



# NEW CERAMICS

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NEUE KERAMIK

# THE NATURE OF NATURE

Justen Ladda

**D**aisy Youngblood is a sculptor who chose clay as her primary medium to create mysterious, often haunting works of such visual intensity that they seem only a small step away from coming alive.

Her work is figurative and revolves around the forms of living, breathing beings: animals and humans. It is both very modern and archaic, with aspects that touch on that part of animal-and human nature which cannot be explained in words – only sensed or imagined in their powerful presence.

The sculptures look like they existed long before they ever came into being, just waiting to be called upon in some parallel universe.

The work is breathtakingly beautiful in the way it combines a raw materiality that goes to the essence of clay as a medium with a highly pitched sensitivity to how emotional and spiritual states of being and character manifest themselves in gestures, postures and facial expressions.

Much of the hypnotic intensity of the work comes from the openings in the places where we expect to see eyes and meet a gaze but instead are drawn into a dark void. It seems that as we enter these voids, a part of us animates the sculptures and they begin to breathe.



*The following is an email interview done over several months, edited for smooth reading.*

*Where did you grow up, what was your family like and what kind of childhood did you have?*

I grew up in North and South Carolina, both sides of the family were rural people who had lived in the mountains of North Carolina for many generations, my father's people were farmers and my mother's were artists. My grandparents house had many paintings all over the walls and large wood carvings done by my grandmother. I always knew I was of this lineage of female artists, my grandmother died when I was three but the artwork kept us connected, and I knew I would continue this relating to my grandchildren through art. But I didn't intend to include those outside the family.

*What is the first thing you remember making in clay?*

I was the middle daughter with a brother the oldest, and always felt very close to him. It was while waiting for him to come home on the school bus, sitting by the road in a ditch of red clay that I made my first clay sculpture, a bear, and no I never thought of it as a toy, it was serious and sat on the book shelf for a long time. Sometime during those years, age 4



opposite page - *Mother and Child* - 1987 - low fired clay and wood - 41 x 15 x 10cm

above - *Horse on a Rock* - 1980 - low fired clay and stone - 21 x 52 x 19cm

or 5, I was sitting on the bed next to my mother while she was breast feeding my sister. I must have been feeling very left out, because I remember looking over at the window which was dark from the night, and seeing a large bear head looking in at me, who said clearly "Don't worry because I am your real mother". It was profoundly comforting and remained with me.

*Did your parents encourage your creativity?*

My parents thought of me as an artist from the time I was very little, we moved away from red clay to South Carolina on the coast, so I didn't do any more clay sculptures. But I dragged in dead animals, loving their bones and longing so for a horse that I once rebuilt a skull I had found with cotton and paint and cardboard ears from toilet paper rolls. When finished, after a lot of work, I found it repulsive, cleaned it off and realized I could see the horse much better in the bone.

I painted and drew and seemed to always be accepted as an artist, some teachers even saying I didn't have to do the school work if I

just drew. I didn't make very good grades and only wanted to go to art school as I was of a class that after high school went to college. I was not at all interested in working or having a career. But I was curious about modern art and wondered how fame existed around art, I had no notion of being one, but thought I might marry an artist and live it for a while.

*At what point did you make up your mind to become an artist? Where did you go to art school, what did you study? How did art school help you?*

About the third year of art school in Richmond, Virginia I was ready to quit and go to the Amazon to be an Indian when I found myself pregnant. At that point I rekindled the desire to go to New York with my husband and be an artist's wife. It was the late sixties, we had our little baby and lived in the lower east side, my husband worked at Max's Kansas city and I roamed the streets with our son.

Not until separating ten years later did I want to be a professional artist, before then I had kept my work hidden, it was still for a family



lineage. But friends encouraged me and I could find no other way to make a living. I was very shy, however, art school and the ten years being an artist's wife gave me the confidence to know that what I did had merit, also by then I had come to know many great people who were living in the art world. I was finding meaning in other people's work and realized I was part of a culture.

