



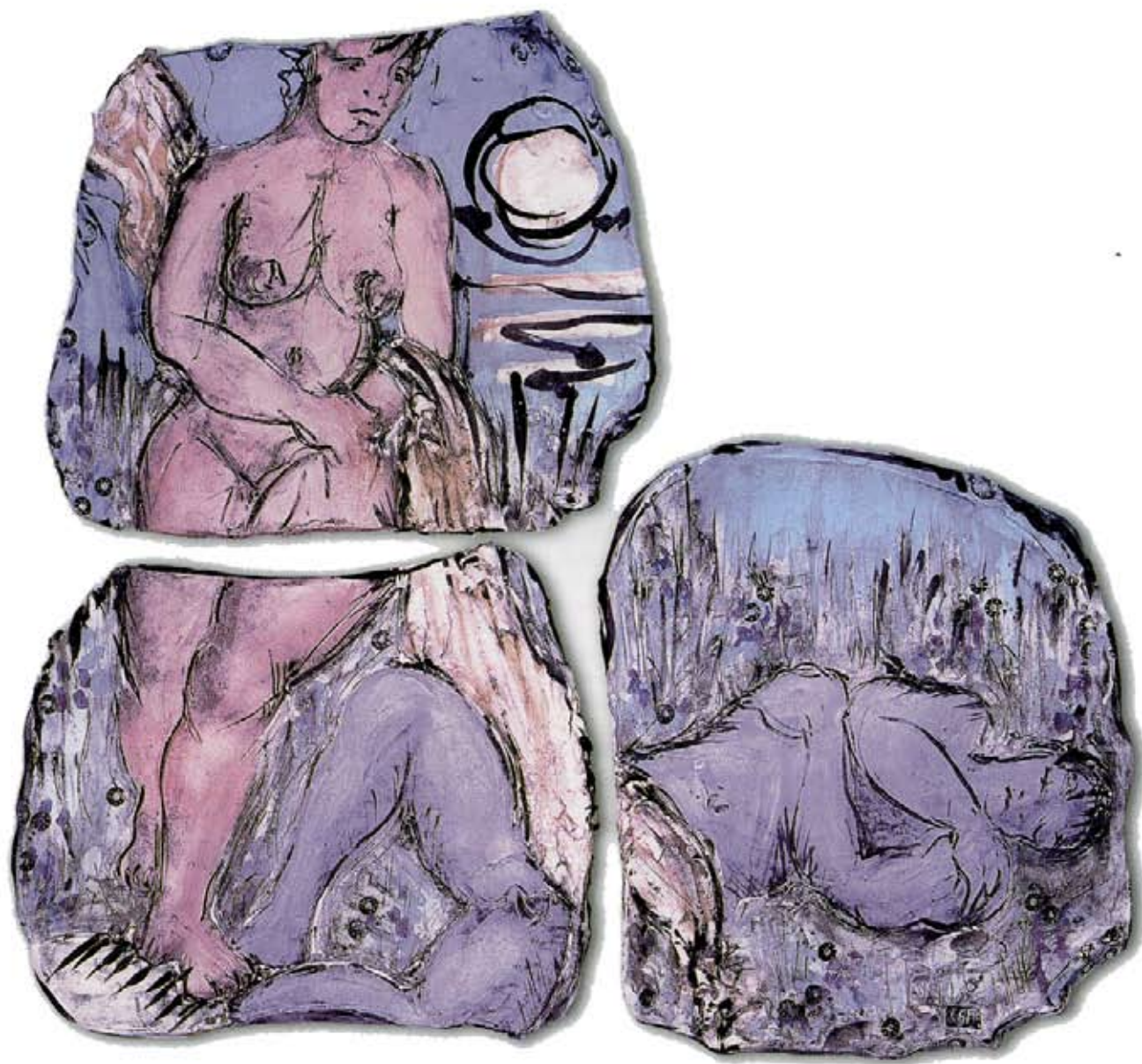
# NEW CERAMICS



# CATHERINE MERRILL

LANDSCAPE OF THE  
HUMAN HEART

*Catherine Merrill  
and Laura Cera*



*Photo - Jacques Gersaty*



The two landscapes that recur most often in my work are landscapes of the human heart: the desert and the oasis. Each symbolizes a stage in our life's journey. The oasis is where everything is wonderful. We are in a tropical paradise with our beloved and our perfect families, happy and fulfilled. These pieces express a powerful sense of nostalgia familiar to all: yearning for the Garden of Eden, Arcadia, the Golden Age, the perfect childhood that never really existed, the beginning of the affair. Yet too soon, once again, we find ourselves crossing the desert. Unlike the oasis which is all too brief, the desert goes on forever. Alone we trudge through a hostile world where even the sun can kill us, in a state of survival, afraid of becoming lost, struggling against endless obstacles.

