

Submitted by Kay Miller, November 2012

**“Vessel 80,” 2007, Cheryl Ann Thomas, American, born 1943,  
#2008.16**



**Gallery Label:**

This remarkable vessel elicits many questions from the viewer. What is it made of? How was it constructed? What has happened to it, and is its slumped form intentional? Cheryl Ann Thomas, a ceramic artist living in Ventura, California, has literally taken the vessel form and turned it on its side, and almost inside out. Her medium is porcelain. She constructs tall vessels by layering tiny rolled coils on top of one another, a process with meditative significance for her. By firing these pots until the point of near or partial collapse, she allows the unpredictable process in the kiln to have a large role in the final appearance of her pieces. This seeming juxtaposition of control and serendipity--a mirror in some ways of our own lives--has produced exquisite results with *Vessel 80*. This thin-walled white porcelain object is beginning to slump forward, slightly breaking down the vessel form and creating an interesting interior architecture. Like Ruth Duckworth's cup and blade in this exhibition, Thomas has pushed the finicky porcelain medium to its limits.

***“My work is an intimate and experiential inquiry into fragility and loss. I construct. I sabotage. I reconcile.”***

**- Cheryl Ann Thomas**

**Questions:**

- 1) Describe this vessel. What material do you think it is made from? Is it balanced or unbalanced? Chaotic or orderly? Does it look strong or fragile? What textures do you see? What rhythms? How do the textures, angles and wrinkles of the vessel affect the appearance of light on the vessel inside and out?

- 2) If you owned this vessel, what would you put in it? What do you think it could hold?
- 3) *“Vessel 80”* is a contemporary work. What does its appearance suggest to you about the era in which it was made? Could it have been made in any part of the world, at any time? What is it you see that makes you say that? What does it tell you about the artist who made it?
- 4) The artist Cheryl Ann Thomas has named her latest works “relics” and “artifacts.” This refers both to their broken nature and her use of an ancient, trans-continental hand-coiling pottery technique. Compare Thomas’s 2007 vessel with the hand-coiled Neolithic Chinese funerary jar [below], which is more than 4,000 years old. Both Thomas and the Neolithic potter fashioned their vessels without a potter’s wheel by coiling rolls of clay into the desired shape. But ancient potters then smoothed, burnished, painted and fired their pots at a temperature around 1,000 degrees. What differences do you see – in the vessels’ shapes, surface textures, designs and how they would be used?



*“Funerary Storage Jar,”* Yang Shao Culture, 2300 BCE, #89.49

**The object, “Vessel 80”:**

- Coil-built vessel. Made from long, spaghetti-thin strands of porcelain, piled coil onto coil into a very thin-walled, basket-like vessel. No potter’s wheel was used. The artist, Cheryl Ann Thomas, left her fingerprints in the ridges, so that viewers could see her process.
- White, thin-walled with some small spaces between coils. Conical shape, flaring outward from flat base. Wrinkled near bottom. Leans precariously to one side.
- Thomas adapted an ancient, trans-continental coil-building technique developed more than 4,000 years ago in Neolithic times, but still used by contemporary potters. Unlike potters who smooth, burnish, paint and fire their pots to produce seamless, water-tight vessels, Thomas engineered a structure that was designed to fail in the kiln.

- Thomas fired the vessel in a kiln at 2,280 degrees Fahrenheit, knowing it would collapse in uneven, unpredictable ways. Walls of the porcelain were too thin to hold the vessel's shape. It slumped on one side, undone by the strain of heat and the pressure exerted by the weight of the unfired clay walls. The top layer separated, shredding slightly and opening gaps.
- No effort was made to control what would happen to the vessel once it was in the kiln. Thomas delights in the surprises that this process produces. No two objects turn out the same. The unpredictability keeps Thomas moving to take the next experimental step.
  - *“I’m not interested in just making a beautiful object. I’m interested in illustrating a tragedy. I wanted the accident to be part of the content of the work rather than how I thought that form should go.”*
- The resulting surface is lightly textured. It looks like a cocoon, wasp’s nest or a gauzy cowl scarf dropped in place. Frayed upper layers create rhythmical swirls and leave gaps, giving the vessel an unexpected lightness. Its curves are organic, yet rigid in its kiln-hardened form. It is sensual, but unyielding. The vessel’s tilt lets us see inside and, with its wrinkled exterior, creates a play of light and shadow.
- Paradoxically, the hardened porcelain ends up looking vulnerable and frail, when it is actually the unfired clay – with its upright, intact walls - that were fragile. The finished work looks vulnerable, but is actually quite strong. Meticulous order and arbitrary chaos are both at work.
- This piece was made in 2007, two years after Thomas was diagnosed with breast cancer. Like her other sculptures, it is embedded with the unpredictable, the unexpected and unforeseeable in human life.
  - *“Fragility interests me, not because it’s beautiful or delicate, but because it’s tragic and has the potential for an accident, for loss.”*
- The sculpture is ambiguous, mysterious. Some critics have suggested the crushed shapes of Thomas’s work are a metaphor for the pressures felt in life, for the precariousness and transience of life. She insists that she does not deliberately create metaphors or express her feelings through her art. She numbers her works in the order they are produced.

