

TONY MOORE: AXIS

Pulse Magazine Review, by Abby Luby

For eons man has been fascinated with fire – harnessing and taming the sheer force of heat and light for survival. Cultures borne from the ability to control fire have yielded great leaps in science and extraordinary art. Today, fire built and controlled in a kiln to create ceramic art intuits ancient ties and rituals. For English-American painter and sculptor Tony Moore, firing his clay creations and transforming the malleable forms to permanence is part of what he refers to as his “personal process of discovery”. Moore’s most recent wood-fired ceramic sculptures are being exhibited in two concurrent shows at the Garrison Art Center and the Putnam Arts Council, NY until October 2, 2007.

At the Garrison Art Center eight of Moore’s sculptures are exquisitely presented, leading the eye successively from piece to piece. The sculpture “Blind Man’s Buff” is a large ceramic helmet at the gallery entrance. Moore says he started to create “Blind Man’s Buff” by carving the solid, wet mass of clay, weighing several hundred pounds. It was what Moore calls, the initial stages of his creative and spiritual journeys.

“I reduced this mammoth clay to the physical form,” he says. “When the piece is being carved, it is being revealed in the sense of it being pre-existent. I have a certain sense of where I’m going and what the work is about.”

Moore likens his creative journey to that of an explorer hacking his way through the jungle to a lost city of antiquity.

The helmet, as with Moore’s other work, has a recognizable form that is intriguingly mysterious and complex that engages the viewer. At once a military head-gear, it bears a curved, lined etching of the figure of Christ on a cross-like ‘frame’ that would protect the face. There is a tiny staircase leading to where the mouth would be. Moore says the helmet has archetypal characteristics.

“It’s not specifically a hermit from a particular period, but the polarities are ideas of church and state, hope and despair, life and death,” he says. “There is always human aspiration in my work.”

Polarities about church and state are also in Moore’s “Trophy,” a grid of 15 small fortresses mounted on the wall. The pieces are sequentially positioned starting with church-like structures with pointed spires to squared-off, blunted gothic castles and finally those with abstracted, truncated towers. Every third fortress is blue giving a break in the grid, the rest alternate between dark and light-brown. “The blue is from a glaze. Some say blue is a spiritual color,” says Moore. “All the fortresses are fired together for a week.”

Moore says ideas for “Trophy” came from his own personal feelings about the confluence of religion and government in this country.

“Right now, issues of church and state, where fundamentalist religion and right-wing politics intersect, are very dangerous,” says Moore. “I wanted to address that subject in the work where a sense of a fortress or castle and church create a hybrid that moves back and forth, without one being more dominant than the other.”

Creating “In Our Name,” a large singular fortress piece that is two square feet, was a vehicle for Moore while grappling with the atrocities at the Abu Ghraib military prison in Iraq.

“I was particularly thinking of the hooded figure with electrodes attached to his hands, standing on a box, being humiliated, or perhaps tortured,” says Moore. The piece has one footprint on the top, Moore’s footprint. “I stood on it and put myself in the position of that person because I was outraged that these types of things were being perpetrated in our name,” says Moore. “The one footprint is as though the figure is leaving, stepping out of this situation.”

On the bottom of the fortress a swirling, darkened rush of what could be body parts in an orange sea, are in deep textural relief, contrasted by the grainy flat sides.

Footprints also appear in two separate pieces “Castle Cross, (One) and Castle Cross (Two) that directly and spiritually involves Moore in the work.

“There are symbolic references in hand and foot prints,” he says. “Handprints are often used as a gesture of aspiration, a human presence within an abstracted landscape that takes on a spiritual reference, a figure representing all people -- humanity.”

Moore uses a hybrid Anagama/Noborigama (Japanese style) wood fire kiln, which apparently allows for both controlled and creative flexibility in the wood-firing process.

“In a sense, the kiln is like a crucible where chemical changes take place, which imparts fire- color to the clay,” explains Moore. “The iron, in this super heat, becomes fluid and migrates through to the surface of the clay. Wood ash, which sometimes looks like bronze, can be dusted on the surface like a patina – which brings out the three-dimensionality of the object. Wood ash can also be melted on a smooth surface, which becomes very glassy and shiny.”

For Moore, firing is a communal experience that requires tending by a group of people.

“Unlike the solitary process of painting, or making sculpture in the studio, firing a kiln requires a community of artists coming together to fire a kiln for a week,” he says.

“The fire has to be stocked every few minutes, every day. Other artists and potters come together and put their work in the kiln, and also help me to fire my work. There’s a sense of comradery and an exchange of spirit between people. Sometimes complete strangers get to know one another quite intimately during the process of the firing.”

People come to view their work at Moore's Cold Spring studio from many different places, from as close as New York City, to as far as North Carolina.

Moore received a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Sculpture from Yale University. His work is included in collections at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC, the Brooklyn Museum, the Greenville Museum of Art, Greenville, NC, the Derby Museum, Derbyshire, UK and the Yorkshire Museum, York, UK. He has been exhibiting his paintings and sculpture internationally since 1969. His numerous awards include the Avery Fellow at the Millay Colony For The Arts, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award for Painting, a CAPS Grant (Creative Artists Public Service Program), NY and 1st Prize in the National Young Contemporaries, Royal Academy of Art, London, England.

Both shows are entitled AXIS, and are at the Garrison Art Center at Garrison's Landing in Garrison, NY and Putnam Arts Council in Mahopac, NY until October 2nd 2007.