

FORMAL EXHIBITION

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment
of
the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN STUDIO ART

University of Wisconsin – Superior

May 2013

Abstract

This paper examines surface and glaze exploration within ceramic sculpture. By using wheel and hand building techniques to make the foundation of forms, graduate student Brianna Deterling experimented with the surface and non-traditional techniques to give her sculptures an interesting appeal. Her discoveries from these experiments led to expanded possibilities for reaching a final, unified form. This paper supports the artist's thoughts and the processes of the sculptural forms evolving into quality pieces of art.

Keywords: ceramics, sculpture, art, exhibition

My work presents the examination of surface and glaze exploration by emphasizing shape, space, and texture within sculptural forms. As I made pieces for my exhibition, my knowledge of ceramic sculpture incorporated the skills acquired from throwing clay on the wheel. Combining thrown pieces with non-traditional ceramic techniques, such as hitting the clay with a stick, has resulted in interesting forms. With previous work, I concentrated on making perfect representations of objects, often resulting in my displeasure with the piece. Non-objective sculpture has released me from the “cloning curse.” The non-objective work relies on itself for balance and unity of completion.

When I gravitated towards sculpture, I gained knowledge of different techniques used in making ceramic objects. The potter’s wheel is one tool for turning out clay work; I wanted, and continue to want, to construct something different and fresh. With pottery, a preconceived end exists regarding how a mug or a bowl should look. Sculpture is unique and contains limitless possibilities. Time after time, success with my sculpture leads to the question, “What if I try this?” The exploration of “what if” expands the potential of my work. Ceramic artist Paul Soldner (n.d.) describes exploring possibilities in his article, *On Art*:

Often we begin with the desire to emulate; We try to remake what our parents, teachers, and historians led us to believe was the best of the past . . . Eventually, we have to make a choice. We either continue to repeat the past, or we start to explore the future. To work in the future, we must let go of the past. Don’t value too much what was so painstakingly learned . . . Walk that delicate line between knowing what one is doing and going beyond to explore the unknown (n.d).

Soldner's statement depicts my thoughts at the beginning of my graduate studies. I made the choice to continue my education in ceramics to "explore the unknown" areas, and from it began the series of "what if" questions.

A good example of a "what if" piece would be my third figurative sculpture titled "Egypt." While constructing realistic female figures, I noticed the texture my fork produced as I applied appendages to the sculpted body. The texture reminded me of stitch marks as I was "sewing up" my figures. I also carved into the figures to add slabs and coils for muscle definition. The gaps from carving on the body left the impression of imperfection. I made the decision to make a figure "for fun," and to leave the "stitches" and holes. The process of making this figure (see Figure 1) developed my openness to constructing more abstract works.

My series of large figures continued, totaling eight by the time the end of the semester arrived. After the figure "Egypt" (see Figure 1), my sculptures continued with the stitched look or otherwise represented the human figure by combining simple thrown forms (see Figure 2). My acceptance of the process of exploration and my commitment to abandoning to the "ideal figure" led me to my next challenge: making no functional pieces and no human figures.

Starting my sculptural forms without referencing the human figure, as I did previously, challenged me at first. Abstract sculpture was uncharted territory for me. I started with clay slabs, which began to act as a canvas as I added texture as the "paint." The texture made by the tool marks, the crawled glaze, and the Manganese Dioxide wash, which bled through the glaze, blended to make the piece very painterly (see Figure 3). I was starting to see the possibilities of the clay acting as canvas. As my use of slabs continued, I started to compose more three-dimensional forms. I worked on producing forms that were visually interesting from every side

(see Figure 4). These were my first steps in developing strong, successful pieces. My work with ceramic sculpture was finally allowing me to break the barrier of my pottery comfort zone.

The question “what is it?” has come up numerous times with my sculptural work. The response “non-objective art” usually satisfies the question, but I am also left wondering if “non-objective” is the best term to describe what I am doing. While researching non-objective and abstract art, I came across an art theory that applies to my current work well: Formalism. Art critic Clement Greenberg (1961) was a proponent of formalism. While discussing the debate of the superiority of representational art versus abstract art in his essay “Abstract, Representational, and so Forth,” Greenberg mentioned how a recognizable object will provide conceptual meaning to a piece (p. 134). However, he also noted that the addition of conceptual with aesthetic meaning *does not* affect the quality of the piece and give us “more as *art*.” He states, “More and less in art do not depend on how many varieties of significance are present, but on the intensity and depth of such significances, be they few or many, as are present” (p. 134). Too many times I make my non-objective pieces complicated by the design (see Figure 5). Emphasizing form in my sculptural compositions has retrained my brain to see art differently. Now, my work definitely emphasizes the structural form of the piece versus any content it may contain.

