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Ryan Mitchell  
The Birth of Rubble



*Article by Stephen Glueckert*



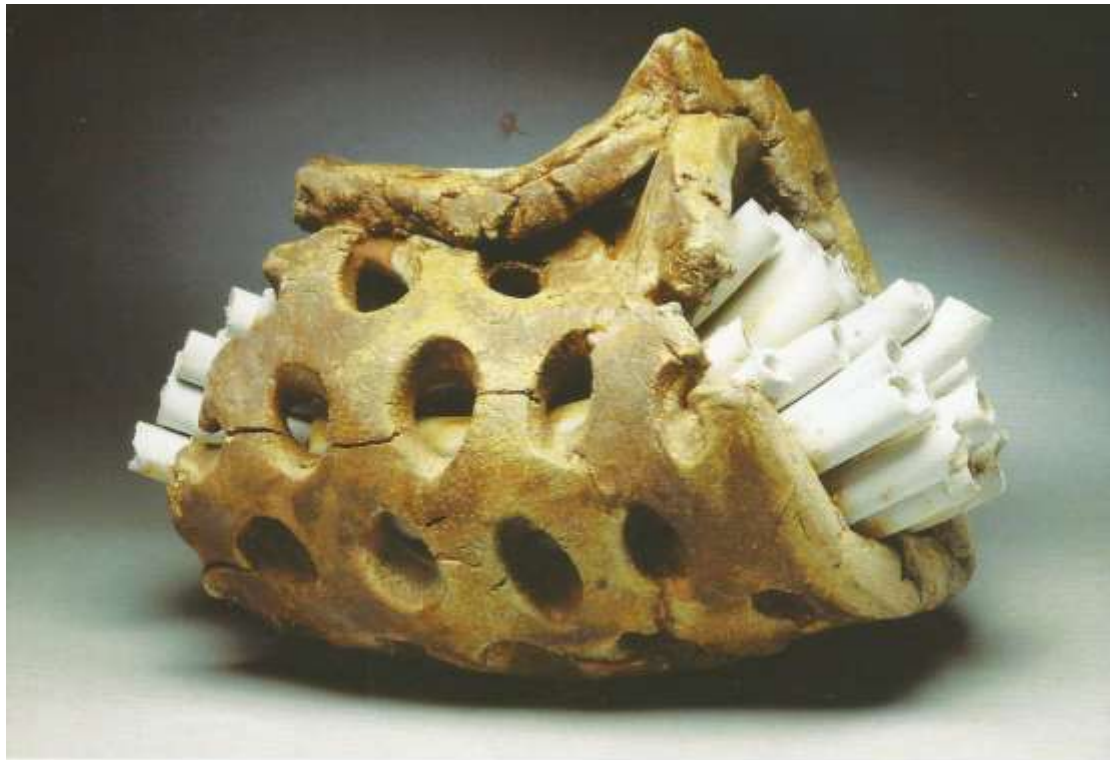
*Latigo*, 2007. 50.5 x 45.5 x 45.5 cm.

WALKING INTO A RECENT EXHIBITION IN MISSOULA Montana, hosted by A&E Architects to view the exhibition *The Birth of Rubble*, one immediately senses the pure physicality of Ryan Mitchell's work. Large woodfired works like *Bundle* and *Moses* feel as if they have erupted from the sediments of the earth; they reference a makeshift tool or carrier. As Mitchell has described, "I tend to look for meaning and truth in the residue and rubble of our daily world, rather than the pursuit of our ideal goals."

Like cross sections of the earth where the soil decomposes and regenerates, the cycle continues, and Mitchell presents us with a sense of movement, decomposition and reconstitution. His works speak for him and his moment. Mitchell states that his work, "explores the relationships between chaos and beauty". His artistic maturity comes through in the continuity of the surfaces and his attention to a professional and crisp presentation. The works proudly rest before us, suggesting the next moment in time. In

the *Birth of Rubble*, Mitchell's discipline and spirit of experimentation come through as he presents us with one resolved work after another: *Latigo*, *Lost Count* and *Ramses*. The control of the surfaces, establishing a frontal point of view and awareness of the edges reveal the artist's background as a painter. But they are not paintings, nor vessels or containers; his works are sculptures and executed in the same exquisite language as an eastern mystic.

Mitchell's aesthetic attitude toward unglazed surfaces is an approach increasingly appreciated by American ceramists. The structure and assembly of his forms show the individual and communal evolutions through the world of abstraction. His experimentation and unquenchable curiosity are layered like the surfaces he presents us, with a flash here, a reduction there. The physicality of these works, all recent, pay tribute to the visual language shared with clay artists of the Intermountain West. The influence of Rudy Autio and Peter Vouklos, and the camaraderie



*Bundle*, 2007, 55.5 x 45.5 x 50 cm.

of the 'clay village' in Montana are not lost on his audience. Mitchell conveys a sense of energy, full of passion for making, inspired by the past yet coupled with openness for learning something new. Having these regional clay masters as a direct influence is no surprise and undeniable similarities in Mitchell's approach can be seen. He pushes the limits of what clay might be able to do, ignoring the mantle of utility and focusing on the expressive nature of clay as a sculptural medium. Yet two generations later, Mitchell continues to till the fertile ground of abstract expressionism.

