

Rebecca Hutchinson: The Gesture of Place

Rick Newby

Within the marvelously pluralist landscape of contemporary ceramics, Rebecca Hutchinson is one self-defined ceramic artist whose work crosses more boundaries than most. Her elegant and mysterious biomorphic forms—constructed of handmade paper brushed with a slurry of porcelain paperclay or woven of paperclay-coated sisal thread—straddle the divides between ceramic and textile arts, between sculpture and the vessel, between the ephemeral and the timeless, between ecological concerns and the purely aesthetic. By remaining committed to the (multiple) traditions of ceramics and yet determined to follow her own aesthetic path wherever it may lead, Rebecca Hutchinson brings a fresh perspective to our discussions of the clay arts—and what their role might be in an increasingly de-naturalized world.

A professor of Artisanry/Ceramics at the University of Massachusetts–Dartmouth, Hutchinson is, as she likes to say, “of the tribe” of Environmental artists, but she feels especially close to those (like Patrick Dougherty, Michael Singer, and Roy Staab) whose works share with her ruggedly refined forms an exceptional sensitivity to site, natural materials, and what she calls the “gesture of place”¹ (she disavows any affinity with the massive and domineering earth works of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Nancy Holt).

Dividing her time between Massachusetts and Montana—and as the daughter of a medical technologist and a psychologist—Hutchinson finds herself deeply concerned about the links between the human and the non-human, with what she calls “total ecosystem function, specifically looking at dynamics of species survival and site activity individually as they function in the parameters of place.” This has led her to turn away, despite her training as a potter, from the fetishization of the well-crafted object so prevalent in recent ceramic arts. Rather, she writes, “[m]y interest in ecology has taken me to understand species structure and organism growth on all environmental levels.”²

This truly holistic approach leads to complex and delicate structures that most resemble spiders' webs, the nests of birds, or massed floral forms. Moreover, Hutchinson's earth-centered works partake in what critics Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss call the tradition of the "formless," a subset of modernism that explores the abject, the tactile, and the entropic ("a degradation that leads to a continually increasing state of disorder and of nondifferentiation within matter"³). Entropy appears most strikingly in Rebecca's outdoor sculptures, especially her ambitious series, *Ten Sites, Ten Situations: Site Works in Rural America*, where the effects of weather over time invariably deconstruct her fragile structures. This recognition that all life is ephemeral can also be seen in her gallery works, which exist only in the spaces for which they are created, and only for the time of the exhibition.

Hutchinson sees a clear connection between her own work and that of her Environmental-artist peers, engaged—as they passionately are—in articulating concern for increasingly threatened natural systems, and the vast canvases of nineteenth-century painters like Thomas Moran and Alfred Bierstadt, who sought to capture the sublimity of the Rocky Mountains and, in so doing, helped to create the movement to preserve prime examples of the American Sublime (like Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks).

Three recent solo exhibitions embody Hutchinson's vision for an art that speaks of the strength *and* fragility of the natural world and of our profound connectedness to all things. At the same time, the groups of works in these shows can function purely as gallery environments that engage visitors on many levels—as affecting abstractions, as bodies in space, as elegant objects for contemplation. Like the multiples of Eva Hesse (think of her suspended works, *Contingent* and *Right After*, both 1969, which she described as "paintings as sculpture"⁴), Hutchinson's post-Minimalist objects bear an uncanny and uncontainable charge—of emotion, spirit, and intelligence. In each of these exhibitions—her 2006 installation at Manchester Craftsmen's Guild of Pittsburgh; the 2005 installation, *Communal Condition*, at Washington State University, Pullman; and her 2004 New England Artist Awards exhibit at the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston—Hutchinson has refined and extended her repertoire of forms and processes.

Made of literally thousands of florets assembled out of rolled handmade paper sheets coated with porcelain paperclay and then pegged together with twigs, Hutchinson intended the works in Pittsburgh to be viewed from multiple vantages—more so than any of her previous installations. It took her a full year to assemble the florets, and eleven days to install these graceful floral forms. It is only when the viewer walks underneath them and looks upward that their true expansiveness—the multiplicity of their parts—becomes evident. While abundance might be said to be the theme of this show, the installation in Washington State celebrated, in Hutchinson's view, gravity and, more particularly, the "gentleness of gravity." These webbed objects, each different from the next, suspended from branches found locally, seem to drip and pull, terminating in "intimate sacs" that recall the sensual curves of swallows' nests. Spare and angular, these long-stemmed works—Asian in feeling—are unique in Hutchinson's oeuvre. The show at Boston's Society of Arts and Crafts offered Hutchinson the opportunity to orchestrate an intimate space. Unlike the larger galleries in Pittsburgh and Pullman, SAC offered a bay window in the historic structure, where she installed five skirted bell forms ("very feminine," says Hutchinson), with 100 florets to each stem. This time Hutchinson wove the florets with sisal thread and again coated them with her signature paperclay, achieving a feeling of openness furthered by the absence of color—during the past half-decade, Hutchinson has limited her palette to white. (Although these woven works seem far distant from what we generally think of ceramic objects, they can be seen as standing within the continuum of clay arts; as critic Glen Brown writes, we can "read in these elegant woven forms a suggestion of the memory inherent in the ceramic tradition—a popular speculation about the first fired pot is that it was a mud-covered basket accidentally hardened in a fire.")⁵

With each of her singular installations, Rebecca Hutchinson transforms space, captures our imaginations, and asks us to contemplate, not just her arresting forms, but the natural phenomena to which they allude: the outrageous fecundity of flowers, the nurturance of nests, the strength and delicacy of spiders' webs, the temporality of all existence, especially our own. By refusing to create works that have a future, she challenges us to share her concern about, and care for, the lovely, evanescent, and enduring natural world.

Notes

1. All quotations from Rebecca Hutchinson are drawn, unless otherwise noted, from interviews with the author, Helena, Montana, July 2005 and August 2006.
2. Rebecca Hutchinson, unpublished artist's statement, 2005.
3. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 14.
4. Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten and Linda Shearer, *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972), unpaginated.
5. Glen R. Brown, "Memory Serves: Time, Space and the Ceramic Installation," *Critical Ceramics*, March 10, 2001, <http://criticalceramics.org/articles/nceca01/memory2.htm>

In 2006, Rick Newby contributed essays to the exhibition catalogs, *New Works: Lawson Oyekan: Solstice Lip Series, Minneapolis* (Northern Clay Center), *Rudy Autio: The Infinite Line* (Holter Museum of Art), *The New Utilitarian: Examining Our Place on the Motherboard of Ceramics* (NCECA), and *Provocative Clay* (John Michael Kohler Arts Center). Newby is editor-in-chief of the online journal, *Drumlummon Views* (www.drumlummon.org).