

Tim Rowan

Time Again

An essay by Janet Koplos



IT SEEMS AESTHETICALLY APPROPRIATE THAT TIM ROWAN lives in the Hudson Valley, New York, town called Stone Ridge. His house and studio are up a winding road from the village itself, on wooded acreage with meandering stone walls left from years ago when it was pasture land. His buildings shoulder up to a great grey outcropping of the bluestone that once was quarried in this area. Bluestone, he has learned, is actually compressed clay, so recently he has begun to experiment with firing it to make small sculptures. It can be glazed and it also develops interesting expansion and fracture effects. This literal stone work is an addition to his major works, large sculptures with a craggy, coarse, stone-like effect.

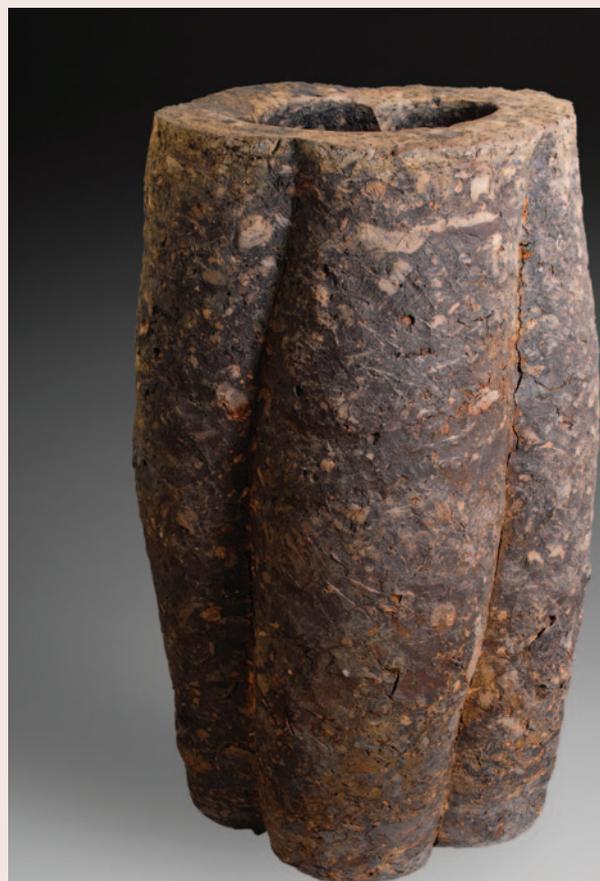
Ironically, although Rowan has a strong interest in local clays, these large works are not from Hudson Valley digs but from New Jersey. That is because his truly local sources are brick clay and don't give him the qualities he is after. He uses the New Jersey material just as it comes from the ground. This truth-telling is visible on the surface: in pits and stains where iron has melted, in knuckle knobs of small stones and so forth. This clay does not make you think of 'dirt' – fine and dusty – but of 'earth', a larger reference to the complex mixture under our feet, the weathering rock on which we stand.

Rowan may be influenced by long familiarity with this kind of landscape. He did his undergraduate study at nearby SUNY (State University of New

York) New Paltz and he grew up on the stony coast of Connecticut. He discovered ceramics during his first forays into college course work at a hometown school and it has held his attention since then. This background might seem rather geographically limited. Yet Rowan's other greatest influence was far afield: he apprenticed for two years in Japan. That opportunity was fostered by Hudson Valley potter Jeff Shapiro, whom Rowan had met and then assisted with firing. Shapiro knew Ryuichi Kakurezaki, a potter who lives and works in the Bizen area, site of one of the major ancient kilns of Japan, but who makes non-traditional forms. Rowan describes an intense experience: his day work involved such tedium as sweeping the studio and crushing clay with a hammer; his own work, in the evenings, was devoted to repetitively throwing cups.

His recent work, however, is all handbuilt. And aside from having made tea bowls and boxes (who hasn't?) and the fact that the first kiln he built at Stone Ridge was an Anagama (now replaced), he does not directly show the influence of Japan in his work. A drive to reveal material is not exclusive to Japan

*Facing page: Tall Oval Vessel. 2011.
Native clay, woodfired. 39 x 32 x 27 in.
Below left: Four Part Channels. 2011.
Native clay, woodfired. 34 x 24 x 22 in.
Below right: Object 115. 2011.
Native clay, woodfired.
36.5 x 18 x 14 in.*



and neither is a preference for the muted hues of ash glaze. Yet Rowan's story is all of a piece. It seems he followed a path he could not define, picking up the things he needed to know, one at a time. There was also grad school at Pennsylvania State University and a happy learning relationship with Chris Staley; the major benefit he got from grad school, he says, was a greater confidence in himself.