There is always a slight incongruity with the presentation of such abstract and expressive works in a sparsely populated region in the American West. It is too often a place simply considered by many, as a void between coasts or a place to contemplate while looking down when flying between important engagements. The American West is a place that is steeped in romanticism and narrative story telling. But Mitchell's work is anything but romantic. It is real and of the moment. His work is shockingly mature for a young artist, yet the influence of place seems profound. For the modern American ceramics movement has been shaped by a handful of artists who fearlessly tilled the soil of aesthetics and helped shatter the box of 'applied arts'. The stereotypes of the artist's role in society and academia

have changed a great deal in the past 50 years. From the country's interior, from places like Madison, Wisconsin, and Helena, Montana, rippling outwards to far parts of the world, clay artists live in a world that is much more of a society unto itself. That society relishes the isolated nature that nurtures creativity, experimentation and personal vision. And so shaped by skilled hands, tutored by masters and tempered by fire, the clay community has become a tight-knit village. Mitchell is an integral part of that community.

However, Mitchell's sculptural forms are visually eloquent in a way that reaches far beyond this place, for the internal relationships in his works are always challenging, and are anything but regional. The forms and surfaces speak to a connection of East and West. And the way that East found a home in the American West through Autio and Voukos clearly influences Mitchell. He loves surfaces and each is particular to itself. He has a respect for elder artists and those that have laid the ground work that continues to be tilled by the next generation. He pays attention to the vitality of the edges of his forms.

Like the earth's sedimentation, these layered edges, are like the layers of his ideas that capture time's passage. He continues to reflect upon "the fluctuations in the world between brute hostility and beauty" and the place of art in his life and the world around him. In



Moses, 2006. 45.5 x 25.5 x 25.5 cm.

both the artist and his work, time and movement blend in an ageless manner. While Mitchell carries the spirit of Aulio and Voukos into contemporary art, his voice is unique. I conducted an interview shortly after the exhibition asking him for a brief description of his works right now. Mitchell replied:

*Most of what I am concerned with in my work tends to balance oppositions or contradictions, whether they are physical, conceptual or simply the real world events and motives in my work.*

Who are the artists who have influenced you most significantly?

*In terms of ceramics, I think it goes without question that my work would be affected by Voukos, especially in terms of how I engage and handle the material. It is important that the work made is affected by the use of my hands in a primary way, even if it is not apparent or so evident in the final product. In a similar sense and more importantly I think my work at its foundation is informed by the early work of Richard Serra. In much of my work I am trying to orient my relationship with the clay in a way that records an event or series of actions as much as the set of consecutive processes normally involved in creating ceramic works. It is an effort for the verbs in the creative process to speak more effectively in the end. In addition, there is often an emphasis on the horizontal or an attempt to acknowledge gravity in some way.*

Can you cite some of your non-art influences?

*One of the bigger influences on my work came about*

*from going back and reflecting on the nature of the physical environment in which I was raised. Working in clay, and especially woodfiring has had the effect of re-orienting my perspective to things in our world much closer at hand. I was raised around tools, equipment and material supplies to the point that the demarcation between work life and domestic life was ambiguous. This ambiguity is definitely something that has informed my subject matter as well as served as a vehicle to question the nature of our world and our intentions within it.*

Where does your instinct for abstraction come from?

*For me abstraction becomes necessary when ambiguity is used as a means to finding clarity; it's much like a koan I suppose. I like to float between abstract forms and literal representations. It's about pulling away the concreteness of the known and familiar, to a place of greater potential understanding. The way I work is on certain levels about understanding my own relationship to the world, through a physical engagement with the material. By means of that path I have come to a fuller awareness of certain ideas. However, I am in no way interested in making any concrete assertions through my work. It is a process of making a gesture at an intuition rather than a reliance on the language of a limited idea.*

To many people it seems mysterious how you put these forms together in clay. Can you describe your working methods?



*Lost Count*, 2006. 38 x 5 x 38 cm.

*I think clay is the most effective material at recording the will of the artist. This is because of its plastic nature when wet, but also because of its tendency to express its original state despite the intentions of the artists and because of this it often conveys the relationship between material and artist. I look at and work with clay from the concept of base materials and their primary meanings and cultural associations. The clay can be itself as base earth or often resemble steel and concrete, the bulk work of our transformed world. Porcelain reflects a different set of intentions, and the convergence of these two materials balances the relationship. More and more, my working methods are concerned with immediate actions: bending, folding, tying, patching and such. It's the recording of those events with clay that matters. Joseph Beuys had the idea that if one could channel the wants of chaotic energy in the universe and put them into physical form and order, one could initiate a healing process; in certain regards my efforts follow this path or idea.*

*Woodfiring follows this idea of primary processes as well. My perspective of firing starts with the quite literal translation of the Japanese word for ceramic art 'burnt things'. At its simplest level it is participation in the process of creation, a Promethean kind of thing. That's not to give it a romantic appeal of any sort, but there is this thread throughout all of my work; the significance and*

*implications of how we choose to view, engage or treat the material aspect of our world is underestimated.*

*In *The Birth of Rubble*, many viewers responded to the freshness and originality of the shapes and forms. Where do these forms come from?*

*For me art is best when it is about understanding aesthetics, when it tries to distill the important things about our relationship with the world; how we navigate reality, or pay consciousness to certain things over others. Most of our decisions are made on value judgments based on use and exchange values, our intentions usually fall in line with these values. But our most truly profound aesthetic experiences are seen in brief flashes of sublime reality: events that escape our grasp and comprehension, we are left only with the struggle to distill meaning and understanding by sifting through the rubble and ash. The hardest thing is trying to hold on to these intangible and elusive experiences and meanings after the fact. So in some sense my forms serve as vehicles for this.*

Stephen Glueckert is Curator at the Missoula Art Museum. He has travelled and lectured widely and is a practicing artist. Ryan Mitchell was a resident artist at Australia National University in 2007, and completed works and exhibitions at the Fule International Ceramics Art Museums, Shaoyi China and XYZ Gallery Beijing China. Caption title page. *Rumesses*, 2006. 124.3 x 96.5 x 35.5 cm. All photography Chris Austin.