



# Tomoko Abe's Weathering Scape

*Article by  
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**T**OMOKO ABE'S APPROACH TO CLAY IN MANY WAYS echoes our relationship with nature. It is a give and take relationship, complex yet simple, with much that is predictable and much that is not. There is a mutual respect and, every now and then, we have to be reminded not to take each other for granted. In the same way, Abe works with clay's natural tendencies and, with skilled manipulation and patience, she starts a dialogue



with clay and other materials, then she sees where it takes her with anticipation and excitement instead of expectation. For Abe, the working process with the materials is just as important as the end product. "Rather than forcing the materials to fit my intention, I enjoy the interactive process with the medium. The materials speak to me and make me respond to them. The message in my work is rarely my idea alone – rather I wish to coexist in harmony with nature, by listening to the voices of the materials."

Because of Abe's attunement, her work seems to capture a moment in time, yet it is unclear if we are catching something in a state of growth or decay, in a moment of destruction or healing. This "ambiguity between deterioration and recovery" was a theme throughout her compelling January 2012 exhibition of wall installations at Clay Art Center, entitled *Weathering Scape*. Each piece in the exhibition offered a powerful yet obscure 'scape' reminiscent or suggestive of land, sea, space, or an amalgam of the three.

Formerly a painter trained at the Edinburgh College of Art in the UK, Abe comes to clay with an experimental fresh approach. She is not bound by its rules and limitations, thus allowing her to be free in the studio. To her, clay is a malleable expressive medium to be cast, thrown, dipped, pierced, spread, burned and broken. She mixes it with cotton, gauze, paper, metal and plastic. She sheathes it with paper, envelops it with a membrane of epoxy, leaves it in the rain to disintegrate and then abandons it in the heat of the sun. She further pushes the clay in the firing process, experimenting with saggar, smoke and Raku. About her processes, Abe states, "All begins with clay and returns to clay. Through my work I aim to express the intricate and mutually reinforcing relationships between this universal medium of clay and other materials. I am interested in providing the kind of experiences mixed media pieces situated in space as a whole afford the



viewer. Individual pieces merely provide 'clues' that, when put together, may lead to a world beyond our imagination."

While Abe explores the passage of time and the memories and remnants that result, she also contemplates the future. In *Rubble Bubble*, Abe has pinned thrown and cast smoke-fired clay and objects upon treated rice paper "in a configuration relative to the sepia and black shadows on the paper, as though they are exploding in the universe. The objects are rubbles in space casting questions about our future."

Similarly, *Weathering Scape* and *Egg Cartons* use cast artefacts of mass production, tennis balls and egg cartons, to urge us to think about our effect on the earth and universe. The cast tennis ball and carton parts are at first unrecognisable. Then they emerge sheepishly from the wall, their familiar shapes seemingly decaying under or growing out of the snow. In a most profound yet subtle way, Abe is pointing us to the fact that our trash has become a part of our natural landscape, with plants tolerantly growing through and around all that we leave behind. Sometimes it can be beautiful. "In many of my installations, trivial objects and debris are installed to bring them back to life, using the power of clay as a universal and embracing medium. Many of these objects are being consumed and thrown out as daily wastes in our culture of mass production and consumption. I incorporate these as cast objects, arranged in configurations that may remind the viewer of stardust shards in the sky, bubbles in flowing water, or weathering rubbles. Our existence is a small particle in the scale of the universe and our time just a split second. With a change of viewpoint, small particles in space and



seemingly trivial artefacts may be viewed as rich and special as our own existence."

*Solar Tailings* is an 18 foot long installation of rice paper with thrown and cast porcelain objects fired to cone six. To achieve the ghostly white shadows on the royal blue paper, Abe treated the rice paper with special chemicals that would turn blue when exposed to sunlight. To achieve the results she laid the paper outside in the dark and, just before dawn, placed ceramic pieces and 'rubbles' in a specific configuration on the paper. As the sun came up, the objects created white shadows while the exposed paper turned blue. She then installed the piece in the gallery so that the objects were tacked upon the paper, but slightly shifted from their white shadows. This piece was inspired by several sensations, all to which we can relate, such as "the gravity free sensation of swimming in the ocean, or the trivial rubbles scattered in the universe, suggesting each person's lifetime is a split second in the cosmic scale of time.

Or it is the sensation of the physical body being shifted from one place to another with the mind and emotion not being able to catch up; of being lost in time and space, like what we feel when we are heavily jet lagged or sleep deprived."

While *Solar Tailings* combines Abe's own personal life experiences of jet lag with the ambiguous truths of nature, in *Gauze Fall* she explores the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms. For this piece she dipped in casting slip gauze that her grandfather had used to treat his war-wounded leg and then she fired it. The physical gauze burned off and what remained became "like a fossil embedded with a memory of the past". Abe then installed these thin delicate glazed and smoke-fired pieces on the wall in the therapeutic and healing shape of a waterfall. This simple yet powerful piece binds together life and death, recovery and loss.

Abe's urge to heal also comes in to play in a four piece series of 22 by 16 inch wall tiles. Each piece started with a slab of clay that she left outside in the rain, put in the sun to dry and crack. She then saggar fired to cone 10 to see how the clay would 'move'. She then "treated" each piece based on the results.



In *Subsidence* Abe wrapped the heavily cracked clay with paper and 'healed' it. She explains that "accentuating the cracking movement of the clay reminds us of how the earth moves in an earthquake, creating an entire new landscape. In these pieces there is the same tension, healing power and forgiveness that this earth offers to us."

Like the earth itself, clay has the power to heal us from the atrocities and memories of the past as well as the wrath and deterioration of nature. Abe boldly uses the forces of nature themselves to explore the extremes that govern our lives: fragility and strength, decay and growth, deterioration and recovery, darkness and light, life and death. She juxtaposes the spiritual with the physical, the present with the past, the beginning with the end. As we can endlessly ponder earth's mysterious ways, the contemplation of Tomoko Abe's work leaves us with many questions, a few certainties and a significant sense of wonder.

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Leigh Taylor Mickelson is the Executive Director at Clay Art Center, after six years on staff as the Program Director. In 2006, she moved to New York from Baltimore, Maryland where she was the Exhibi-

tions Director for Baltimore Clayworks for nine years. In her 15 year career as an arts administrator, she has curated ceramics exhibitions for galleries across the US and has had articles published in various art journals. In 1995, she earned her MFA in Ceramic Sculpture from Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts. She has taught ceramics and workshops at Baltimore Clayworks, University of South Carolina, Peters Valley Center for the Arts & Crafts, Lee Art Center and other art centres and universities on the east coast. She exhibits her work widely across the nation and it was featured in the March 2005 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*. She received a 2003 Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award.