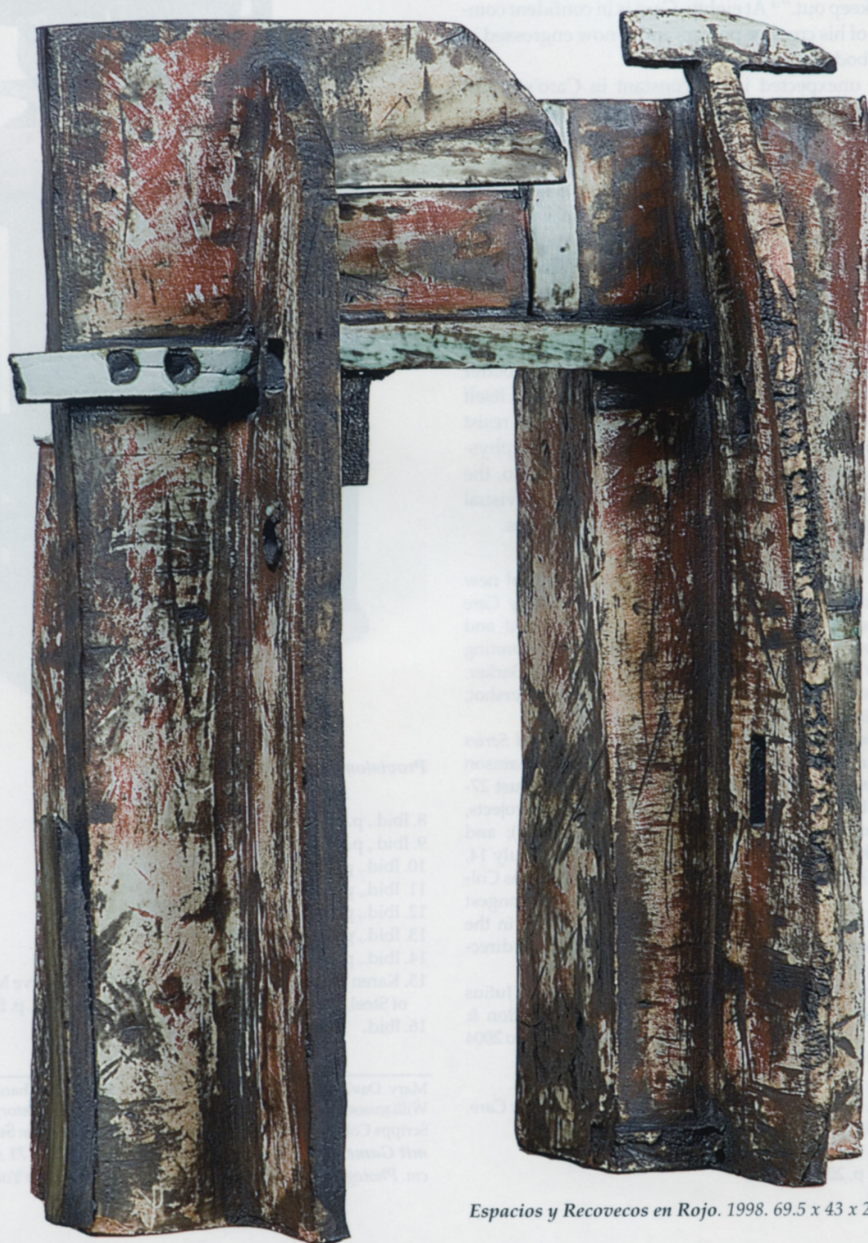


Toni Hambleton

# A Romantic of the Present

*Article by Enrique García Gutiérrez*



*Espacios y Recovecos en Rojo. 1998. 69.5 x 43 x 25.5 cm.*



YOU BE THE JUDGE WHETHER IT IS TRUE OR NOT THAT we face a romantic of the present as we stand before these works by ceramist Toni Hambleton. *Moons, Guardians, Temples and Walls, Murals, Ruins, Totems, and Spaces to Meditate In/On* (the latter exhibited in Miami) are the titles she has given to her artistic production of the past decade and a half, gathered together in a retrospective exhibition. They could all serve as headlines for an essay on the intellectual and artistic movement of 19th century Romanticism.