Greenberg also made another important point in this essay. He wrote: “Art is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles, and what counts first and last in art is quality; all other things are secondary” (p.133). I agree with Greenberg’s statement, and would add to it: if the finished piece is not of quality, then the piece will lack success. For example, the work may have effective relationships of line, shape, texture, but lack in balance and unity. Even though I have achieved success with many of my pieces, I know my productions have been an

experimental exercise more than anything. Frequently the work turns out unsuccessful; with some pieces I quickly realize this, and with others I realize after the glaze fire. My growth in recognizing successful pieces without the help of others is continuously getting stronger. Yet, the time in designing the unsuccessful pieces was not wasted. The experience of problem solving and producing unsuccessful art holds valuable knowledge regarding which techniques work. The acquired knowledge will transfer to the next attempt at success.

My first idea for work outside of functional pieces and the human figure was to make slabs that stood upon stands, mimicking a lamp form (see Figure 6). Unfortunately, the thin slabs slumped in the kiln and the surface design vanished in the glaze (see Figures 7, 8). Creating thicker slabs solved the slumping problem, and I shortened the bases to compensate for the weight. The slumping issue was solved, but the bases bothered me. I wanted to create a contrast between the base and the piece, but was failing to find a texture for the base that complimented the pronounced surface design of the piece (see Figure 9). Part of me wanted to eliminate the base altogether. With the elimination of the base, the piece suffers with stability. Making the slabs thicker to stand on their own did not seem to be the best option. Thicker slabs have a low survival rate in the kiln; I lost about four pieces this way. The only success I had firing thick pieces was when they sat to dry for almost two months. My professor suggested that I make a hollowed out slab for a stacked sculpture I was working on. What I intended for the hollowed piece did not fit the rest of the sculpture. It was too big and didn't compliment the stacked structure. When looking at the single, hollowed form, it had a sense of being a piece all its own. After drilling a hole in the middle, I saw I had this simplistic, unified sculpture. When the glaze fire finished, the sense of success still existed (see Figure 10). This sculpture was the

first composition I would call, in Greenberg's terms, a quality piece of work. Through trial and error, the more simplistic my pieces get, such as my first quality piece of work (see Figure 10), the emphasis on certain elements, such as space, intensify. This emphasis upon simplicity resulted in a more powerful piece.

During winter break, I started to read *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Stiles & Selz). The first two interviews I read made me evaluate certain aspects of my work. The first interview was of color field painter Kenneth Nolan by Diane Waldman, called "Color, Format, and Abstract Art" (1977). Within the interview, Nolan commented on varying the use of color and form in his paintings, and his collaboration with sculptor Tony Caro. Nolan stated, "Recently Tony has made sculpture that I have painted. He has to make the sculpture before I can paint it. That means that the form is taking precedence—that the material takes precedence as a form, rather than color establishing the form" (Waldman, 1977). This statement by Nolan made me consider my glaze choices. Some of my pieces appeared successful in the greenware and bisque stage, but not after the glaze firing. The glaze took away from the piece. My handmade bottles have a balance of texture and shape, and one can see the definition of the emblems and vertical lined texture (see Figure 11). However, after the glaze firing, the emblem on my first bottles seemed to disappear by blending into the piece (see Figure 12). Also, with this particular piece, the textured lined of the bottle faded with the glaze's crawling texture. As Nolan stated about Caro's sculptures, my forms are taking the precedence here. The color, or in my case, glaze, should compliment the form, not fight it. Similarly, Nolan reflected on this idea in his interview. He stated: "Color has properties of weight, density, transparency, and so forth. And when it also has to be compatible with things that have an actual density, a given form, it's

very difficult. It's difficult enough to get color to work with the form that's necessary to make paintings, let alone something that is three-dimensional, with those other added factors" (Walderman, 1977). When glazing, I need to determine whether I want the details of the piece to stand out, or if I want to let the glaze produce the details. My upcoming work will revisit oxide stains versus applying glaze on everything. My future pieces may find more success with a stain's matte, subtle look, and accents in the grooves where the color stays dark, such as in the figure "Egypt" (see Figure 1), where the only application of color is from an iron oxide wash.

