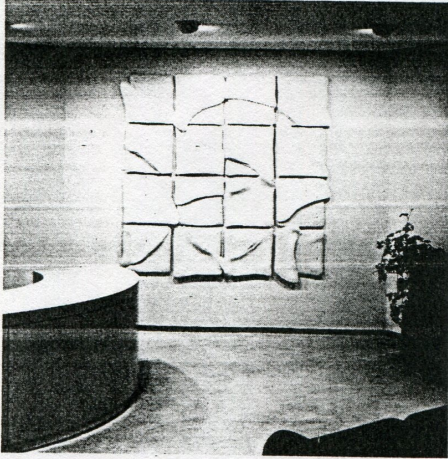


Marylyn Dintenfass

April Kingsley



Quadrille (1979), 72" x 72" x 3" (180 x 180 x 7.5 cm). (Right) installed at Benton & Bowles, Inc., New York. Photos: John O'Donnell.

During the seventies, countless women artists made the crucial and difficult move from home to studio and from an intimate personal mode to a more public, universally accessible style. Ceramist Marylyn Dintenfass was among them, but when she moved she took with her the excess baggage of negative associations that have so long burdened her medium. Thinking positively, as is her wont, she found ways to turn the material needs of the ceramic medium into an advantage by organizing the first cooperative industrial workspace for women in her Westchester town. And her choice of clay served to humanize, one might even say feminize, the otherwise impersonal, large-scale architectural commissions that have occupied her in recent years.

Like many other women making their first artworks, Dintenfass celebrated her newly liberated feminine sexuality in overtly voluptuous abstract images, covert references to the female body. But by 1978 only the sensuous handling of the clay and the soft, clothlike, folded imagery remained to speak as a whisper of things feminine, as they did, for example, in *Autumn Palette*. For her, as well as for a number of other women at this time, the Minimalist grid with its gentle, soothing repetitiveness and its sense of progression or sequence became the compositional format of choice, and she continues to explore its potential today. Clay readily lends itself to the production of nearly identical shapes, its oldest function as container assured by its easy replicability. But it is clay's lack of absolute predictability that makes its application to the grid so valuable. The effects of chance, those little differences, the subtle shifts from one unit to the next, are what bring the rigidity of the grid to life.

When Dintenfass manipulates the grid, it seems as malleable as the material from which it was constructed. Or more, perhaps, like fabric or paper than high-fired porcelain. The sagging folds and rounded corners of *Quadrille* (1979), installed at Benton & Bowles, New York, form interior curvilinear shapes that belie the rigidity of the separate squares comprising its sixteen-unit grid. Its organic naturalness, while addressing the soft sofa and curved desk that accompany it, also relaxes the stiffness of the architectural setting. Agnes Martin's grids are pale pink and blue; Michelle Stuart's

are formed of "Mother's" earth that has been rubbed lovingly into their surface; Paula Tavins sewed hers in little canvas bag units; and Howardena Pindell covers hers with a snowfall of confettilike paper dots and sequins. Marylyn Dintenfass's grids are no less softly feminized, despite their actual porcelain-hardness.

Dintenfass intuitively exploits clay's chameleonlike adaptability. She uses it not for its *trompe l'oeil* reproductive potential, but for its illusionistic imitativeness, profiting in the way thin sheets of wet porcelain clay can be handled like cloth, bunched, folded, draped, or like paper, the rough, untrimmed edges closely resembling the edges of handmade paper. The effect is not deliberate, but rather a natural outcome of her earlier involvement with those materials.

