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Art as a Process of Discovery: The Singular Aesthetic of Tony Moore

Written by **Robert Morgan**

I have been aware of Tony Moore's presence as an artist, and his synchronic methods of work emanating from the gaping mouths of enormous crucibles, for more than a decade. During this time I have witnessed Moore develop a serious quantity of remarkable forms, and discovered that his awareness of art-in-general has an uncanny breadth and sophistication. Not only is he unique and exemplary by technical standards, but he further reveals a visually astute thought process – what some read as spirituality or transcendence – that includes attention and alertness to the clay medium in which he works.

I state this based on my understanding of his arrival into the field of ceramics after paying his dues as a sculptor and painter in his early career. What has evolved, at the current stage of the

artist's career, is integral to all he has learned previously when working in numerous studios of fine art. This, among other personal incidents and chance situations, brought him to a point where he began reorienting his work by adapting himself to the infinite and inventive possibilities that became available to him through the medium of ceramics in the late 1990s. This was after having worked as an artist for more than a quarter of a century.



Moore's ceramic sculpture represents an approach to making that moves between inspiration, originality, force of will, and a dire commitment to form. Throughout his perpetual, on-going involvement as an artist, Moore understands form as an intuitive resolution where the imagination comes in contact with materiality in an indeterminate way. In a recent work, *Collector's Cabinet* (2016), the use of intuition to achieve form is shown through the artist's embedding of 'stones' and shards of glass in clay. These elements will eventually be transformed in the glazing process after they are placed inside a wood-fired kiln.

of pounding, cutting, and combining lumps of clay, he holds out for the moment of unconscious effect, the unknown discovery that often lingers beneath the material surface. He hopes to find exactly what he is seeking – the magical element needed to complete the finished piece – even before the elusive wonder of the object emerges from his Japanese-style anagama-noborigama wood-fired kiln.

In this sense, Moore is an artist/humanist whose ceramic sculpture, often in the form of tombs or ancient architecture such as *Flower of the Godchild* and *Journey of the Ferryman* (both 2015), metaphorically attempts to define

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The work Moore makes suggests a type of *bricolage* where disparate shapes and colors come together in a way that communicates a heightened emotional feeling. The connection between Moore's use of chance, in relation to form, happens in an instant; a fraction of time during which the artist is still in the throes of manipulating the clay. Suddenly the rugged, earth-bound slabs begin to come alive. Their commonplace appearance is transformed into a spiritual allegory filled with haptic energy. The transition moves from the heat of the cauldron into the visual environment of everyday life.

Related works, titled *Move upon the Waters* and *Face of the Deep* (also 2016), become symbolic forms in which traces of objects, placed on shelves; suggest ties from the past that have influenced the present. These works, pulled from a recent firing, recall porcelain elements found in *Collector's Cabinet*, additions that go beyond the limits of automatized production. Given the artist's vast range of lyrically sensitive subject matter, one may discover the paradox between the material and spiritual world. In doing so, his forms manage to reveal both a visceral and unique intellectual vitality. Rather than conceptualizing the way he chooses to work, Moore allows himself to become involved with the tactility of the medium. In the process

the state in which human beings currently live their lives on the planet. The works reveal the hand of a diligent, material-based artist, given to both precision and coincidence in his practice. The acquired knowledge he gained over the years as a sculptor and painter taught him that through persistence, one may discover new forms that do not appear readily apparent at the outset. An example of his working methods would be a recent series of ceramic works, titled *Fragments* (2013–2016). These forms were derived from sections of wet clay, kneaded and beaten into large slabs, which were then cut off and pushed aside, only to be transformed into small-scale works that contain intrinsically poetic abstract elements.

At the moment, there are three mediumistic approaches in which the artist works. There are the previously cited 'fragments' and 'fire paintings'. And in addition to these, his highly meditative and consciously provocative sculptural forms, all built by hand and heated at high temperature to 2350 Fahrenheit in his wood-fired kiln (where for almost twenty years he has worked in seclusion in the mountain woodlands of the Hudson Highlands, New York). An important example of his sculpture from a decade ago, *Who Knows Why?* (2006), includes 150 body-casts of his head encased within



Banner, 2016, wood-fired ceramic, glass, 9.5 x 7.25 x 3.5 in.

and around a tower of six steel racks or cages, stacked in a vertical progression. My initial reference upon seeing this work was comparable to the 'stacks' of the Minimalist Donald Judd from the late 1960s, which appear neutral and architectonic when compared with the more explicit humanist content found in Moore's work.

In contrast, the press-molded clay heads stacked within the cages are covered with a mysterious blue glaze, while the accompanying heads situated on the floor are unglazed. Moore's sculptural installation offers a considerably different point of reference from the work of Judd. In *Who Knows Why?* the repetition of the artist's life-size facial suggests auto-symbolic meaning; in other words, meaning that is self-referential. Even so, the array of heads gives us a sense of ourselves even as the character and expression of the face belongs to the artist. This paradoxical effect conflates the sordid dehumanized aspect in which human heads are displaced in racks with those neatly lined up on the floor. In doing so, the artist augments the feeling of a programmed society in which people are transformed into statistics, similar in feeling to Jasper Johns' *Target with Four Faces* (1965), rather than being understood as unique individuals with emotional and corporeal needs.

Despite the lofty, often majestic appearance apparent in sculpture such as *Portal* and *Journey of the Ferryman* (2015), both works testify to the artist's durable understanding of frontality as a kind of architectural façade that

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provokes an analysis of the elements housed within and the support structure that gives further credibility to why these forms exist and how they are linked to one another. This is carried further in his two-dimensional 'fire paintings', especially in the early cruciform works from 2004–10 and later in the nature paintings from 2010–14. In each case, Moore returns to his desire to make paintings that occupied a good deal of his attention from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. In the 'fire paintings', his grasp of flat spatial form is reiterated and re-contextualized with regard to how imagery, both abstract and concrete representation, can function on a smaller scale and in relation to a vastly different medium. While painting on canvas and glazing on clay are technically different from one another, they still share the touch of the hand and a clarity of understanding as to surface composition.

Collector's Cabinet,
2016, wood-fired
ceramic, porcelain,
glass, 16 x 21.75 x 6 in.



As suggested at the outset, Tony Moore's work, for more than two decades, has focused on his ability to take what he learned from his early work as a sculptor and painter and transpose it in relation to the medium of ceramics. To this he might respond: "Yes, but there is more to it than that." And this is perfectly correct. The preceding remarks can only serve as a summary of what Moore's thoroughly involved and precision-oriented art is essentially putting forth. While others have remarked on his desire to bring his ceramic sculpture into some kind of transcendent outset, I have – perhaps wisely – not attempted to define this, even as there is little doubt that Moore thinks, feels, and works in this manner. Moreover, I would give emphasis to each viewer's personal experience with the artist's works, and to further suggest that such an experience can only be fully realized by seeing the actual physical works of art in real time and space. ■

Images courtesy of the artist.

About the Author

Robert C. Morgan is an art critic, scholar and artist. He holds an MFA in sculpture, and a PhD in aesthetics and art history. He is the author of numerous essays, reviews, and books on contemporary art and criticism, and his writing has been translated into over twenty languages. Morgan was inducted into the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (Salzburg) in 2011, and received the inaugural Arcale award in International Art Criticism in Salamanca (Spain) in 1999. He is a Board member for Art Omi International and Professor Emeritus in Art History at the Rochester Institute of Technology.



**Who Knows Why
(detail),** 2006, wood-
fired ceramic, steel,
84 in x 300 sq. ft.