The titles evoke the romantic search, or flight, to places and architectures modified by time, hallowed as the stuff of myths and as inspirational motifs. Indeed, in Hambleton's ceramic sculpture her search for an individual artistic expression materialises as a simulation of self-analysis, an introspection in harmony with that canon. This poetic, intimate, glance – rooted in her historical and family ancestry – is also the testimony of a lifelong odyssey.

Toni Hambleton, the eternal voyager – Mexican by birth, with a spiritual commitment to the Mesoamerican heritage that never left her – went to the US to study and ended up marrying Robert Hambleton, Bob for all of us lucky enough to call him a friend. A North American, a Mexican, and their children, born and raised on the island – all wound up as Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, for Toni, the emotional and visual memories of her origins have always remained vivid. In her life's journey as a woman and as an artist, it was her mother who guided her first steps as a visitor to and as a witness of the past. In family trips to archaeological sites, or to the homes of ancestors, she would narrate the history, real and imaginary, of every monument and every place. In these early experiences enjoyed by the girl who would one day be an artist, are the beginnings of the journey of eternal return – that which we witness today.

In spite of the varied proposals, conceptual and plastic, brought to bear in her retrospective show (the titles give evidence of that variety) a common denominator reveals the pattern of thought that has ruled Hambleton's artistic evolution: monumentality, a dimension that is always present in her works, no matter the size. In *Temples and Walls, Spaces and Nooks, Spaces to Meditate In/On, Ruins, and Murals*, the plastic metaphor of an ordaining architecture could be thought of as evoking in itself the monumental scale. But that is not the case in *Lunas (Moons)* and *Centinelas (Guardians)* where monumentality is present regardless of their different identities, unrelated to architecture. In those two series, the support schemes, whether wall units or metal frames, are integrated to the pieces' overall design and contribute to enhance their character as sculptural objects, something shared by every piece in the collection.

Monumentality as an essential trait in Hambleton's work has an iconic origin and, on the other hand, is in



*Espacios para Meditar con Silla. 2002. 42.5 x 21.5 x 20 cm.*

itself a way to do and to think with clay. The icon I refer to would be hieratic, with a sacred function, a symbol with form and content set by historic tradition: that is, temples and walls, or ruins of past civilisations. (I do not refer to the current meaning ascribed to the word, as used to identify pop stars, sports heroes, fashion and show business idols.)

That way to do and think with clay is an essentially additive process that responds to the dynamics of aggregating bits and pieces that will ultimately define





*Portal of Many Hands. 2005. Murals or wall plaques.*

the finished object. The dialectics of thought and doing do not spring from a preconceived image, albeit it follows a disciplined search and experiences that guide the creative process, but it flows from memory and the will to bestow life upon the art object. Ironically, it is a process diametrically opposed to that which defined the work on ruins, temples and other archetypes that originally inspired her; in those, time has worn out what had been done, bringing to its metamorphosed de-construction state the aura of mystery that is ever in the company of history and its monuments.

If I have called Hambleton's work in ceramic sculpture her search for an individual artistic expression that materialises as a simulation of self-analysis, it is because her work is one of those expressive signs we must decode. Octavio Paz, her illustrious countryman, declared in one of the many occasions he has written on Mexican art: "I have spoken about beauty. It is a mistake. The appropriate word for Mesoamerican art is 'expression'. It is an art that tells but what it tells is told with such concentrated energy that it is always an expressive telling. Express: extract the sap, the essence not only from the idea but from the form."

Toni Hambleton tells us much with her art, evoking a reinvented past in contemporary simulation. She does not narrate the past, neither does she copy or represent the archetypes that inspired her. She



*View of Retrospective Exhibition Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico San Juan, Puerto Rico.*

extracts the idea of eternal return within each monument of the past and encrypts it as an enigmatic form that always refers to the monumental as the identity of remembrances made present.

Her *Guardians* and *Totems* embody their presence as silent witnesses and keepers of a grand odyssey that has not yet been completed. Like every artist of exceptional merit, she is condemned to never arrive to her port of departure, since that is within her being. Have a good journey, dear friend, for while it lasts we will share art, adventure and life.

Enrique Garcia Gutierrez is a writer on the arts from Puerto Rico. This retrospective exhibition was held at The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Juan, Puerto Rico.