

# TONY MOORE

## SCULPTURE

### *The Embodiment of Spirit in Form*



Tony Moore's unique career trajectory has taken him from environmental sculpture, to painting, to wood fired ceramics. He first made functional vessels (cups, vases, platters and bowls) and then went on to large and even massive ceramic sculptures which draw their iconography from the rural English country-side of his birth, as well as the historical traditions of heraldry, knighthood and the cultural institutions of Church and State. His sculptures are at once voluminous and majestic, forceful and serene. They engage subjects as diverse as the inevitable consequence of human action in both the personal and cultural/political spheres, the urge to break free of the constrictions of inhumane social institutions, and the belief that such structures can be transformed and re-formed to reflect the inherent beauty of nature and transcendental law.

Within Moore's work there is both a substantive depth and a quietness implying an optimistic future where such transcendence is possible while at the same time there is a stark and honest confrontation with the endless repetition of pain and suffering born of blind ignorance. While the imagery has personal roots drawn from his boyhood in the English countryside, it is also equally evocative of the current global tensions and turmoil from which there seems no immediate escape. The possibility of a hopeful future, however, is seen in the lyricism and minimalist beauty of the forms, as if we are being shown at once the incongruity of the effects of violence and hatred, and at the same time aspiration for a more ideal world.

Two examples of sculptures which explore these polarities are "He" 2004, and "Shrine" 2004. In the former, footprints sink deeply into a mass of clay suggesting a person inexorably drawn into an earthly grave. According to Moore, this work was stimulated by seeing images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. He cites his disgust at the human degradation and anguish he witnessed through viewing the much publicized photograph of a hooded man standing on a box, with electric wires attached to his outstretched hands. The artist relates how in his studio, in empathy, he stood on a large block of clay. In so doing, Moore felt the shudder of recognition that all people are vulnerable to humiliation and devaluation, and that this experience is a universal aspect of the human condition.

In contrast, "Shrine" 2004, a luminescent bas relief, depicts hand prints in a gesture of both giving and receiving. It is both the tablet and the architectural niche in which such an object of reverence might be placed. The clay seems positively incandescent, lit from within and quite dynamic, a quality enhanced by the radiating "halo-like" markings emanating from the "mudra" of the hands. This work, both metaphorically and symbolically, evokes the possibility for spiritual transcendence through the eternal fire of the human spirit.

The use of handprints and footprints had also been a signature in Moore's earlier work as a painter. These are humanizing elements making the loftier and more conceptual aspects of his oeuvre, more personal and down-to-earth. They create a power-

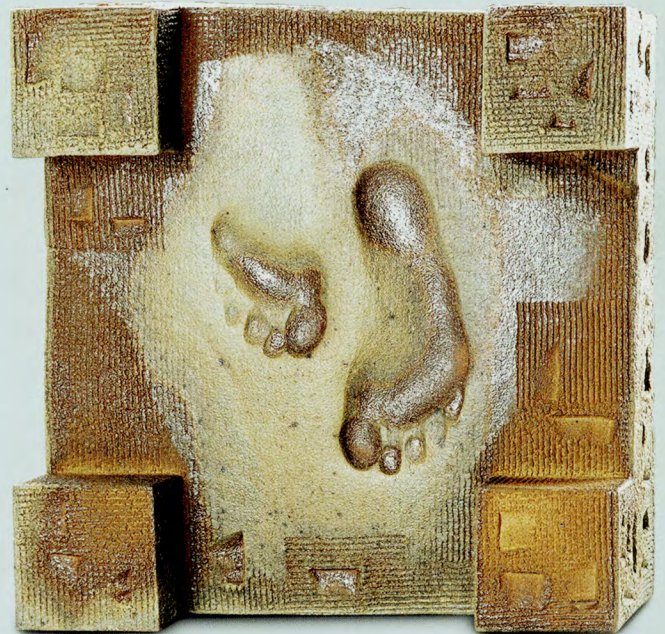
ful and mysterious conversation about the simultaneity of "presence" and "absence". A sculpture which extends this dialogue is "Castle Cross" 2005, a large clay slab with embedded footprints, contained by what might be the walls and interior structure of a fortress or prison. In both visual and conceptual terms, this piece questions the relationship of life to institutional structures.

In two large-scale installations of small wall mounted architectural sculptures, presented in grids of 15 modules, Moore takes on the perennial issue of the relationship of Church and State. He confronts the modern version of an age-old theme, the encroachment of fundamentalist religion on secular freedom. By interspersing atypical structures of church-like spires with castle-like fortresses, Moore creates a sense of scope, and through progressive modulations of the forms demonstrates the effects of the subtle and persistent morphing of institutions over time. Using this architectural vocabulary as metaphor, he shows how the "actual design" of social institutions has been co-opted and subverted by deep ignorance, leading to an overarching misuse of power. The subject of these two works, "Smoke Screen" 2005, and "Trophy" 2005, directs us to acknowledge this tendency towards corruption and decay.