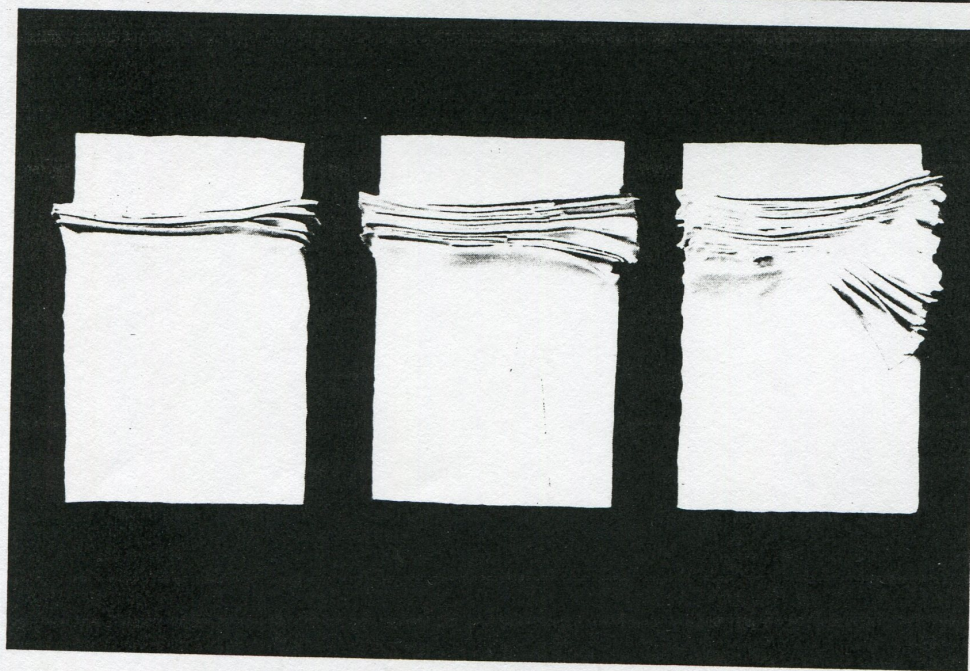
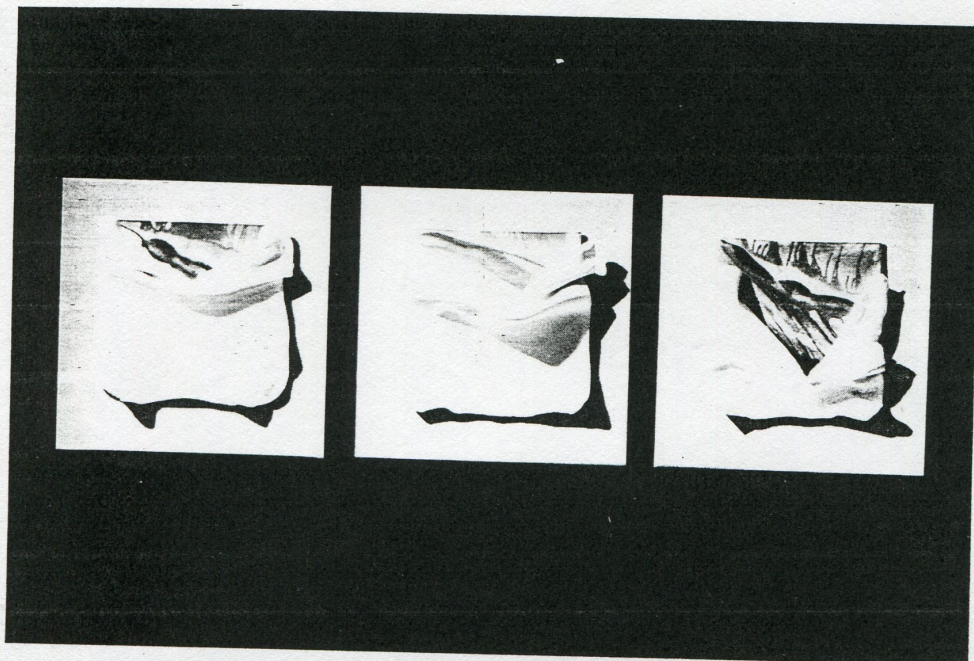
Both of her major commissioned installations—*Virgula* (1980), now in the New York offices of Main, Hurdman, Inc., and *Cubic Themes* (1981), in the IBM offices in Charlotte, North Carolina—seem deceptively paperlike on first glance. *Cubic Themes* seems to be comprised of stacks of deckle-edged paper, while the modules in *Virgula* resemble sheets of thick handmade paper folded at right angles like cards. Whether pierced by ceramic rods (*Virgula*) or seemingly strung in padlike bunches on ceramic tubes, the penetration of the shapes augments their illusion of paperlike vulnerability.

The tubes and rods are the linear elements she uses most to play against the larger planes and to create illusions that manipulate one's perception of the work. Often this is done to orient the work to its architectural setting, and to mediate the architecture and the people inhabiting it. In *Cubic Themes*, Dintenfass picks up the two main horizontal divisions of the lobby's other walls in the two dark rows of tubes that cut across the whitish vertical bands that comprise the main body of the piece. The "tubes" unify the work's three main sections; the upper, larger one "stringing" three huge, chunky triangular wedges across the gap on the left, while the lower, smaller-scaled one strings three medium-sized cubes across the gap on the right. All this serves to push the work physically and psychologically out into the viewer's space while linking it tightly to the room's design.

The rods in *Virgula* function subtly and differently, conveying the illusion of a

Autumn Palette (1978), 24" x 72" (60 x 180 cm). Photo: Rich Baldinger.

Straight Progression (1979), 24" x 54" x 6" (60 x 135 x 15 cm). Photo: John O'Donnell.



simple geometrical system of parallel and diagonal linear elements reading against and in counterpoint to the square, right-angled units. Actually the system is quite complex, but what's important about its complexity is that the artist has succeeded in overlaying a mechanical, ceramic process with a conceptual one. The skill it took to make dozens of nearly identical modules of unglazed grolleg porcelain (tinted with ochre/iron chromate oxide mist) is not denied, but rather emphasized by the design in which it is put to use. Dintenfass belongs to the new breed of ceramic sculptors who relish their technical triumphs. Yet they are not content to rest on their laurels within the confines of craft. She finds the engineering of complex wall works a fascinating challenge. Process is important in its own right, as it is for any fine artist. So too is the concept, the image. The aim is not simply to produce a well-made object that one may use and enjoy aesthetically, no matter how beautiful; rather, it is to make ambitious work that engages the viewer on a larger scale, holding its own formally, technically, and conceptually against the best painting and sculpture of its time.

April Kingsley teaches art history and is a freelance contributor to numerous art journals. Last May she organized an "East Coast Clay" exhibition at the Sculpture Center, New York, where she is curator.