I have created my own visual language to express a personal mythology. Thus the individual story becomes that of "Everyman" through the universal language of art. My characters live in a mythic, alternate world and are therefore painted in non realistic colors: purple, blue, yellow and orange. They are always nude because they celebrate the beauty of the human figure. Sometimes, mysteriously, the pieces turn out to be prophetic and describe in symbols and allegory events that have not yet taken place. Over the years I have drawn upon the imagery of different mythological traditions to convey inner truth: The Tree of Life in the Ancient Kaballah to explore the cycle of courtship, marriage, conception and birth; a series of heroic classical torsos on columns, recalling the golden age of Greek Arcadia, to express contemporary issues of duality; the medieval Green Man who represents the animating spirit that lives in nature and our oneness with the earth.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

left page - "Oasis" - triptych - stoneware wall piece with colored terra sigillata, H 46" - W 42"

below -  
"Night & Day A+B" - Crossing the Desert series, terracotta with colored terra sigillata, glaze and gold luster - H 12" - D 4" cm



Fotos - Leslie Bezer





**ILLUSTRATIONS**

left - "Axis Mundi A + B" - Crossing the Desert series, terracotta with colored terra sigillata, glaze and gold luster - H 28" - D 12"

I believe that the universe is a balance of opposites: to see light there must be darkness, destruction is necessary for creation. However, in these troubled times of global conflict we are living in a world out of balance, where fear-based destructive energies are in the ascendant. The resulting loneliness and isolation lead to illness, both physical and emotional. In response to recent losses, betrayals and tragedies, collective and personal, great and small, making art for me has been an affirmation of the healing power of the creative process and of love in all its forms. This creative energy and love is passed from the spirit of the maker through their hand to the handmade object and is received by all those who use, contemplate and enjoy what is created by our hands.

The vital importance of the hand in the age of technology has been scientifically proven in the groundbreaking work of Dr. Frank R. Wilson in his book "The Hand: How the use of the hand shapes the brain, language and human culture".<sup>1)</sup> Through studies of human history and prehistory, Dr. Wilson determined that the desired physical task and the structure of the hand necessary to execute that action, both predate and create the structure of the human brain rather than vice versa. He concludes by expressing his grave concern about the effects of technology on the thought patterns of today's children and thereby the human brain of the future, as so often the simple repetitive motion of working at a computer replaces the complex motor activity of traditional writing and drawing.

In an earlier book, "The Thinking Body: A Study of the Balancing Forces of Dynamic Man", Mabel Elsworth Todd applies this innovative thinking to "the whole body, enlivened as it is by muscular memory, (which) becomes a sensitive instrument responding with a wisdom far outrunning that of man's reasoning or conscious control".<sup>2)</sup> Through a lifetime of teaching physiology, physics and anatomy, Ms. Todd concludes, "Our bodies have a history outrunning by hundreds of millions of years that of the human mind".<sup>3)</sup> She also explains how the development of each individual follows our evolution as a species, as the newborn instinctively performs the activities necessary for life before he begins to consciously think about them. In people as in the hand-crafted object form follows function.

The prominence of the human figure in my work results from the many years when I was a dancer and choreographer and the body was the artistic instrument to express emotion and ideas. Raised in an intellectual environment, I was uninterested in sports or exercise until, at the age of 21, I suddenly realized that I didn't really inhabit my body, actively using only my head and hands. Seeking wholeness and integration, I began studying modern dance in New York City with the great Alvin Nicolais and Murray Lewis. At the end of our daily technique class we would be given a traveling movement crossing the floor. Next the teacher would superimpose an arm pattern, then a head roll, then instruct us to make the whole movement turn in space. The complexity would grow to the point where it was impossible to think the combination through and I learned that I



