

CLAY TIMES

Vol. 12 No. 5
September/October 2006

Sandy Culp's Trompe L'oeil

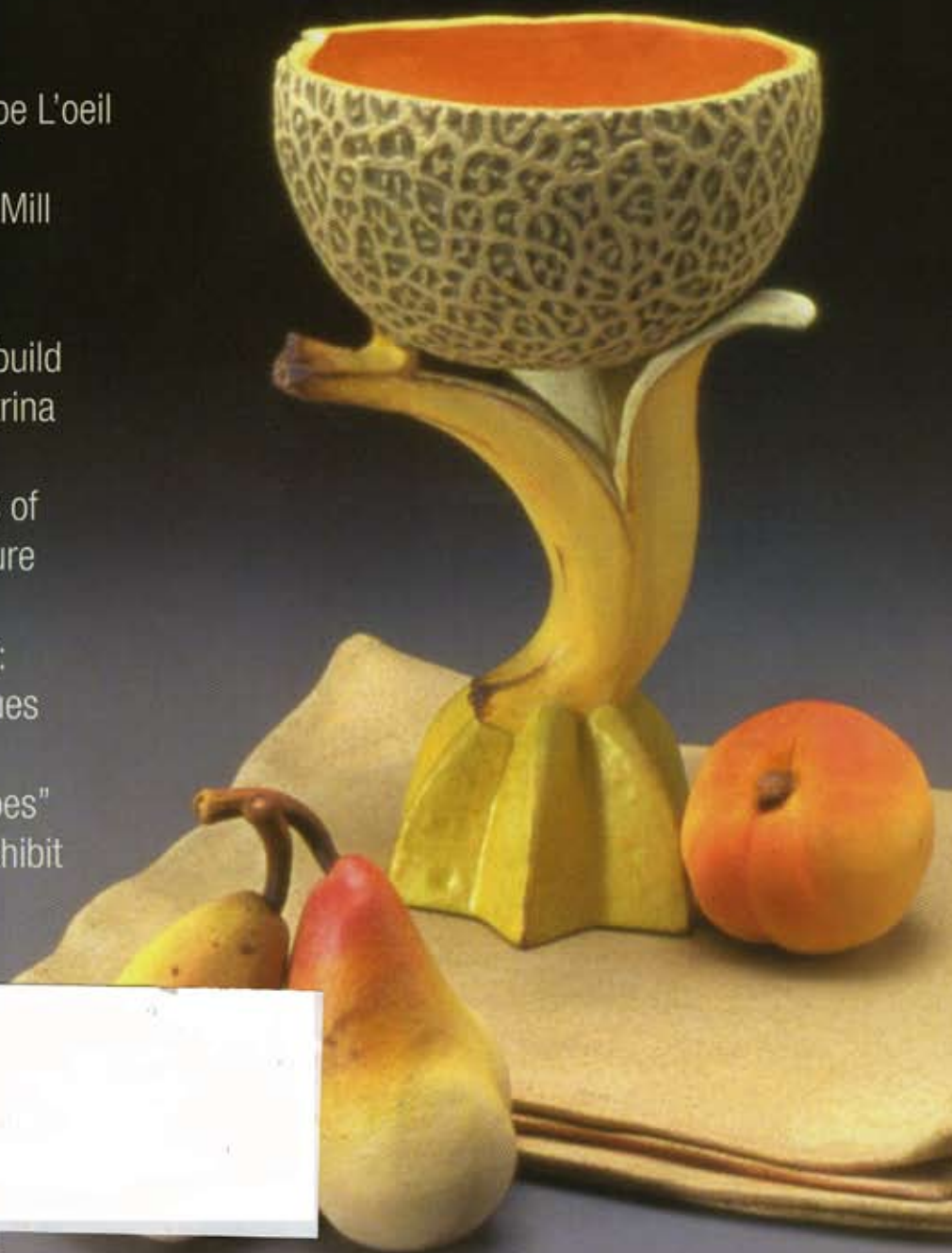
Buying A New Pug Mill

One Year Later
Ceramic Artists Rebuild
After Hurricane Katrina

Weighing the Risks of
Manganese Exposure

Discovering Glazes:
Simplified Techniques

"Architectural Echoes"
Wood-fired Clay Exhibit



Limited Resources

Cuban Ceramic Artists Create Art from Scrap

Story by Catherine Merrill

Photos by Catherine Merrill & Marge d'Wylde

Cuban culture, particularly music, dance, literature, and painting, is a passionate interest of the international world. However, little is known about the unique and flourishing development of Cuban ceramics. Ceramic artists in the "First World" have access to an abundance of equipment, technology, and ready-made supplies. But Cuban ceramists, on the other hand, create world-class art with severely limited access to raw materials and equipment, often inventing new techniques that could influence the wider ceramic world.

