Ryan Mitchell
The Birth of Rubble

Article by Stephen Glueckert
Walking into a recent exhibition in Mesa, a host by A&E Architects to view the exhibition The Birth of Rubble, one immediately senses the pure physicality of Ryan Mitchell's work. Large wood fired works like Buadile and Mancos fired 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 rabble 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 Cause and Rankus. 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 glazed 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 Atilio and Peter Voulkos, and the camaraderie
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 for the most part did the same thing, 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, always challenging, and 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 Artaic and Voulkos 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 groundwork that continues to be tilted in 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
both the artist and his work, time and movement blend in an ageless manner. While Mitchell carries the spirit of Auto and Voukou into contemporary art, his voice is unique. I conducted an interview shortly after the exhibition asking him for a brief description of his work, right now. Mitchell replied:

Most of what I am concerned with in my work tends to balance opposites 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 saying that my work would be affected by Voukou, 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 Satin. In much of my work I am trying to extend 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 treating ceramic works. It is an effort for the verbs in the creative process to speak more effectively in the end. In addition, there's often an emphasis on the horizon in 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, 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 law I suppose. I like to focus 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 story I work with is 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?
Whisk 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 artist 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 subterranean or often resemble steel and concrete, the built 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 these events with clay that matters. Joseph Beuys had the idea that if one could channel the plants 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 of ideas.

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'. As the 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 distil 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 fleeting and elusive experiences and meanings after the fact. So in some sense my forms serve as vehicles for this.

Stephen Glueckert is Curator of the Minerals Art Museum, Heber City, Utah, and a practicing artist. Ryan Mitchell was a resident artist at Australia National University in 2007 and has worked and exhibited at the Felix International Ceramics Art Museum, Shanghai China and XYZ Gallery, Beijing China. Caption title page: Remains. 2006. 14 x 3 x 26 x 33.5 cm. All photographs Chris Aisby.