To solve the problem of aspects not being emphasized, I began determining successful endings for the glaze process by making numerous forms to test. During this process, I discovered accidental mishaps with a glaze firing of an oxidation atmosphere versus a reduction atmosphere. With the boxed forms I made containing the "glass-like" tops, I had the materials copper carbonate and tin oxide added to my wood ash mixture to form the color red in the "glass" (see Figure 13). In order for this to happen, a reduction of oxygen needed to occur in the kiln while firing, which is known as reduction firing. With the lack of oxygen in the kiln, carbon monoxide, which was also present in the kiln's atmosphere, extracted oxygen from any source it could find. Thus, the ceramic materials lost the oxygen molecules they contain, resulting in a possible differentiation in color. Without the reduction of oxygen, known as an oxidation firing, the wood ash mixture containing the copper carbonate and tin oxide stayed green (see Figure 14). This discovery will allow me to explore oxidation atmosphere firings with resulting color-based successes. I will continue testing these forms when I have the option to use wood, salt, and soda kilns, and see what those atmospheres will produce.

As I continued experimenting with my sculptures, I came across the article “Beautiful or Interesting” by artists David Hockney and Larry Rivers (1964). In it, Rivers posed the question, “Would you prefer to have your work thought beautiful or interesting?” I have studied the subject “beauty” with my work before. “Beauty” is traditionally an aesthetic ideal. If my forms contain balance and unity of design, I would consider the piece beautiful. Because my pieces are non-objective, sculptural forms that differ from traditional ceramic pottery, I can also see their identity as “interesting.” One of my goals to maintain my integrity with ceramics is to create “beautifully interesting” forms, a term that Hockney coined in the interview (1964). Further, I agree with Rivers on a statement he made about his artistic integrity as he referred to the medium of ceramics. He said, “There’s one thing I want—I don’t want my works to be confused with a cup. I want them to be recognizable as a work of mine not done by some artisan—this sounds snobbish—but I’d like them to be distinguishable from the objects in the world, something that is mine and different from a handle or a cup” (1964). I understand Rivers’ thoughts as they are also my own. I want the separation from someone who works with clay that is labeled a “potter.” I see myself as an artist who concentrates on ceramics, but who works with various materials. I want the label as an artist to transfer from my drawings and paintings into the medium of clay, especially since non-functional pieces are the dominant forms I produce. I find the uniqueness of my sculptures exciting, and I want those pieces to define my reputation as a ceramicist.

The exhibit represents the most substantial pieces created during my graduate courses. Most of the compositions exhibit some success; few I consider fully successful. A majority of my work in the exhibit is non-objective forms, and all but two pieces have no content associated with the work. The figures suggesting content are included in the exhibit because they began my

graduate sculptural exploration and my passion for working in the studio every spare moment I could find. My first figurative piece stands in my mind as very monumental. During the time I sketched the plans for this piece, I was taking a year off from school working as a substitute teacher, trying to understand where I want to go with my career. The vision of a female figure looking deep inside of her soul for what she wanted to do with her life appeared in my mind (see Figure 15). The functional base morphs into the figure. This represented my knowledge of ceramics: the foundation of my knowledge is throwing and I want to build upon that strength and grow in my sculptural techniques.

With the results from experimenting, I am continuing to work with form-based objects and with exploring surface treatments. I will continue making forms of non-objective sculpture with the features of roughness incorporated within the sculptures since the theme of drilled holes and lined texture complimented the scratched surface treatment, as revealed throughout the display. I plan to explore the forms by investigating matte stains with glossy glaze, bright low fire glaze with earthy high fire glaze, and different clay bodies. With these possibilities to consider, my research will encourage me to explore further, and my art will grow and strengthen as I reach for a professional level of artistry.

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Appendix



Image © 2013 Brianna Deterling

Figure 1. Egypt. This figure illustrates the experimentation of texture for surface design.



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Figure 2. Lady. This figure illustrates combining simple thrown forms together to represent the human figure.



Image © 2012 Susan Dunkerley Maguire

Figure 3. Singularity. This photo illustrates the texture from tools and slip acting as paint would to a canvas.