***Could you talk about the nature and evolution of your technique, for example, what kinds of kilns have you used over the years, what kind do you use now?***

I started using clay when I needed hollow forms, I picked up some clay on Long Island when I was on a school outing with my son's class. For firing I only knew that you needed fire, so I went out to the end of Chambers Street where we lived and in the vacant lots built a fire and cooked them. They weren't really fired but I didn't know that until they were sold and broke and the collectors saw that they wouldn't glue back. After showing with the Willard Gallery and having some recognition, I was offered a teaching job one day a week at a N.Y. school, they had a kiln in the basement and someone said I could use it. So I put my pieces in and turned it on and left for the day, coming back and taking them out in the evening, I still didn't know about temperatures or cones but everything came out pretty well. I used local, dug up clay, and sometimes pieces melted. Later I enjoyed a low fired wood kiln made by my present husband in Costa Rica, but now because we move so often I am back to bisc firing in a

gas or electric kiln and then wood firing for color.

***Please talk about the element of chance in the making of the work and the firing process, do you play with it, do you try to control it, do you have any anecdotes?***

I don't like firing, once in France I made my own kiln, looked in the peep hole when I heard a pop, and the kiln blew up right in my face. I lost most of that eye. I get stubborn and frustrated around the wood firing, never remembering how, but if I go back to my old way and just go off by myself and build a fire it usually works. Though it may take several tries.

***Who or what were your early influences?***

Certainly my maternal family as I have already expressed, but later living in N.Y. as introverted housewife, I was greatly influenced by Susan Rothenberg. I remember seeing her big horse paintings and thinking, "we know the same horse" and feeling power and meaning from this exposure of what felt to me to be an ancient way. (In thinking of the horse as the subtle body, a body that connects us to others, her horses thundered through a wall that had been closed a long time). We lived near each other so I introduced myself to her in the grocery store, we also had very young daughters who played in the same park, and soon she came over and saw my work and helped me into the Willard Gallery. Through her work and her generosity, she invited me to be a part of the culture.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

left page -

**Kalu Rimpoche** - 1999 - low fired clay  
15 x 13 x 13cm

**Tulku #1** - 1999 - white clay and porcelain  
26 x 13 x 9cm

right -

**Horse Crucifixion** - 1975 - low fired clay and wood  
29 x 30.5 x 5cm



**What does the image of the horse mean to you? I know many women who have a special affection for horses and wonder why that is.**

Yes horses are powerful images, especially for women. I think its their long horizontal movement, like our bodies without arms, moving, and not even our own feet, and fast as if directed by another force. I think of them as the subtle body, a movement within us like a will that works in conjunction with something different from the ordinary mind. Not a personal will, but one that is intended by a higher mind, something that I have to learn to ride. Where some see this horse energy associated with male sexuality, I think it is an image females use to not direct their will through men. The first horse I did in clay was the horse crucifixion, this one also came quickly in a vision and was easily done, it brought the feeling aspect of the sacrifice that was taking place. Not a feeling of horror as usually associated with a crucifixion but one of love that comes with letting go. Actually its about the horizontal movement of the horse being made vertical, connecting the personal to the higher.

**How do you see the process of creation in your work?**

Much of which looks like it made itself and existed before it was made. Many artists feel something take over when they are in deep concentration, later they say they don't feel like they did the piece, it was done through them. I think of this power as Awareness. Likewise, when there is terrific suffering and our rigid consciousness can't

handle the situation, Awareness "speaks" to us through paranormal means, visions, voices, synchronistic events. Our egos experience the occurrence as coming from outside of us, but we are actually within IT. Awareness is the underlying, harmonious event called Life.

**How does your sculpture fit in with this way of thinking?**

Awesomeness, I guess we could call it, has always expressed itself to me visually and therefore needed form. Sculpture is how I relate to being alive in a continually changing form. From the time I was very little I occasionally had visions, they never frightened me nor did I ever consider them to be concrete, but I was aware that they were real and meaningful, that they were me in another form. Usually this gave me a sense of comfort, that the cosmos was personal, that I was being taken care of. I had the foundation of Emptiness so important to Buddhism but I did not have the Buddhist culture to support it. But as I grew up and had to deal with the outer world I got mesmerized by the question of who was in this body. For a long time I did self-portraits, working from the mirror or drawing my feet. I was trying so hard to get inside this body that didn't seem like me, didn't describe who I was. Even though I stared at myself in the mirror for hours there were several times during this period that I caught sight of myself and didn't recognize who it was, actually thought she was someone else for a few seconds. I was really stuck like this for many years and didn't let people see these things I made, had fights with those who wanted to know what I was doing. Eventually, and painfully I had to come out.