I have traveled to Cuba nine times and, since 2002, I have co-directed an ongoing international cultural exchange project, the Proyecto Arte del Fuego (PAF) with Cuban master ceramist Antonio Lewis. To further our primary mission to promote peace and friendship through the universal language of art, we have offered workshops, exhibitions, lectures, and residencies in the ceramic arts in Cuba, Canada, and the United States.

Havana: Pastor Fumero

In May of 2005, we presented a workshop in Havana at the studio of ceramic sculptor Pastor Fumero. Fumero explained later that all his materials and equipment were made from recycled materials.

"Fundamentally, I work with recycled materials and objects," Fumero said. "I also look at the natural world, not only to nature where one can find metal oxides and kaolin, but also to those things which people throw away on a daily basis, the things that contaminate our environment. With these materials, I can dispense with the marketplace."

Fumero developed a series of low-temperature glazes for sculptural work based on discarded car batteries. He extracted lead oxides from a plate inside batteries



Santiago de Cuba by Dunieski Lora. 72" x 72" x 1". Red clay with multi-colored engobes and glazes. Gas-fired to 1900° F.

covered with a brown lead-bearing powder. For calcium carbonate, he calcines animal bones, coral, or eggshells. He obtains silica from rum bottles, manganese oxide from batteries, and copper from electric cables and copper fragments, which he calcines to produce powdered copper oxide.

Fumero uses vents, a respirator, and surgical gloves to protect himself when working with lead. But whenever possible, he uses alkaline materials not detrimental to human health, such as tubes for fluorescent lighting and television tubes, both made of glass that melts at 1650-1800° F. He will also use ampoules from hypodermic needles that melt at 1300° F.

With the exception of a spray gun, Fumero made all of the equipment in his studio: the kilns, the wheel, the ball mill, and the air compressor. He uses a kiln of Argentine design called "Condor Guasi" that fires to 1850° F, is fueled by either wood or gas, and gives off little smoke. The exterior is well-insulated, made from the interior of a Westinghouse refrigerator. The interior is hard brick. The outside is constructed from recycled pieces of soft brick. Fumero also built a large electric kiln that reaches 1850° F in eight hours, and a small electric kiln for raku with a Fiberfrax® lid. He built his ball mill using a German bottle mounted on rollers from a printing press and powered by an ancient American motor. The potter's wheel is made from auto parts and other parts custom-fabricated on a

lathe. Fumero constructed his compressor for spraying glazes from a 60-year-old refrigeration unit he found in a garbage dump, combining the unit with a gas tank from an old car.

Fumero attended art school in 1966-67 at the Taller Libre de 10 Octubre where he majored in painting and sculpture, because a ceramics program did not exist. In the 1980s, motivated to learn the technology of clay and glazes, he worked at the Fulton Factory, a construction materials manufacturer that makes sewer pipes, bricks, and tiles. Everything he learned about industrial ceramics was essential to him later in the studio, when looking for raw materials and recycling.

Although Fumero has designed and made wheel-thrown pottery adapted from traditional Spanish forms, his primary focus is now handbuilt vessels. His first ceramic pieces were sculptural and reflected the Afro-Cuban tradition. He began to express these themes in painting, developing a new synthesis of line in a series of sculptures based on the bottle form and glazed with the car battery glazes. He prefers to sculpt primarily using the indigenous coil method because of its control in shaping the form, which he combines with thrown and slab-built elements. In his studio, some-



Bottle by Pastor Fumero. 16" x 12" x 4". Red clay, raku-fired to 1850° F with copper glaze made from car batteries.



Bottle Form by Pastor Fumero. 18" x 10" x 4". Red clay with white glaze, fired to 1900° F in an electric kiln.

one is always working on or researching the latest glaze Fumero has discovered. He believes in sharing his work with all the ceramic artists in Cuba. Since there is no commercial marketplace in Cuba, he is not motivated by competition, but by the passion to create. Fumero's lifelong goal is to expand communication among the potters of the world until they become one large family.

Pinar del Rio: Uldis Lopez

Eighty miles west of Havana, Antonio Lewis and I presented a four-day ceramic workshop in Pinar del Rio at the studio of Pedro Pablo Oliva, one of Cuba's most important contemporary artists. Although Pinar del Rio is known for its painters, ceramics is not well developed there.

In Pinar del Rio I met the best-known local ceramic artist, Uldis Lopez. I visited the studio he shares with his partners and assistants, Pedro Pablo Palacio and Victor Gonzalez, who have worked together for nine years. Pedro Pablo works full-time in clay. Victor is a gynecologist. Lopez is the Director of the Consejo de Artes Plasticas (Fine Arts Council) and the ACAA (Cuban Association of Artists and Artisans) and creates set designs for the theater.