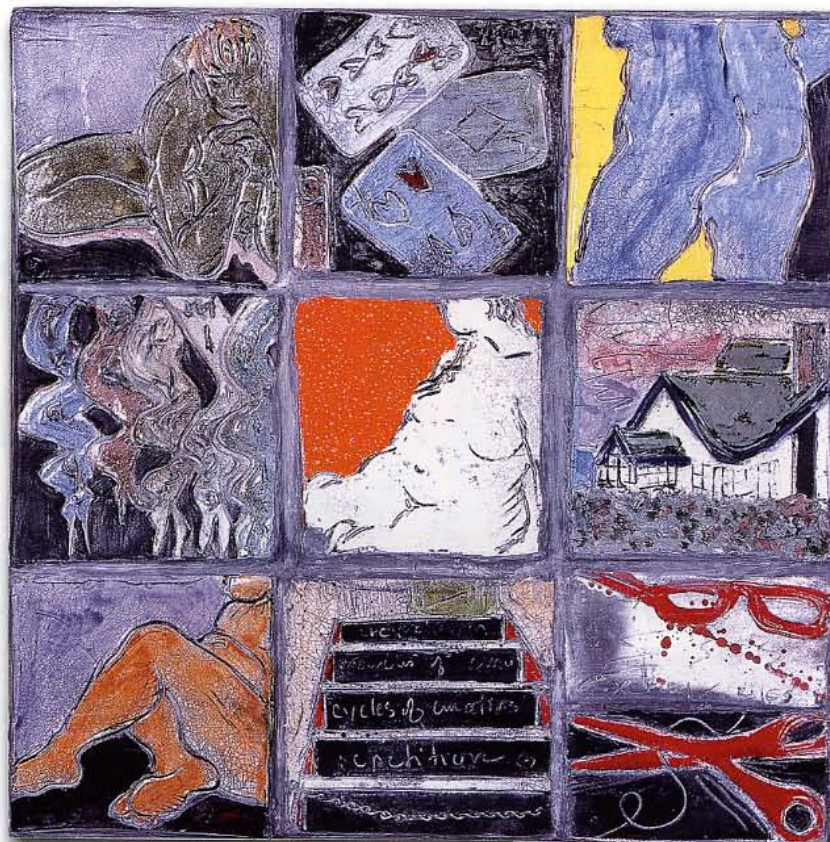
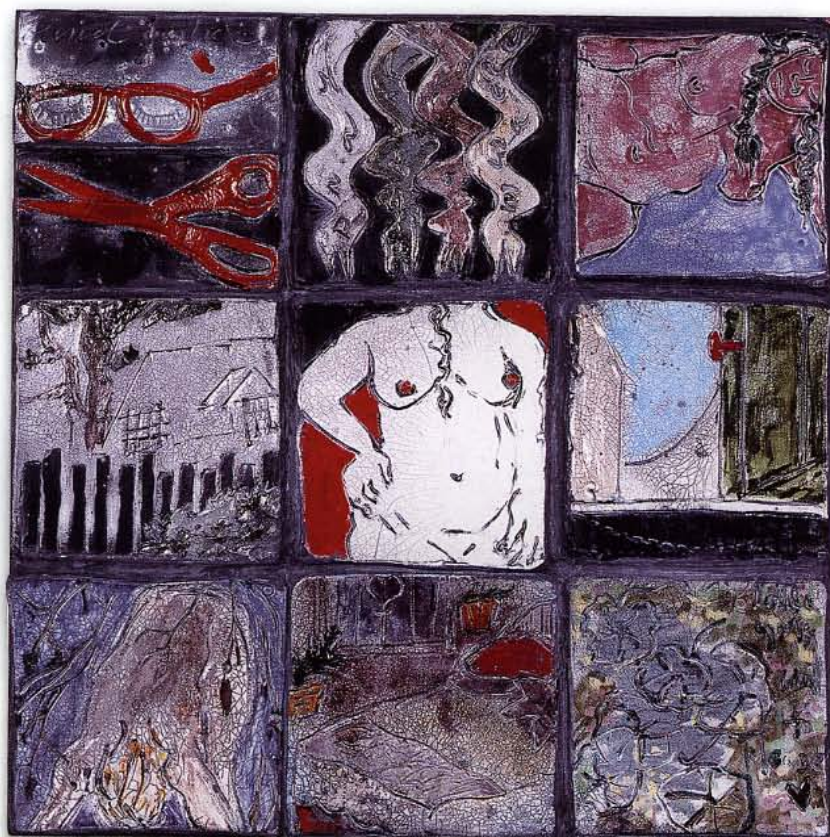
top - "Journal" - raku-fired tile wall piece - 24" x 24"  
 below - "Prayer Flags" - raku-fired tile wall piece - 24" x 24"

had to just let go and trust my body to do the right thing. This was when I first discovered the wisdom of the body.

