



Mother and Child. Stoneware and earthenware. 132 x 58.5 x 66 cm.

Ceramics of Compassion Abstract Sculptures of Ray Chen

Article by Patrick Timothy Caughy

ILLUMINATING THE INTERIOR SOURCES OF HER IMAGERY, Georgia O'Keeffe once called her abstracted forms 'equivalents'. She said, "I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at - not a copy of it." O'Keeffe altered essences of visible subject matter to express an unseen reservoir of feeling and empathy which could not be expressed in words. A parallel path of intensely personal shaping and encoding is evident in the recent ceramic sculpture of Gow Hwei (Ray) Chen. In his dyads of large abstract and faceless forms, all entitled *Mother and Child*, Chen compiles layers of internal, personal sentiment with a masterful command and trust of clay. His compositions become a chorus of filial devotion and pathos.

A 38-year old native of Taiwan, Ray Chen has come to his status as sculptor by an indirect route. Eighteen years of classical training in violin and voice preceded a Bachelor degree from Taiwan University. Awards for vocal performance followed that accomplishment. Disoriented with the conformity to the established music of historic composers, Chen found incentive and inspiration in the artistic life of his family. His mother, Cheng Wah Gow, had been a

respected practitioner of Japanese ikebana. Her training attuned his eye and hand to the power of placement, proximity and the evocative tensions of positive and negative spaces.

Departing from professional musical performance, Chen pursued a direction in visual arts. First in drawing, then in clay, he sought a medium which could be both a livelihood and a voice for an emerging sense of independence. Over seven years he acquired skills of handbuilding and the potter's wheel. These were refined amid a circle of craftsmen dedicated to the renewed reproduction of Song Dynasty-styled wares. Lessons gathered in this immersion in traditional disciplines were lasting. "The forms were beautiful and I learnt about classic Chinese aesthetics which emphasize uniformity and smoothness of line and texture," he recalls.

Next he apprenticed with the Taiwanese sculptor, Margaret Sui Tan. Her installation pieces were also influential. In creating new, non-functional components of porcelain, Chen once more integrated prior knowledge. "I think flower arranging influenced me. My mother taught me to think about formal



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qualities of objects and how they exist together in space." His mother's initial training prepared him to comprehend the interplay of space as a personal vocabulary emphasized by Tan.

Emigrating to America in 1991, Chen began a second undergraduate degree in ceramics at Ohio University. He sought an ever-widening bridge between the realms of Eastern and Western artistic practices. In a remark which could well serve as an emblematic refrain he exclaims, "I love freedom - it is why I came to the West and why I changed from music to ceramics." Brad Schwieger, his instructor, also reflects on several aspects to Chen's development. "As an older student Ray was more conceptually inclined in what he brought up in his work. Ray's work always seems to identify his place in the world, for example, Ray Chen and his environment."

Schwieger adds that although his themes may not always have been obvious, what was clear was Chen's "total passion for building and materials - almost taken to extremes". Multiples of stone, glass or found objects became the module forms in which Chen would articulate the mathematics of his place among others.

While at the university, family crises and illness compressed forcefully on Chen's life and art. His mother suffered a descent into disability through Parkinson's disease. This catastrophe became the forge on which to re-examine his sense of family and duty, so requisite a Chinese virtue, with his commitments to an artistic career far from home. As he continued graduate study at the Rochester Institute of

Technology, he discovered solace and example in the innovations of modernism. In the sculpture of Henry Moore, he met an eloquent soloist who enunciated the depths of connection between mother and child. Chen was inspired to reinterpret that ancient and universal theme from his own experience. From an array of tensions over cultures, family demands and artistic traditions, he distilled his own nascent 'equivalents', in clay.

Like O'Keeffe, Moore's genius was to charge abstracted forms, full of twisting spaces, with "spiritual vitality". Such energy, Moore declared had an "indirect expression" - an indirectness consonant with the diffidence ambient in Chinese society. Writing in his 1997 thesis statement, Chen explains how that society prepared him to perceive objects with spiritual significance. "I re-examined myself through Western ideas. I thought about forms, textures, a variety of materials and structural ways to combine this with a sense of spiritual vitality." Onward from that insight, the theme of *Mother and Child* emerged as an compelling focal point of articulation.

Awarded a fellowship at the Baltimore Clayworks in 1997, Chen has continued residency there as an artist/teacher. Attracting students by the power of his work, he is esteemed for his individual and gentle attention to their needs. Chen remains a generous and integral presence in the ceramic community of the region.

His latest sculptures stood in survey with other claywork artists in the exhibit, *A World of Hands and Fire*. Resting atop custom-built pedestals, this trinity