Tony Moore: Lyricist in a Time of War

by Roger Lipsey

"Before God," 36½ in. (93 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware.

"The Gathering," 36 in. (91 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware.

It is not the artist who is divided, it is the times. Tony Moore's new work in clay captures the mixed realities of contemporary American experience: on the one hand, those things many of us care for and surely hope to always care for; on the other hand, the violence of 9/11 and the wars that have followed. A lyricist in a time of war, Moore offers both the loveliest of studies in quiet clay and something like the portrait of blind militarism.

The first theme draws on the heritage of twentieth-century art in ways that recall Constructivist design and the clean late Cubism of his fellow Englishman, Ben Nicholson. The second theme draws on the language of Surrealism to give a shape to irony and sorrow. As well, a current of archaism reaches back to the most distant era of image-making for impressions of hand and foot that signal in the simplest way the human presence. Is the artist bound by some rule or convention to present a single vision? Not in times when there is no single vision, when contradiction and complexity prevail. But the artist *is* bound to show us well and freshly what he sees. By this measure, Moore's recent work is strong.

The two major themes, war and a poetry that knows nothing of war, approach each other in two works that share formal similarities: "2004 A.D." and "Resurrection of the Spirit." One is the closed and bandaged version of the other; one is the open, tender version of the other. 2004 A.D. presents with surreal intensity a wholly bandaged head, or something very similar. The viewer reads it as thick, harmed and closed off. It recalls the repertory of images we share from the wars of the twentieth century; among so many others, those of wounded soldiers, scarcely visible beneath their dressings. Looking across to the miniature shrine, one sees much the same form but opened out and modeled with childlike attention. Tell me which is true? They are both true.

A similar approach of the two themes occurs in a work such as "Before God." The artist refers to this and works like it as tablets—

"2004 AD," 16 in. (41 cm) in height, carved, wood-fired stoneware, 2004.

"Resurrection of the Spirit," 17 in. (43 cm) in height, carved, wood-fired stoneware, 2004.

but surely he will not quarrel with us if we see something more specific, namely, memorial stones. Yet on this memorial stone is inscribed in low relief—with superb textures and colors owed to the wood-fired kiln—a Constructivist or late-Cubist pattern that recalls nothing so much as the elegant, lyrical art of Nicholson. One stops before this work. It is both light and dark, warmly poetic and unyielding. How can this be? Ask the times.

As a poet, Moore looks at how impressing a leaf in the clay before firing leaves behind a fossil-like, detailed image; how fire moves across clay surfaces and deposits marks; how a strangely eloquent Sign of the Cross can emerge from a complex technical sequence of superposed tiles, clay slip and the heat of an extended, six-day kiln firing. "Meditation—A Work in Many Parts" reflects the interests of a poet and an inquirer into the meeting place of technique and image-making. Like much of Moore's other work, Meditation has its good ancestry—the art of Kasimir Malevich, who first offered simple geometries as spiritual icons; and the Black Paintings of Ad Reinhardt, the American Abstract Expressionist who recognized in his own way the eloquence of simple geometry. But all of that, so much a part of our shared heritage from twentieth-century art, is transformed into a new experience by Moore's medium, the wood-fired kiln. In Meditation, one comes upon Moore's lyricism, free of our conflicted times and exercising itself in the realm he knows to be his home ground: clay and the wood-fired kiln. On the hill where he lives in Cold Spring, New York, in the Hudson Valley, Moore has built a kiln where these kinds of things can happen.

"Thine is the day, thine also the night," sang the Psalmist long ago (Psalm 74). In these words, though poetically coded, may be a hint for artists in our time, and for us all: to look at all things straight on, to hold dear and practice what we have always held dear and practiced, yet not to avert our eyes from the night, from the difficulties we all face. Moore's new work, in its lyricism and harshness, neither ignores our time nor cedes to it.

"Meditation—A Work in Many Parts," 10¾ in. (27 cm) square, wood-fired stoneware, with slip, 2004, by Tony Moore, Cold Spring, New York.

Tony Moore is represented by van brunt gallery. For further information, see www.vanbruntgallery.com or www.tonymooreart.com. A solo exhibition of Moore's works will be on view June 10–July 2 at bau, 161 Main St., Beacon, NY. See www.beaconartistunion.com.

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