Image © 2012 Susan Dunkerley Maguire

Figure 4. Burnt Pinna. This figure illustrates the continued use of slabs and how they form a more three-dimensional sculpture than a single, flat slab creates.



Image © 2012 Brianna Deterling

Figure 5. Untitled. This piece illustrates how the texture and design started to become complicated.



Image © 2012 Brianna Deterling

Figure 6. Untitled. This figure illustrates the beginning of the artist's slab work.



Image © 2012 Brianna Deterling

Figure 7. Untitled. This figure illustrates how the slabs started to slump in the glaze firing.

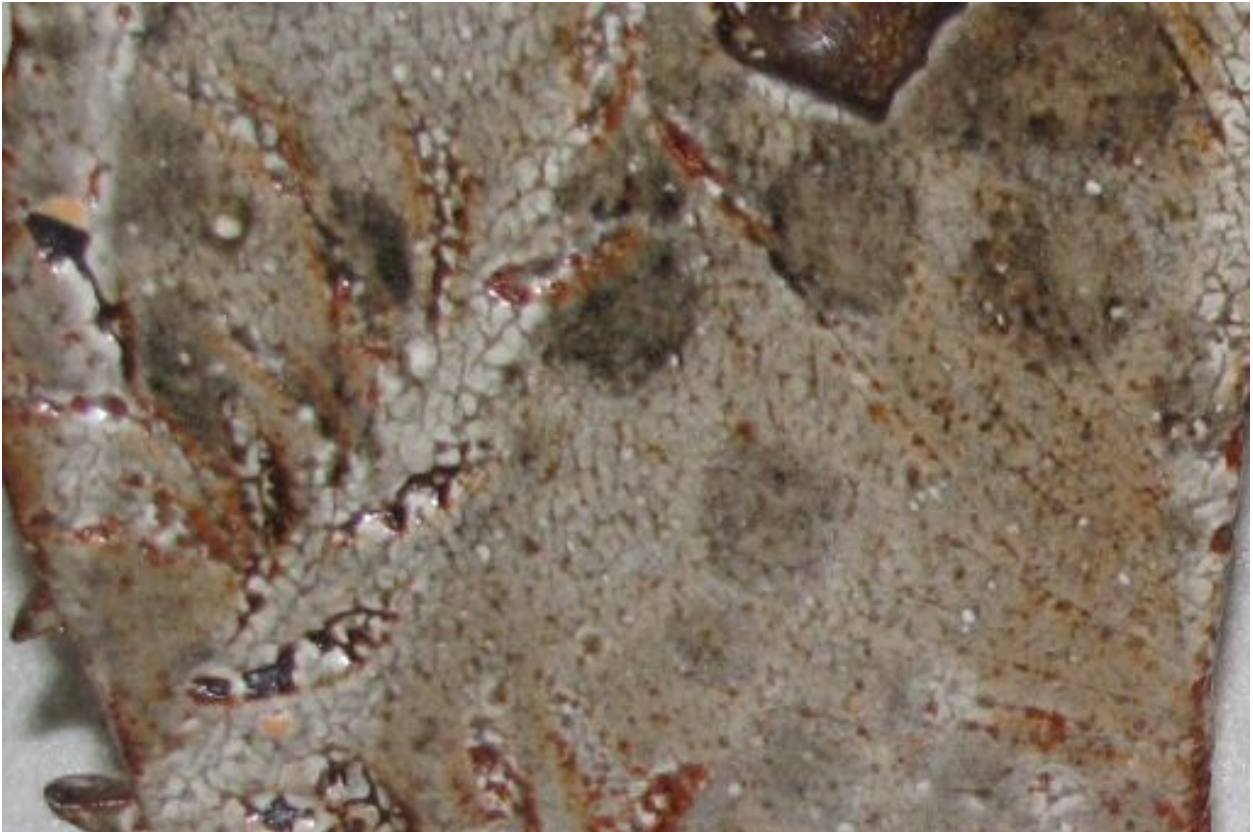


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Figure 8. Untitled. This figure illustrates how the glaze overpowered the surface texture, and made the design fade.