## Porcelain:

**Porcelain** is a ceramic material made by heating raw materials – kaolin clay and feldspathic rock – in a kiln at high temperatures (between 2,192 °F and 2,552 °F). The kaolin holds the object together, while the feldspathic rock fuses, or vitrifies, becoming glasslike and smooth. Its texture and pure white color have been prized throughout the world. Porcelain also has low permeability and elasticity, resonance, and a high resistance to chemical attack and thermal shock. It is used to make household wares, decorative items, building tile and objects of fine art.

Its name comes from old Italian *porcellana* [cowrie shell] because of its resemblance to the translucent surface of the shell. Porcelain can informally be referred to as "**china**" or "**fine china**" in some English-speaking countries, as China was the birthplace of porcelain making.

## The Artist, Cheryl Ann Thomas:

- Born in 1943. Lives and works in Ventura, Ca.
- 1978-1982 – BFA from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, Ca.
  - Studied to be a painter. Inspired by two artists: Eva Hesse, who made non-traditional organic sculptures, and Agnes martin, a minimalist expressionist
  - Didn't continue studio practice, feeling it was "too late to begin." Began teaching elementary school in inner city Los Angeles in 1984 and taught for 13 years.
  - Took a beginning ceramics class, where she was introduced to the work of Peter Voukos, who experimented with the sculptural side of vessels, pushing ceramics beyond their functional roots. She was especially impressed with Ken Price's early work. Their work gave Thomas permission to play with the medium.
    - *"My drawings after art school were alluding to death and chance. My mother-in-law was dying of cancer at the time and I was asking questions about faith and accident. I have never been interested in pottery but liked the transformative possibilities of clay."*
  - Bought a kiln to explore her own interest, never expecting to have the opportunity to exhibit her work. Started as a member of the Studio Channel Islands art collective.
    - *"Being in an art collective gave me the opportunity to use a large high-fire kiln, but put me in a competitive setting that interfered with a free and personal exploration."*
    - *"My first clay works were slab construction. My first porcelain works were Relics or open columns."*

***“I don’t see porcelain as a difficult medium because I am not trying to control it. It separates, collapses and tears. It has a memory and a mind of its own.”***

- Has since moved to a new industrial studio in Ventura. Her kiln’s interior is 36” tall x 26” wide x 26” deep.
- Thomas can coil about one inch an hour.
  - ***“The daily, quiet, repetitive physical act of coiling is essential to my understanding.”***
  - ***“I work in silence for most of the day but may listen to music or chat with my studio partner in the afternoon. I don’t try to clear my mind, but the repetitive process is relaxing. I think about everything from theory to grocery lists.”***
- Makes coil-built vessels employing one of the most traditional methods of pottery production, used by pre-Columbian, Native American and West African peoples to hand build large storage jars. Traditionally, potters smooth the coils into solid, even walls. But Thomas leaves the twists of clay exposed and imprinted with her fingers and hands. These marks are permanent records of her work with the material. The vessels she constructs have very thin walls. Once she fires them, the weight of the clay causes the works to collapse and fold in on themselves.
  - ***“I am very aware of the history of coiling and porcelain but am glad I did not have this baggage when I began exploring the material.”***

***“I think it is difficult to approach clay in a fresh and untutored way when the artist knows too much. I also think it is a detriment to the viewer in truly seeing the work. Artists who work with resin or industrial materials do not have the weight of history to contend with.”***
- Uses a natural palette of warm black, gray and white clays.
  - ***“I chose black, white and gray so that the works would not lend themselves to interpretation, not because they reference death. I am also breaking this rule and color is creeping into my new work.”***
- By allowing her fingerprints and hand marks to show, Thomas deliberately reveals the process by which her works are made.

