



## Catherine Merrill's Dance of Opposites

*Article by Laura Cera*

**L**IFE IS A DANCE BETWEEN OPPOSITES – A DYNAMIC balance of complementary forces. In the belief systems of many cultures, the universe is conceived of as a balance between forces. Distinct components are necessary to form an organic whole and cannot meaningfully exist in isolation – darkness needs light, life needs death. Working with polarities and contradictions provides a source of creative inspiration for sculptor Catherine Merrill. The dominant themes of her work parallel the major dualities in human endeavour, creation/destruction, growth/decay, nature/architecture, the ancient/the modern. Merrill's figurative work takes three forms: life-size sculpted torsos, sketches, and drawings on clay.





*Dancer. 1997. Raku wall piece. 38 x 30.5 x 5 cm.*

*Light & Shadow in Arcadia* is a walk through a double colonnade of eight life-size terra cotta male and female torsos. It is the artist's chronicle of the mythical journey of the self, through loss and sorrow to hope and new growth. Merrill's figures are sculpted from live models making them true to nature. The artist then adds another dimension in surface treatment to symbolise the inner spirit. In the pieces symbolising nascence she places stencilled foliage and draperies blowing in the wind. Fall and winter torsos are composed of fragmented sections with textures of different patterns of wire mesh representing armour. Textures of nails and screws embedded in the bodies symbolise the ability to build anew, or inflict pain. The leaves on the senescent pieces are scarce and falling amid carvings of snakes and lizards. Geometric patterns, textures, seams, carved and altered edges act as metaphors for emotion. The pieces express opposing spiritual forces – the delicate balance that generates the vital energy of life.

The torsos are created by carving a solid block of clay while working from viewing a live model. The artist takes a two-part plaster mould of the solid sculpture from which she builds a series of clay slab figures. She moves into the interior space of the piece by cutting away the clay, exposing the inner and outer walls simultaneously. She uses multiple firings, layering



*Abandon. 1997. Slab wall piece. 51 x 48 x 5 cm.*

terra sigillatas, glazes, underglaze pencils, lustres, sandblasting, unfired paints and patinas. The smoky saggar-fired pieces resemble antiquities found buried in the earth, weathered through time.

Clay wall pieces and rapidly executed charcoal and pastel drawings create a further perspective of the figure. Merrill gives the slab drawings the same freshness and immediacy as her sketches on paper. She draws into the clay surface: the lines have thick to thin, light to deep variations. Emotion is generated from these variations, whether full of sensuality and joy, or something darker, more complex. The slab itself is part of the piece. Its shaped edges are curled and torn, made thicker or pinched thin. The figures are given dimension by stroking the slab from the back, stretching the lines on the surface. This technique gives the piece the sensual quality of skin.

The predominance of the figure in Merrill's work is influenced by her many years as a dancer. She sees the body as an artistic instrument to express ideas and emotion. The artist enjoys working with models who are dancers because they are inventive, unselfconscious and have beautiful bodies. She sketches them as they move naturally. Looking for models is like casting a play or choreographing a dance piece. When working toward a show she often collaborates with a model to build a body of work.

Merrill's work in both dance and clay began in New York City in 1968. "I saw all these feminine qualities in my early thrown forms, so I started stacking pots together and making primitive sculptures. They were mythical, crude and personal, connecting





*Dancer at Rest*. 1997. Raku slab, 40.5 x 30.5 x 5 cm.

directly to my feelings and ideas. I was spending so much money on firing fees that I opened up a storefront studio with a friend in the East Village. Our studio area was in the rear and we displayed our work in the front window. The store was totally impractical but the experience was wonderful."

Later, living on the Big Island of Hawaii, Merrill moved into functional pottery working as a studio potter to support her family. She used airbrushed pastel colours with stencils of foliage on a line of tableware including goblets, plates, bowls and casserole dishes. "I was successful in shops and galleries but dissatisfied with the work. One day when I was going through a scrapbook with a friend, I saw pictures of my earlier pieces from the East Village and I realised that, crude as they were, they had more presence, power and meaning. I realised I had advanced technically, but backward artistically. I had lost the impetus for doing the work in the first place."

In 1988 Merrill made the difficult decision to leave Hawaii and return to college. "School is a one-time opportunity to make a major change in the work without considering the marketplace. I went to the Kansas City Art Institute to restore my enthusiasm for technical growth, new connections and help with my career." The move reflected a major change in her life. "When I lived in paradise I felt I was supposed to be happy all the time. I tried to convey the *aloha* spirit of love for one another and reverence for nature. I believed that my work was supposed to be a register of the beauty that surrounded me in the islands."



*Primavera*. 1996. Raku wall piece, 38 x 28 x 5 cm.

Being in Kansas City gave her the freedom to begin acknowledging sorrow in her art. Her ideas began to evolve from the process rather than the work being an illustration of an idea. She started creating figurative sculpture that had feeling and content and the collective pieces emerged as archetypal psychodramas. With the teaching and mentoring of KCAI professors, George Timock and Ken Ferguson, Merrill had made the transition from pottery to sculpture.

Merrill's most recent work is a life-size portrait bust of her 27 year-old daughter, Ariane. The bust titled *Yesterday, Today And Tomorrow* captures the girl Ariane used to be, and the woman she is now. It was a powerful collaborative experience which strengthened their relationship. "By capturing exactly the gesture, the physical features of the model, I try to portray the inner essence, the feelings of the person." Today Merrill is an artist and teacher. She shares a home and studio in San Francisco with ceramic artist, Donn Buchfinck, and their two cats. She is a member of Pacific Rim Sculptors Group, Association of Clay and Glass Artists of California, California Contemporary Crafts Association and the Studio Potter Network.

Laura Cera is a ceramic artist and writer. Caption title page: *Arcadia*, 1996. Two in the series, Ternacotta. Detail. Photography by Jaques Cressaty.