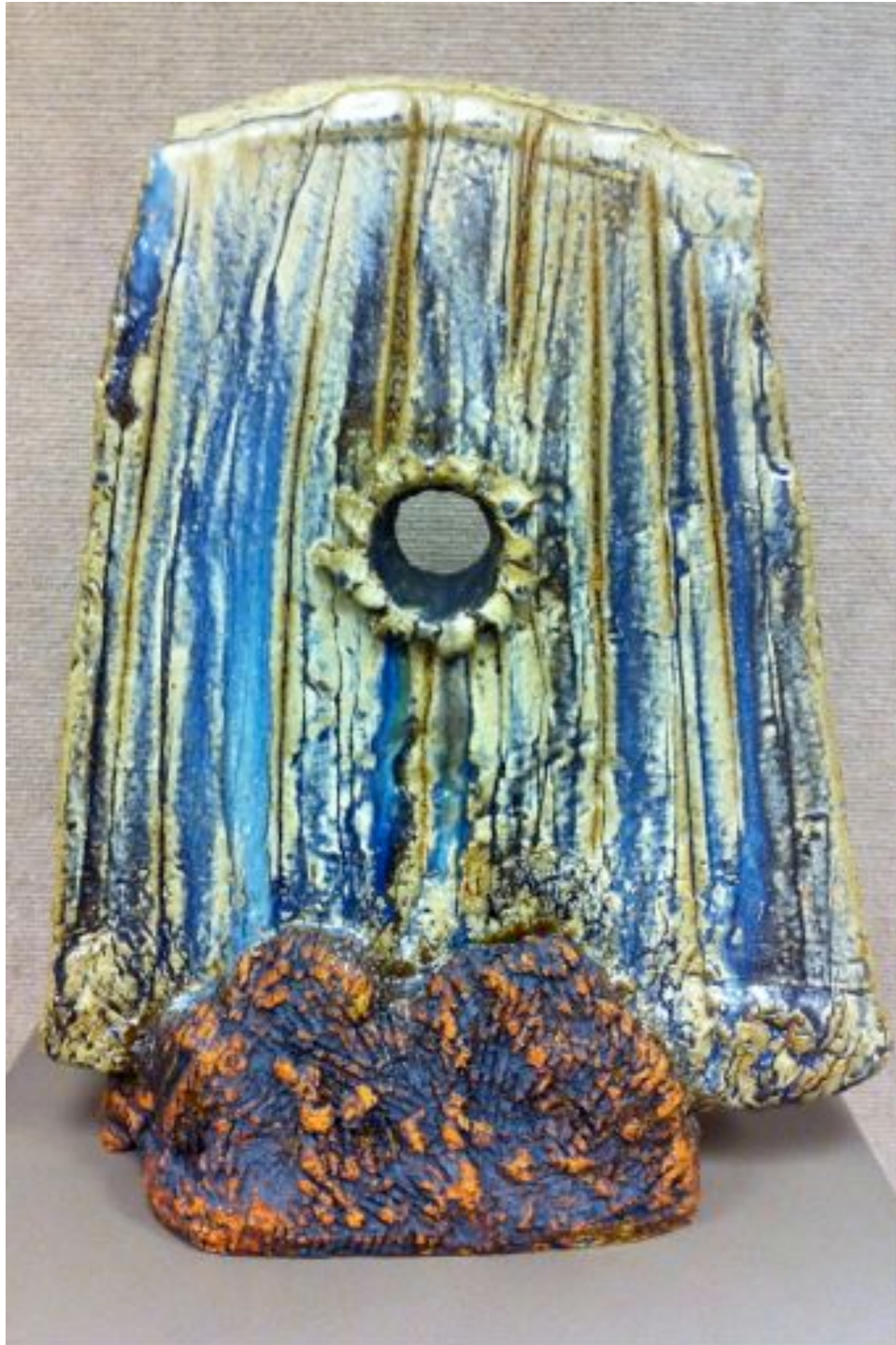


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Figure 9. Untitled. This figure illustrates how the texture of the base does not suit the rest of the art piece.



Image © 2012 Susan Dunkerley Maguire

Figure 10. Cranberry. This piece illustrates the first form that had a sense of being successful.



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Figure 11. Untitled. This figure illustrates the detailed texture of the piece before a glaze is applied.



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Figure 12. Untitled. This piece illustrates the emblem having a lack of contrast with the rest of the bottle.



Image © 2013 Brianna Deterling

Figure 13. Blood Polysquam detail. This piece illustrates the result of a wood ash mixture with copper carbonate and tin oxide after a reduction firing.