In all my work I am committed to working from life. The artist's model, each one unique in body and spirit, is my inspiration, my muse. I look for models who have a natural feeling for movement and with whom I can develop a rapport. We come together in a spirit of celebration and collaborative improvisation, against a background of music of many lands, entering into liminal space: where time is infinitely slow yet moves so quickly, the rest of the universe ceases to exist and we are completely present in the moment. I begin every model session with quick gesture drawings in colored pastels on paper to get creativity flowing. In all my work I prefer to work quickly and intuitively, trying to bypass the analytical and often critical thinking of the mind, hoping to catch something eternal in the fleeting moment. Through dynamic line and color I wish to express the many parallels between clay and dance: sensuousness, physicality, the ritual of daily discipline, repetition, rhythm and flow. I give the models minimal direction so that the poses will be spontaneous, natural and convey a sense of life.

Currently I am working on series of figures drawn in colored clay on tiles, platters and large classical vase forms. I apply the colored clay to the leather hard surface with my fingers in a visceral way and like the way the marks record the gesture of the hand of the maker. I always work in color, a rich, saturated tropical palette which evokes happy memories from travels to Cuba and the fourteen years I lived on the big island of Hawaii. Blues: sky blue, deep indigo and brilliant delphinium, greens: copper and chrome and bronze, a luminous pale apple green and deep turquoise, rutile the color of a lion's mane, iron, deep crimson, black, white and my favorite, a sunshine yellow that makes all the other colors pop and illuminates each piece like rays of sunlight.

When I am working with a model I respond to her poses and the mood. Later, alone in the studio, I add other images. A landscape or sense of place emerges, and the story begins to tell itself. As in primitive cultures, where people made art to help them understand life, death and the events of their lives, in recent years my work has become increasingly narrative, telling stories using imagery, form, line and color. Pacing a series of challenges and personal losses during 1999 and 2000, I found myself crossing a seemingly endless desert. A major creative breakthrough occurred in the spring of 2000 during a residency at the Mendocino Art Center, a picturesque artist community in Northern California, in a breathtakingly beautiful location on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Desperately seeking a remedy against the overwhelming fear of losing my home, I began a series of tiles like pages in a diary, juxtaposing the figures with symbolic elements as an act of prayer or magic. The tiles were raku fired,



Photos - Teena Albert





then combined in a square grouping of nine into a non-sequential story, like a storyboard that can be read in any order. A significant compensation for these difficulties was that my work became stronger and more expressive, connected to my life, feelings and ideas as never before.

Artists have a deep need for community to balance the many solitary hours in the studio. The greater community needs its artists. More important than any medical factor, human beings' very biology demands love and connection. I have found connection through becoming deeply involved in inter-cultural exchange with an exceptional group of Cuban ceramic artists over the past several years. An invitation in 2001 to an annual international ceramics symposium in Santiago de Cuba became that chance turning at the fork of the road that has irrevocably changed my work, my career path, my life. The experience of creative collaboration with artists from another culture and of being welcomed into their community has been transformative, magical. In the process of interchange, giving and receiving go both ways and I always return to my own country inspired, full of new ideas and new energy, ready to enter the studio once again.

The role of the artist and of art is no longer mere entertainment or decoration, but an essential force for change. Giving back is the beginning of healing. Those who resist greed, fear and anger and remain compassionate, continue to create and act upon their beliefs become strong. This is the next wave.

- 1) Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999
- 2) Mabel Elsworth Tadd, *The Thinking Body*. New York: Dance Horizons, 1972, p3
- 3) *ibid.*, p.4

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

- top - "The Green Man" - stoneware with colored clay, glazes and gold luster  
 H 28" - W 18" - D 12"
- below - "Yes and No" - pastel drawing on colored paper - 12" x 12"
- below right - Catherine Merrill in her studio



**Catherine Merrill** received her BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute. Her work has been shown in over 150 national and international exhibitions. She has been published in "Ceramics Art & Perception", the "Studio Potter", "The NCECA Journal," "Neue Keramik" and "Contemporary American Pottery." Merrill presents figurative sculpture workshops at colleges and art centers around the world. Catherine is actively involved in Cuban American Cultural Exchange. [ceramicsca@aol.com](mailto:ceramicsca@aol.com)