- *“I decided to make process my subject. I chose coiling tiny coils in a column, trying to go as thin, as wide, and as tall as my kiln allowed. I did not have any pre-conceived idea about what the outcome would be. The collapse was a surprise. The works occasionally fall during coiling or come apart during firing and get trashed.*

*“I think I am showing the entire process. It could easily be traced from start to finish by observation. Honesty and transparency are important to me.”*

- Breaks with the tradition of delicate porcelain bowls and containers with smooth surfaces, shiny white glaze and lacy filigree. Thomas’s works fit in the new definition of porcelain. The five elements are clearly at work in her sculptures – born of fire and earthy hues; light, airy textures mimic natural forms; flowing, watery; and textures that play with light and shadow.
  - Her sculptures do not function as traditional vessels, but explore the edges of what hand-wrought clay can achieve, reaching stunningly delicate balances. As her art has matured, she has relied increasingly on chance for fascinating outcomes.
    - *“My sculptures are created by a marriage of design and accident.”*
  - In her newer works [pictured below], Thomas combines several sculptures of light and dark colors, allowing them to collapse together in surprising, multi-colored configurations. She calls these “opportunities for transformation.”
  - Numbers her works chronologically. Gives her sculptures names that sound religious, or archeological: “Six Relics” and “Artifact4.” The images are ambiguous. Her newer works look like a shroud or caricatures of death, an empty black hood with a bony hand holding a scythe.
    - *“I like the names “relic” and “artifact” because they have religious connotations but the works reference chance rather than design. I see this as another way to allude to loss, in this case a loss of faith.”*
- Late bloomer: Emerged in last 13 years as a ceramic sculptor of note.
  - Her works have been featured in recent international shows in Paris and Japan; and in the 2009 World Contemporary Ceramic Exhibition and World Ceramic Biennale in Icheon, Korea.

- Thomas has exhibited in solo shows throughout California, and in New York and New Mexico. Her ceramics are included in the collections of the American Museum of Ceramic Art, Fuller Craft Museum, Long Beach Museum of Art, Gardiner Museum in Toronto and the MIA.
- Included in Northern Clay Center's "Repetitive Nature" exhibit Sept. 22-Nov. 4, 2012, in Minneapolis. Her newer works are striking and larger than you expect.
- Thomas's work is often noted for its allusions to the transience and delicacy of existence. Collapsed and wrenched out of shape, her vessels ultimately show strength and durability.
- Her childhood experience with the death of her father and her adult battle with breast cancer is embedded in her sculptures in the unpredictable, the unexpected, the unforeseeable in human life, the occurrence of disease and loss.
  - *"I agree that our experiences and temperament determine the work we produce. I chose process because I was trained to regard sentiment and introspection as weakness. However, intuition is playing a larger part in the work all the time. Although I am glad I did not start with allegory, I know that accident and adaptation were the formative aspects of my life.*

*"My father was killed in action when I was one year old. My mother was emotionally unstable. Amazing how the subconscious finds its way to the surface when art making.*

*"Although several articles refer to my cancer, this period of chemo and radiation was one of the most exciting periods of my life. It was during this time that Frank Lloyd offered me a solo exhibit. All my energy went into preparing for this show. I went to my first exhibit bald and elated."*

- Thomas isn't trying to create a metaphor for her feelings or particular ideas:
  - *"I heard a woman speak at UCLA once. She was a Buddhist priest. It was during the time when the war had begun in Iraq and there were people there who were very disturbed about that. One woman asked, 'How can I give an expression to what I feel about this? How can I create a metaphor?' She said, 'There is no such thing as metaphor. There is only direct experience.'*

*“That’s the one thing I took from that lecture that I really liked. I want the art work that I do to be direct. I don’t want it to be standing for something else.”*

- Recently, Thomas has begun to experiment with lost-wax bronze and stainless steel in abstract forms. These sculptures retain the appearance and texture of coils, but not the collapsed effects. Instead, thin strands swirl upward. But often these structures seem battered by the destructive forces of nature, a hurricane or tornado.
  - *“Clay behaves in a certain way. When I work in wax and make the bronze pieces, the wax behaves a different way. I like the material to be itself.”*
  - *“I don’t see myself as a ‘ceramic’ sculptor but simply as an artist. I am not enthralled with ceramics as a medium and usually visit other parts of a museum. Warm wax coils give me the same opportunity to coil a soft material and let it collapse. It also hardens into a hard object. I enjoy seeing how different materials react.”*



This portrait, taken in 2005 in Thomas’s former studio in the Studio Channel Islands Art Center in Camarillo, captured her just weeks after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She asked photographer Donna Granata to include the black crow on the right as a symbol of her mortality, but also of her determination to recover. Today, Thomas is cancer-free.





*“Relic 52,”* 2006, porcelain



*“Five Relics,”* 2009, colored porcelain



*“Coupled – Relics 242 & 243,”* 2010, porcelain



*"Artifact 3,"* 2009, bronze



*"Artifact 5,"* 2010, stainless steel

**Sources:**

*"Fragility and Loss,"* Elaine Levin, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No. 85, 2011.