*But then eventually you started making your self portraits in three dimensions...*

... The self portraits started being constructed of tree limbs and in parts, abstracted. I was really feeling the dismemberment, and then I found myself trying to carve the inside out, wanting them to be hollow and realized it would be easier in clay as vessels. When someone turned me on to Jung I started studying myself through dreams and vowed to quit with the self-portraits, quit approaching myself from the outside. I was also studying astrology and about that time a stick that I had laying in the corner, one that I had picked up because it looked just like my backbone, slithered across the floor like a snake and I saw my hand grab it behind the head and hold it up. This didn't happen physically but I saw it happen right in front of me. So I started making a wooden hand holding the snake backbone and made a little clay head for the snake. It turned out to be the sign for saturn so I think of it as the beginning of taking responsibility for consciousness, of seriously working at it.

With that piece I immediately got noticed and soon began showing and selling. But also separating from husband and suddenly having to support myself and two children. To guide me through this very difficult time of rapid change, the dreams and visions got strong and precise.

*Why do you choose animals as subjects in so many of your works?*

It's really the human realm I am dealing with, but using human imagery is so connotative, unless abstracted, and then it loses the feeling aspect. I think I am using animal reference to draw out my boundaries. Usually it starts by a strong attraction to an image of an animal, in a photograph or real life, and then I try to work out what it is about the image that grabs me. I don't identify with any of the

particular animals but feel like animals open up something in humans that is common to all of us, and by going into what ever it is, we gain some personal connection to all living form. It's a way to open up feeling.

*You say that you don't identify with any of the animals - yet it seems that you create them from a deep understanding of their nature, which is so different in all of them. Your donkey radiates donkeyness, your cheetah is all cat. How do you choose your animals?*

Like I said about the horse, it is a movement a certain animal will represent, a gesture, or expression and while that attachment to the movement is going on I will see that animal in everything, I will notice many people seeming like goats or crying like cheetahs. Then as soon as the piece is finished it will be over. Then some come back unfinished. So except for whatever message, so to speak, is coming from the image of a certain animal I am not particularly attracted to them. Well, not obsessed anyway.

*Please talk about the eyes of your sculptures. Were there always empty sockets or didn't I see pieces that had eyes? How do you think of eyes in general, as one of the key elements of a face, human or animal? Do you think they are the windows to the soul?*

I think of the whole piece as a vessel, not empty eye sockets! The hollow aspect is very important, I would like it to feel like a shell, and the normal openings, eyes, etc. are the obvious ways to show this. I don't use the term soul because it generally implies an individual. I am benefiting by doing the sculptures, by passing through and changing, and would like it to effect the viewer that way also.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

opposite page -

**Elephant head** - 2001 - low fired clay - 89 X 24 X 33cm

**Sri Ramana Marharshi** - 2003 - bronze - 36 x 13 x 30.5cm

right -

**Little Head of Chagdud Tulku Rimpoche** - 2003 - bronze - 15 x 9.5 x 11.5cm

below -

**Dylan's Cheetah** - 2001 - low fired clay - 11.5 x 12 x 13cm

*Can you talk about clay as a medium for your work and about the translation into bronze. How does it change the work?*

I noticed you pretty much leave the bronze surface alone and don't give it an obvious patina. Surface is very important and hard to get right, I don't want any surface, I want to see the piece from the inside first. So hard surfaces in clay are repulsive, if I accidentally fire them too hard I have to throw them away. The dead look of bisque fire is awful, so I wood fire them to get the surface to soak in and be soft. I think of it as drawing and do it many times to get it acceptable. Clay is so great for me, as I sometimes rework it for years trying to find out what I am doing. Also there is the fragile, very subtle gesture that I can only get through moisture and waiting for shrinkage. And then the purity and rawness allows me to get lost in it. The bronzes let me keep a copy and let it be seen when the clay one breaks and makes what happened in the clay be seen by more people. And then they enable me to make a better living with the work. Its very frustrating not be able to do the patinas myself, I just want nondescript subtle depth.

*Thank you Daisy...*

Thank you Justen!



*Justen Ladda is German born and lives since more than 25 years as Fine Artist in New York*

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