







Kathy Butterly

Miniature Monuments

April Kingsley

Had personal tragedy not intervened, Kathy Butterly would probably be making room-scale ceramic sculptures today. As an undergraduate at Philadelphia's Moore College of Art, she had been fired up by the work and the energy of visiting artist Viola Frey. She was making over-life-size figures of her own and planning to continue in that mode while working for her masters degree at University of California at Davis under Robert Arneson. But upon her arrival at graduate school, after having suffered a shocking sudden loss and feeling completely alone in unfamiliar surroundings, she focused ever more intensely inward. Later she realized it was a gift, one which enabled her to plumb emotional depths she might never otherwise have known, and discover a new self. Arneson always supported her work, though the temper at Davis was anti-throwing and she was making classical vessels.

He was like another father to her, even fixing her up with studio space on his property after graduation, but she doesn't feel she was particularly influenced by him. Their work shares an irreverent humor, but it is obvious that Ron Nagle and Ken Price affected her much more. Working with smallish, slipcast objects, glorious, sensuous surface glazes achieved over multiple firings, and reveling in the metaphoric implications of the vessel form, Nagle and Price created a rugged little world that could readily admit the feminization Butterly would subsequently introduce.

Butterly used classical curvaceous vessel shapes (especially the amphorae, *oinochoe*, and *lekythos*), that relate directly to the female body, until the mid-1990s when a kiln disaster freed her to change to a cup form she had been pondering. She has been working with cups ever since, though she has recently begun to think about closed forms. She starts with a slipcast from a mold of a large glass, ringed in round bulges from wide top to narrow foot. Removing it from the mold while still damp, she lets it sag and then begins to push its walls in here, poke them out there, until something clicks—a shape begins to seem human or to imply some bodily interaction with another shape. Sometimes women's clothing (nylons, a sweater) sparks the shaping of an area or its surfacing; at other times it may be a kitchen utensil, or a toy. She noticed that while she was carrying her first child, she made a lot of very round pieces, and lately there have been a number of squared off works with bright colors, like baby's toys.

Weeks, months may go by as the shapes are refined, the foot attached (usually it is a lower-fired class that shrinks to fit the body in the firing process), tiny beads and threads of clay attached, and layers of slip applied, then "sanded down" with tiny paintbrushes, until the whole piece is formally satisfying. Finally bisque fired, the piece then needs an average of 18 to 20 additional firings for the glaze applications. (Thus far the longest working time has been nine months on *Double Knit*, a piece she decided needed a sweater, which she proceeded to knit onto it with clay threads.) Having gained good control over glazing, she welcomes the rare accident, which sparks new ideas.

Butterly's glaze hues are more like the indescribably beautiful greens, yellows,

and pinks found in Indian miniatures than anything in pottery history, with the exception of her celadon green. Like Nagle and Price, she exploits both the glassiness of glaze to achieve sumptuous smoothness and its molten lava crustiness for heightened textural effects. She likes to contrast them in the same piece, as happens in *Winging It*, a miniature monument to motherhood. The erotic playfulness and dance-like poses struck also recall Indian sculptural decorations. Whether feet or handle/arms are present, whether left as a single cylinder or divided into two or more sections, and whatever they are titled, Butterly's "oups" are suggestive of bodies whose parts and interaction are decidedly erotic. Like people, they have fronts, sides, and (often-pronounced) rears. "Legs" intertwine suggestively; handle/arms wind around, binding, or thrusting outward in joy.

Christopher Gustin is the only other contemporary ceramist who also deliberately stresses the voluptuous potential of the vessel's likeness to the female body, though the vessel-human connection can be seen as an underlying theme in much modern ceramic work. It was prefigured at the end of the last century by "The Mad Potter of Biloxi," George Ohr. The sagging bowl shoulders, loopy handle/arms, and pinched or twisted vessel midsections found in his work represent the same kind of expressive approach to the material taken by Butterly, which is remarkable, especially since she hadn't seen any of his work until Abbeville reprinted its monograph on him in 1995. Like Ohr, Butterly thins the walls of her vessels drastically to let the light shine through the glazes, adding to their vitreous appearance. A host of surface effects activate or decorate the many separate parts of a Butterly and an Ohr. In some of her pieces, beads, gold bangles, and colored cords are draped over, along, and around the work, tying these parts together.

As if to offset the voluptuous curvaceousness of the body of the piece, Butterly sets it on a base that is often squarish and furniture-like. Chinese tables, the low platforms supporting sculpted Japanese monks, the Buddha's lotus pedestal, or Krishna's throne may be her models. Like the erotic figures populating the temples of India and Indonesia, these sources are ubiquitous in the areas

Butterly's "oups" are suggestive of bodies whose parts and interaction are decidedly erotic. Like people, they have fronts, sides, and (often pronounced) rears.

Page 16: Leviathan (1999), 4 ³/₈" x 2 ³/₈", porcelain, earthenware, glaze.

Page 17: Sweat Socks (1998), 4 ¹/₂" x 2 ¹/₂", porcelain, earthenware, glaze.

This page: Sugar (1998), 5 ⁷/₈" x 5 ⁵/₈", porcelain, earthenware, glaze.



of Asia Butterly likes to visit. She and her husband, the painter Tom Burckhardt, travel these exotic lands by foot, being offered food and lodging in people's homes wherever they may be at the end of a long day's trek. The clothing and adornment of the common people in southeast Asia is often as elaborate and colorful as what is on view in the temples and established art venues, so she is on a first-name basis with the exotic in actuality as well as in art.

Though her work seems primarily influenced by things Eastern, its status as a luxury object of delectation sits squarely in the West. A few of the reasons why are the obsessive, Benvenuto Cellini-like attention to decorative detail, the Paul Klee-like playfulness and modest dimensions, the surrealistic sexual charge, and the Adrian Saxe-like mélange of cultural signifiers and luxe materials. Besides occupying a site somewhere on a continuum that runs from Fabergé eggs to Brancusi, Butterly has pop art and California funk in her framework, and she has the women's movement behind her.

The women's movement gave Butterly permission to make the personal public, which she does with relish in all of her work; to embrace "women's work," such as knitting and stitchery, which is a theme in *Knititation* (1998) and *Double Knit* (1996) but a subtheme running through a lot of her pieces; and to celebrate female sexual power, which she seems to do in *She Dynasty*, *Pillow*, and *Sugar*, all from 1998, in particular, but which feels ever-present in her work. Each piece tells a story or represents a fragment of her life. To the extent that she can communicate through her chosen forms to the rest of us, Butterly transmutes the tragedies and ecstasies, the fine and silly moments of her life to us. Our eyes follow her sensual forms and we are drawn into her small-sized, but profound world.

April Kingsley is the former curator of the American Craft Museum and author of The Turning Point: The Abstract-Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art. Presently she is curator of art at the Kresge Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan.

This page: Knititation (1998), 5" x 2", porcelain, earthenware, glaze.

Opposite: Tonic (1997), 5 1/4" x 2 1/2", porcelain, slip, glaze.