Lopez began working in ceramics at the Fabrica Balay, a production pottery that eventually closed for economic reasons. After the factory closed, he had difficulties obtaining clay, as well as raw materials for slips and glazes. Most of the ceramic artists in Pinar del Rio don't glaze because of the lack of raw materials, although sometimes, when they make interior murals, they will glaze some areas and paint the rest. "Forced by necessity, we continue to grow, to learn, and to face challenges," Lopez said.

Pedro Pablo once was able to travel to the Isle of Youth, which has several large ceramic factories. There he collected waste glazes that he mixed together and brought home in plastic bottles. Lopez paints on a mixture of manganese, iron, and copper, then raku-fires the work to achieve smoked effects with metallic highlights. Others, including Lopez, make pigment from the soot in the kiln chimney and grind broken neon tubing into a powder that has a very low melting point to prepare crackle glazes.

Lopez has also designed an ingenious potter's wheel using the differential from an old Chevy and a Russian motor.



Gallos (Roosters) by Uldis Lopez. 16" x 10" x 12". Kaolinitic red clay painted with a mixture of iron, copper, and manganese oxides; wood-fired to 1850° F.

Since he does not have much studio space, he has used the same motor to combine a compressor, ball mill, potters' wheel, and a jigger into a single machine. The foot pedal was from an old sewing machine, and an antique hinge provided the footrest for the left foot. "We

have created a Cuban symbiosis between traditional and modern wheels: the union between the United States, Russia, and Cuban technology. Very surrealist! In Cuba we like surrealism and create surrealist machines to make our surrealist art."

Santiago de Cuba: Dunieski Lora

My third interview, with Dunieski Lora, took place at the Taller Cultural Luis Diaz Oduardo in Santiago de Cuba, about 540 miles southeast of Havana. The Taller Cultural is a government-sponsored art center with a gallery and studios for ceramics, metal sculpture, painting, and printmaking. Every May, for 20 years, the Taller has been hosting the "Encuentro Terracota," an international ceramics symposium. In contrast with Fumero and Lopez, Lora is very young at 31 years old. Lora is also highly educated, yet shares



MARCO OVALLE

Dunieski Lora with sculpture, *St. James-Santiago: Apostle of the City*, 68" x 72" x 40". Unglazed red clay, gas-fired to 1900° F with metal.

the same passion to create and the ability to see all obstacles as incentives for discovering creative solutions.

He is an instructor at the local art school, the Instituto Juan Joaquin Tejada, where he received his professional degree in Fine Arts, with a major in sculpture. Lora also studied drawing, printmaking, ceramic sculpture, painting, goldsmithing, and bronze casting using the lost wax method. He achieved the highest postgraduate degree, the *Título de Oro*, at the Superior Institute Frank Pais Garcia, dedicated to training college professors in the Fine Arts. Lora became a member of the Taller Cultural in 2000.

Also in 2000, Lora took a course where he and the other participants built a bottle-shaped kiln out of clay and adobe. He has since designed a series of kilns of different dimensions, based on the basic design of the bottle kiln: firebox below, updraft flame, refractory bricks in the combustion chamber covered with adobe—all built with non-conventional, recycled materials. He commented, "We would adapt the size of the kiln to the size of the pieces being fired, taking apart and rebuilding both kiln and chimney for every firing!"

Based on experiences with the ceramic kilns, Dunieski redesigned crucibles for bronze casting following the same principle. "The important idea is to adapt the design to the existential necessities," said Lora.

A large part of Lora's work is about daily life. "Most of my work is telling the story of that which surrounds me, so that I feel as if I am *Sonando despierto*, or dreaming while awake." To express another theme, emigration, Lora uses the symbolism of the suitcase and the ballpoint pen. "The ballpoint pen is the perfect immigrant because, by merely putting it in your pocket, you can travel anywhere without needing so many papers and documents."

Lora concluded, "An important theme in my work is humor, satire, and irony, particularly because, in Cuba, it is a constant state of mind. Therefore, all Cubans are implicit in my art." @

Author Catherine Merrill's work has been shown in more than 150 national and international exhibitions. Publications featuring her work include Ceramics: Art & Perception, Studio Potter, Neue Keramik and the NCECA Journal.



MARCO OVALLE

Si Fue Libre (If She Were Free) by Dunieski Lora. 48" x 16" x 14". Glazed red clay with oxides and metal.



MARCO OVALLE

Daily Life by Dunieski Lora. 15" x 12" x 11". Red clay with glazes, fired to 1850° F in an electric kiln.