Replacing the iconography of handprints and footprints in his earlier paintings and sculpture, Moore has now introduced body casts of his own head into the most recent large-scale works, "Who Knows Why?" 2006, and "In the Age of the Innocents" 2007. He thereby commits himself even more vigorously and with more transparency to the essential and pervasive themes of his work. The relative anonymity and universality of the hand and footprints is now supplanted by a specific image of the artist himself. In "Who Knows Why?", a provocative assemblage of approximately 150 clay body casts of the artist's head, we are exposed to an experience of tremendous power and relevance for our times. Moore has ingeniously placed a number of these casts on the floor, covering the entire gallery, while the preponderance of the "heads" is vertically stacked in 6 steel cages, as a monolith in the center of the room. The walls have been left blank.

The assemblage is disorienting, as the viewer's focus must shift from a downward gaze walking amongst the objects on the floor, to a visual confrontation with the stacked caged heads. These heads are also differentiated from the ones resting on the floor by the striking blue/green glaze which contrasts with the subtlety of the unglazed, but not "unmarked" heads on the floor. (These markings are the result of the "magic" of the week-long wood firing process itself.)

What are we to make of this collection of disembodied



#### ILLUSTRATIONS -

opposite page -

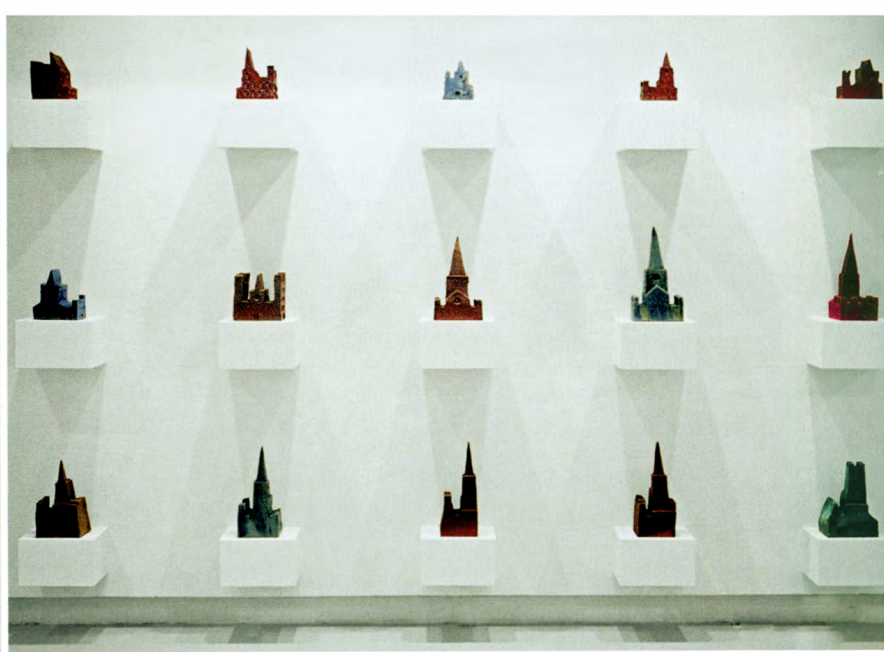
- "He" - 2004 - 13 1/2" x 15 3/4" x 15 1/2" - ceramic - stone aggregate wood-fired 6 days to cone 10

right top to bottom -

- "Fire Painting" - 2004 - 10 3/4" x 10 3/4" x 1/2" - stoneware - slip - wood-fired 6 days to cone 10

- "Fire Painting" - 2005 - 10 3/4" x 10 3/4" x 1/2" - stoneware - slip - wood-fired 6 days to cone 8

- "Large Fire Painting" - 2007 - 14 1/2" x 14 1/2" x 1/2" - stoneware - slip - stone aggregate - wood-fired 4 days to cone 12



#### ILLUSTRATIONS -

left -

- "**Who Knows Why?**" - (detail) - 2006 - 150 body-cast human heads - 84" x 300 sq.ft. size variable - steel - architectural stoneware - barium glaze - wood-fired 5 days to cone 12

above -

- "**Who Knows Why?**" - (detail) - 2006 - 150 body-cast human heads - 84" x 300 sq.ft. size variable - steel - architectural stoneware - barium glaze - wood-fired 5 days to cone 12

opposite page l. to r.-

- "**Smoke Screen**" - (a work in 15 parts, detail) - 2005 - 72" x 108" x 9" - architectural stoneware - barium glaze - wood-fired 6 days to cone 10

- "**Smoke Screen**" - (a work in 15 parts) - 2005 - 72" x 108" x 9" - architectural stoneware - barium glaze - wood-fired 6 days to cone 10

heads, which appear quite peaceful with their closed eyes, in contemplative repose? Many questions are posited both directly and indirectly by the artist. Among them might be the following:

1. What is the relationship of the individual to the collectivity?
2. How can we balance our desire to be simultaneously recognized for our unique attributes, while at the same time yearning always to be part of a larger whole?
3. Is it possible for there to be the experience of real freedom in the midst of a social/political climate which discounts the value of diversity and individual choice, making us virtual "prisoners"?
4. How do we as individuals invest fully in our lives while knowing that our common fate as human beings is the inevitability of death?