Rowan's first substantial body of work was boxes. The source of the idea was complex. Undoubtedly Japanese boxes figured in there somehow, since packaging is so important in that society that a noted critic has called it a box culture. Besides, he did a lot of packing in his apprenticeship. But the idea certainly came as well from funerary forms. The fact that at a young age he lost his father cannot have been irrelevant in this reference to mortality.

Such an experience would make anyone think about time and much of Rowan's work, including the large forms in this exhibition and fired-bluestone sculptures, imply various senses of time. It may be a sub-motif that runs through all his work. Of course, clay itself, as eroded rock and accumulated sediment, has time built into its substance and pottery, by leaving the marks of process, can encapsulate

the time of making, the artist's physical investment. Because ceramic is also familiar as shards, sometimes as the best evidence of ancient cultures, it constantly reminds us of the precariousness and ephemerality of a person's or object's existence. While the massiveness of Rowan's sculptures takes them out of pottery scale – no shard is so thick – their chiselled contours capture a powerful and moving sense of geological time. Hints of geological forms are not new to his work, but the large sculptures achieve a blend of rock and monument – natural form merging with man-made forms that aspire to the same durability.

Rowan speaks of nature as being significant to his work and not just in the raw material he uses and the organic process he engages in. It is also seen in these large works in the spirals that we recognise from nature. Spirals are growth forms, seen in living things (plants, snails) and growth means change. Rock once 'grew', but what we know of it today is its process of breaking down. So Rowan is imposing the spiral, aspiring upward, on his entropic rock-earth, which gives the work a certain poignancy. He is not the first to do this, of course: the columns of the ancient Greeks also tried to catch that swelling sense of life.

Some of the sculptures, in their twists, recall the *contrapposto* stance (weight on one hip) first seen in classical Greek statues or the defined musculature of

Below left: **Object 111**. 2011. Native clay, woodfired. 28 x 22 x 22 in.
Below right: **Object 114**. 2011. Native clay, woodfired. 30.5 x 15 x 16.5 in.



an athlete in action, such as a discus thrower. Rowan has also evoked the body with tubular shapes resembling thighs. The sculptures relate to the body in being approximately torso size (about three feet tall) and having contained space within. These references, however, pass like the shadows of clouds, rather than imposing an interpretation on us.

Surprisingly, though, Rowan says that the origin of the shapes was mechanical forms, for example gears. He remembers, during a residency at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana, looking at old tools and the abandoned buildings of the adjacent brickyard and he has sympathy for salvaged things, which typically show the effects of their previous history. With this hint, it is possible to see in a rugged spiral an enormously enlarged drill bit. The natural and the artificial are not always so far apart.

Thus it is clear that Rowan's sculptures have an encompassing identity, supporting multiple readings. Like the best abstract art, they are open to the imaginative participation of the viewer. Besides the aspects already mentioned (nature, technology, humanity) they also make reference to the vessel form itself, the ceramic origin-of-the-world. They are not, strictly speaking, vessels because they lack bottoms. That makes them suitable for placement outdoors, since they will not collect water. Anyway, they look right outdoors, whether the background is

vegetation or buildings, because they fall between those extremes, somewhat like each. They have sufficient simplicity of form that they 'read' against the complication of grasses, shrubbery, trees. They stand out as intentional, as made, and the few that he has made in two pieces seem to amplify that sense slightly. But in relationship to architecture, even the wooden naturalism of Tim Rowan's homestead, they seem to speak more of nature. The surfaces are raspy and the colour of earth, with lighter orangey splotches leavening the dominant grey. It seems that was exactly what he was looking for in the clay, although this specific body comes with disadvantages: it is thixotropic, which means that as he works it, it becomes wetter and messier.

That makes it hard to manage and requires that he work it as little as possible and let it stiffen before he adds more to the structure. It demands time. No wonder it also speaks of it.

Janet Koplos, a former senior editor at *Art in America* magazine and guest editor at *American Craft* magazine, is the co-author of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (2010, University of North Carolina Press).

The exhibition *Tim Rowan: Time and Scale*, was held 17 September – 9 October, 2011 at Lacoste Gallery, Concord, Massachusetts, US. All images courtesy of Lacoste Gallery.

Below left: Object 113. 2011. Native clay, woodfired. 28 x 14 x 14 in.
Below right: Object 118. 2011. Native clay, woodfired. 31 x 17 x 17.5 in.

