say she's a painter not only because of her colours but also because of the faultless composition of her works, which resemble nothing but themselves.

Frederick Ted Castle

Fred Ted Castle is a poet and novelist. He has been writing about art since 1966. An installation of Paradigm and Diegma series of Marylyn Dintenfass' works was shown at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York, September 12-October 10, 1991.