Tony Moore's work challenges us to reflect upon these questions, and others. Looking at "huddled masses" of heads imprisoned in cages creates a sense of claustrophobia and suggests a mass grave, but the serenity of the visages themselves may suggest that we are equally prisoners of our own mental structures, and not merely the victims of those who seek to dictate how we should live and think. Especially, in referencing death masks, and implying that consciousness may transcend any and all limitations inherent on this plane, there is an eerie suggestion that limitation itself is impermanent and a distortion of the essential nature of freedom. Just as the ego/mind eventually gives way to the knowing which emanates

from the source of all being, so is the suffering of individuals a transitory experience, as horrible as such experiences may be.

A further evolution of these ideas is seen in the more recent large-scale sculpture, "In the Age of the Innocents" 2007, where approximately 60 porcelain heads within a singular raised horizontal cage, seemingly float above the floor. The form and dimensions suggest at once a bed or a coffin, and when seen together evoke a human body at rest, possibly in transition from corporeal reality to the non-material world.

The surface qualities of the individual heads are unique due to the vagaries of the wood-firing process, exposing each somewhat differently to heat, fire, ash, and the atmospheric variants of oxidation and reduction. Some heads glisten because the ash is fluxed at high temperature producing a translucent glaze, while others appear marbled due to the high vitrification of the porcelain clay (fired for 4 days to cone 12). Beneath the surface is yet another layer in which there is an intricacy of detail, a matrix of differentiated colors, shapes and forms, creating interest in the object's deeper aspects.

Further, the artist has deliberately incised a small, precise elliptical mark, into the brow of several of the heads. These could appear as both wounds and apertures into the mind/consciousness of the resting forms. In counterpoint, are more random coarse marks of scarification, which are consequences of the actual molding and



firing process. Yet, one cannot help being struck by the sensuous undulation of the overall contour of the unified mass and the miraculous sense of its luminescence. There is a remarkable vitality and aliveness in this work despite the fact that the forms seem to be inert, asleep or dead.

A recent body of work, "Fire Paintings" (ceramic tiles), continues the development of Moore's painterly sensibilities. (He had largely devoted himself to painting for 15 years prior to the fall of 1996, at which time he began to transpose painted images on canvas to images on the surface of clay.) Similar to his paintings, these works utilize the physical imprints of botanicals, leaves, grasses, seeds and twigs, co-mingled with stones and other findings from the nature surrounding his studio and home. The impression of these, coupled with the rhythmic application of brushed clay slip, creates a lyricism, an exquisite view into a sensory, yet ethereal world. This body of relatively intimate works, remind us that even the most delicate object leaves its indelible mark, while at the same time touching the truth that all living things are evanescent and impermanent.

The astonishing attribute of the "Fire Paintings" is how dramatically they convey a sense of "deep space", far more expansive and luminous than the planar qualities of each object itself. The artist's earliest use of a cruciform iconography, perhaps referencing Christian symbolism or the archetypal intersection of time

and space, has most recently been broadened, resulting in a more nuanced, less structured environment creating an enhanced experience of spaciousness, a window into the cosmic dimension.

Moore's works are fired for one week in his double chambered, hybrid, Anagama-Noborigama (Japanese style) wood-fire kiln, which allows for the maximum flexibility in firing temperatures and optimizes both controlled and accidental impact from ash and other by-products of the kiln. The transformation of clay through the alchemy of heat in this process is metaphorically linked to Moore's interest in the fullness of human potential, the actual demonstration of the embodiment of spirit in form.

This artist's remarkable work is at once heroic and confrontational, elegantly and delicately detailed, minimalist and substantial. It does not so much present a world view, as expose the need for all people to take note of the paradoxes of mind and body, individual and social group, conventional reality and spiritual possibility. Drawing on spiritual tradition, the idea of "radical acceptance", the courage to be with things exactly as they are, is the essential wisdom.

Tony Moore invites us to first immerse ourselves in the truth of things as they are, and then urges us to reach from behind the bars of our cages to the boundless and unlimited possibilities which could optimally be the next stage in the evolution of our planet.

**Vivian Goldstein**, LCSW maintains a private practice in New York. She frequently writes on art, spirituality and culture.

**Tony Moore** is represented in international museum collections, including the Guggenheim Museum. The British-American sculptor and painter is the recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Award and a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Yale University. He maintained a studio in NYC for twenty five years before relocating 50 miles north to a mountaintop property in the Hudson Valley, near Cold Spring, NY.

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