*"Cheryl Ann Thomas, Artist,"* Youtube video, Frank Lloyd Gallery exhibition:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUAtR8jB\\_p4&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUAtR8jB_p4&feature=relmfu)

*"Cheryl Ann Thomas: New Work,"* Artweek LA, *Sun, Jan 16, 2011.*

*"Cheryl Ann Thomas, New Work,"* Michelle Plochere, *Origin Stories*, January 23, 2011:  
<http://www.timesquotidian.com/2011/01/23/origin-stories/>

*"Caught in the Act,"* American Style Magazine, February 2010:  
<http://www.americanstyle.com/2010/02/caught-in-the-act/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porcelain>

---

---

**Email from Cheryl Ann Thomas to Kay Miller, Oct. 31, 2012, in answer to email questions:**

Dear Kay,

You really have done your homework! Thanks for being so thoughtful in presenting my work. I did have a chance to see the exhibit when I was at Northern Clay last month and was so pleased to be next to Ruth Duckworth's beautiful wall relief.

I will try to answer your questions in order:

I am very aware of the history of coiling and porcelain but am glad I did not have this baggage when I began exploring the material. I think it is difficult to approach clay in a fresh and untutored way when the artist knows too much. I also think it is a detriment to the viewer in truly SEEING the work. Artists who work with resin or industrial materials do not have the weight of history to contend with.

Jennifer Kolmar Olivarez purchased vessel 80 at Frank Lloyd Gallery in Santa Monica, CA. The work happened to be in the gallery that day because a client returned the work claiming it was "too wobbly". How fortunate.

Vessel 80 was fired at 2280 degrees Fahrenheit. The works are numbered chronologically.

I like the names "relic" and "artifact" because they have religious connotations but the works reference chance rather than design. I see this as another way to allude to loss, in this case a loss of faith.

I attended art school from 1978- 1982. I began teaching elementary school in inner city Los Angeles in 1984 and taught for 13 years. I did not continue a studio practice and felt it was too late to begin. I took a beginning ceramics class and was introduced to the work of Peter Voulkos and was especially impressed with Ken Price's early work. I decided to buy a kiln and work for my own interest, never expecting to have the opportunity to exhibit the work.

My drawings after art school were alluding to death and chance. My mother in law was dying of cancer at the time and I was asking questions about faith and accident. I have never been interested in pottery but liked the transformative possibilities of clay.

Being in an art collective gave me the opportunity to use a large high fire kiln but put me in a competitive setting that interfered with a free and personal exploration.

My first clay works were slab construction. My first porcelain works were Relics or open columns.

I don't see porcelain as a difficult medium because I am not trying to control it. It separates, collapses and tears. It has a memory and a mind of it's own.

I can coil about one inch per hour.

I work in silence for most of the day but may listen to music or chat with my studio partner in the afternoon. I don't try to clear my mind but the repetitive process is relaxing. I think about everything from theory to grocery lists.

I decided to make process my subject. I chose coiling tiny coils in a column, trying to go as thin, as wide, and as tall as my kiln allowed. I did not have any pre-conceived idea about what the outcome would be. The collapse was a surprise.

The works occasionally fall during coiling or come apart during firing and get trashed. My kiln interior is 36" tall x 26" wide x 26" deep.

I think I am showing the entire process. It could easily be traced from start to finish by observation. Honesty and transparency are important to me.

I agree that our experiences and temperament determine the work we produce. I chose process because I was trained to regard sentiment and introspection as weakness. However, intuition is playing a larger part in the work all the time. Although I am glad I did not start with allegory, I know that accident and adaptation were the formative aspects of my life. My father was killed in action when I was one year old. My mother was emotionally unstable. Amazing how the subconscious finds its way to the surface when art making.

Although several articles refer to my cancer, this period of chemo and radiation was one of the most exciting periods of my life. It was during this time that Frank Lloyd offered me a solo exhibit. All my energy went into preparing for this show. I went to my first exhibit bald and elated.

I don't see myself as a "ceramic" sculptor but simply as an artist. I am not enthralled with ceramics as a medium and usually visit other parts of a museum. Warm wax coils give me the same opportunity to coil a soft material and let it collapse. It also hardens into a hard object. I enjoy seeing how different materials react.

I chose black, white and gray so that the works would not lend themselves to interpretation, not because they reference death. I am also breaking this rule and color is creeping into my new work.

I was born in 1943, not 1944.

Donna Granata added the phrase "determination to recover." I think she thought I was too macabre in my attitude but again I have learned to adapt to the unforeseen.

I have attached images of my new exploration of color and a new bronze work: ***"Artifact 7," 2012, bronze silver nitrate patina.***



*Artifact 7*  
20.5 x 16.5 x 9"

bronze, silver nitrate patina  
2012

---