

# Tales of Stones

## Current Works by Hilda Merom

*Article by Sara Hakkert*

FOR MORE THAN FOUR YEARS HILDA MEROM, A PROMINENT Israeli ceramic artist has been dividing her time between her established line of work and a specific project, she calls *Stone Works*. The first works were exhibited at her installation in Jingdezhen, China in 2004 and since then she has created these objects, which are of great value to her in the formalistic sense, and metaphorically seen as milestones in human life. Looking at the fruit of the last half year's toil, one can see that a distinctive group of compact sculptures has emerged; it is a collection that has reached a maturity of beauty and strength.

It is quite hard to describe precisely the shape of the pieces because, although they are similar in nature, each one is unique in form and character. The most adequate affinity is to natural stones to which indeed they owe much of their initial concept and morphology. Stones and rocks, which are in abundance in nature, have played an eminent role in human life. Small as gems or as megalithic boulders found at prehistoric sites, stones bear cultural and emotional associations. They accompanied man from the very beginning of memory and they also do in modern times.

Merom's bonds to earth and landscape are deeply rooted. She lives in a beautifully situated village in the Galilee, the green but rocky hills in the north of Israel, in a stone house in which she had a great part in designing. "It took years of hard work," she points out "to realize that the means to my artistic development and authentic style are tightly bound to my local environment, to the landscape surrounding my home."

Stones and boulders are a presence accompanying her in daily life. The tactile qualities of stone forms, as well as their evocative nature, arouse sensations that are the cornucopia of inspiration to Merom. They were and continue to be a boundless resource for character and theme in her work.

The objects, or rather sculptures, were in the beginning of a round irregular shape, with their inception being on the wheel, which was soon abandoned. Now the pieces are constructed of slabs, modelled by hand. Some still allude to a round flattened vessel shape but mostly they are oval, elongated, altered and manipulated forms. Although flat, the walls still encompass space within, which is significant. The pieces have two axes, they can be placed either

*Untitled (Front). Saggar fired. 17 x 15 x 8 cm.*



*Untitled (Back).*



vertically or horizontally, thus changing their presence and stance.

In earlier works the two main facades exhibited completely different qualities, their surface having been worked in different ways. On the one side, the emphasis was on building a rough, dry texture; it was achieved by adding different materials to the clay body and on the surface itself. A craggy, sandy face with bumps and scratches characterize some of these pieces; it is as if having multiple layers that give visual depth. Then there is the wealth of shades of colour; patches and lines of black and greys beside spots of red, yellow and many in between. It is a vibrant surface full of incidents that catch the viewer's eye and takes him on a journey of meditation and wonder. Dramatization is added in most of the pieces by the addition of a patch of deeply scratched lines.

These are somewhat sombre sculptures yet strong and powerful.

The works are stoneware with most of them saggar fired in reduction. The saggar technique and its interrelated aesthetics, that only in recent years is gaining popularity in Israel, has been used by Merom for many years. She has developed her own

method, improved by long experimentation.<sup>1</sup> By and large the secret lies in understanding the array of inorganic and organic matter that is used and deciphering their outcome. Although it is thought that there is little control in this technique Hilda skilfully has achieved a large degree of proficiency in composing with the organic and inorganic matter on her surfaces which, she claims, serve her as a painter's canvas. Yet she admits, the element of chance and surprise is always there and is welcomed.

In contrast to the rough *façade*, the other side of the work (or back) is smooth, sometimes even polished. It is less aggressive, more pleasant to the touch and eye. In the last series of works Merom has glazed, one and sometimes both facades with a thick layer of white glaze that comes up close to the rim but does not cross it. The two layers of glaze are encircled by an undulating irregular darker rim, somewhat volcanic in nature, that results from the two naked clay slabs joined together.

The translucent, quietly opulent glaze, that reminds one of glacier ice, is enriched by accents of a variety of shades, lines and spots, created by brushed on metal oxides or coloured glazes but also by the play of light and shade on the luminous surface. It

Top: Left. **Untitled**. Reduction gas fired at 1300°C. 13 x 40 x 29 cm. Centre. **Ikebana Vase**. Reduction gas fired at 1300°C. 6 x 22 x 10 cm. Right. **Untitled**. Saggar fired. 8 x 30 x 20 cm.

Middle: Left. **Untitled (Front)**. Saggar fired. 8 x 24 x 8 cm. Centre. **Untitled (Back)**. Right. **Untitled (Detail)**.

Below: Left. **Untitled**. Saggar fired. 10 x 22 x 4 cm. Centre. **Untitled (View 2)**. Right. **Untitled (Detail)**.





reveals Merom's reverence for far Eastern clay cultures of which she has a broad notion. The lesson learned comes through her sensibility for working the clay and glazes.<sup>2</sup>

The highlight of these pieces is sometimes a small concavity, a kind of bowl placed off centre that alludes to a pool in which water will collect after the rain. In other works the water has worked its way through, during aeons of years and penetrated the stone, leaving a hole in it. Holes and openings are now constant meaningful elements in the artist's works. The openings invite us to focus and explore the inside, the hole can act as a connection between the two sides, it can also serve as a window that lets rays of sunshine come through.

The glazed pieces are of an altogether different aesthetic, they reveal a more placid harmonized nature. The scratches, present on the earlier stones that were a kind of attempt to peel the outer skin and dig into their soul, are gone now. The dramatic juxtaposition of elements such as smooth and rough, dull and shiny, inner and outer space, concealing and revealing, used previously as basic components by the artist, seem now to take a more reconciled attitude.

As Merom repeatedly points out, the interrelationship and bonds existent between nature and man prevail between her *stone works* and herself, or for that matter, she hopes, with any human being. The evocative nature of the sealed forms of stones, their

toughness, their abraded and weathered surfaces, are, for Merom, metaphors of human nature. They are fetishes that possess ancient secrets and magical power, they speak of time and eternity. There is no doubt that some of these thoughts are an underlying current in Merom's own stone sculpture.

Turning to these images she created a sustenance, a core from which she could draw strength, at the same time, imbuing them with her most inner feelings. Each piece carries a tale of memory, of place and time, of nature and the human condition. After a period of pain and stress in her private life, it seems that the artist can, once again, look at the world with a reconciled eye.

The surfaces of her latest stone sculptures are smooth, the water of life is again flowing and gathering in their small pools.

FOOTNOTES:

1. For more information on her saggar firing see "The Crust of Earth" 1998, *Pottery Making Illustrated*, US. ([www.hildamerom.com](http://www.hildamerom.com))
2. Merom has participated in exhibitions related to Eastern clay art in Israel and other countries. She was guest resident for six weeks in Sanbao Jingdezhen Ceramic Artists Center, China in 2004.

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Sara Hakkert is a potter and has written for many years on Israeli ceramic art in foreign reviews.  
Photos by Avi Hirschfield, Israel.

Left: *Untitled (Front)*. Reduction gas fired at 1300°C. 50 x 30 x 12 cm.  
Centre: *Untitled (Back)*.  
Right: *Untitled (Detail)*.