Image © 2013 Brianna Deterling

Figure 14. Emerald Polysquam detail. This piece illustrates the result of a wood ash mixture with copper carbonate and tin oxide in an oxidation firing.

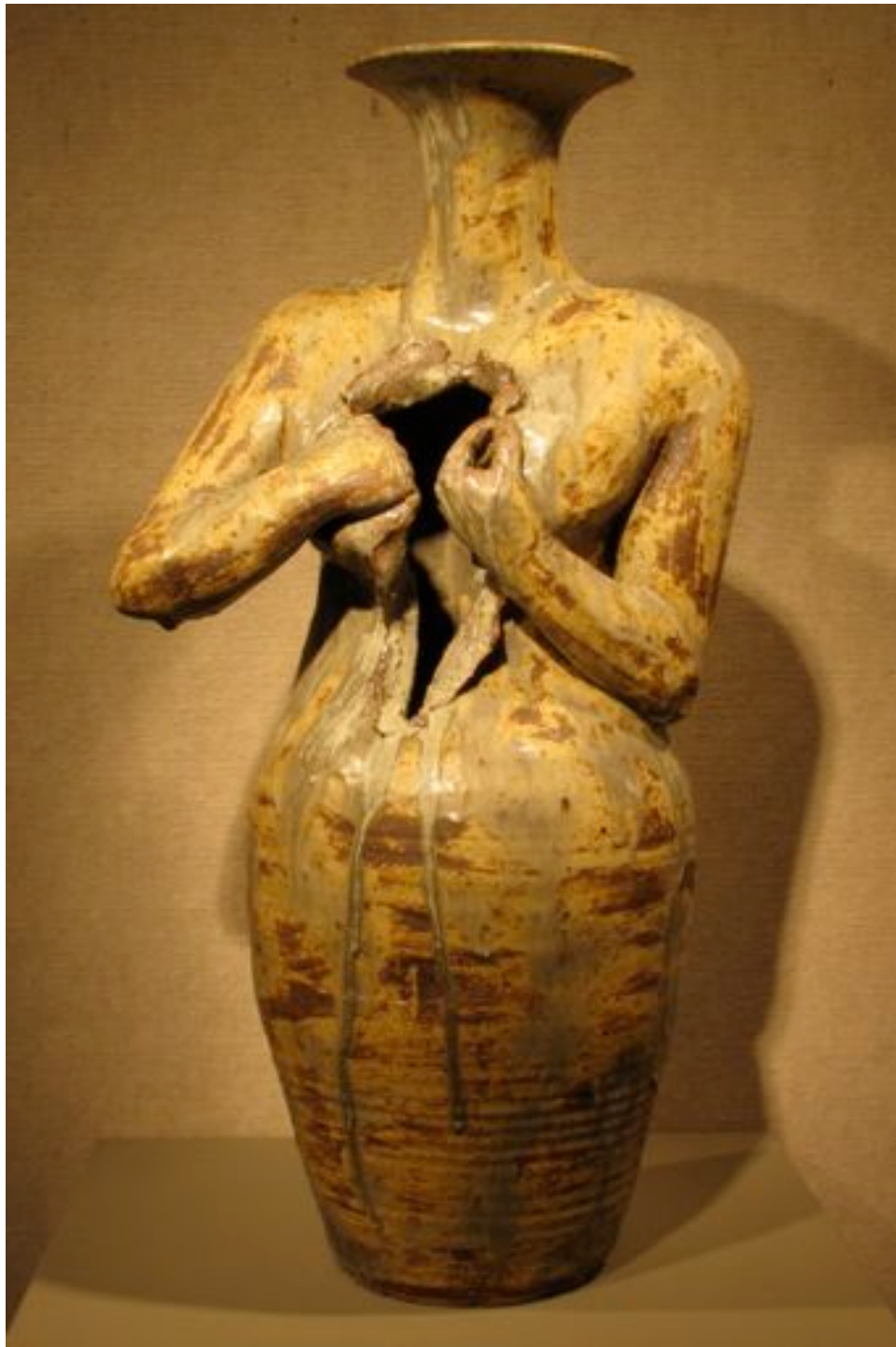


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Figure 15. Untitled. This figure illustrates the first sculptural piece made by the artist.