

Clay Alternatives

Calgary sculptor Walter May has been acquiring old

electrical junction boxes, filling them with odd clay

mixtures and hanging them up in his studio.

“Live better electrically!” The slogan conjures up 1950s visions of suburban utopias with a message that encourages us to reflect no further on the system that produces the electricity itself. Every day we plug in plugs, switch on switches or zap the remote for the VCR: the actions take place so unconsciously we rarely question the degree to which this system of circulating electrons defines the very nature and quality of our lives.

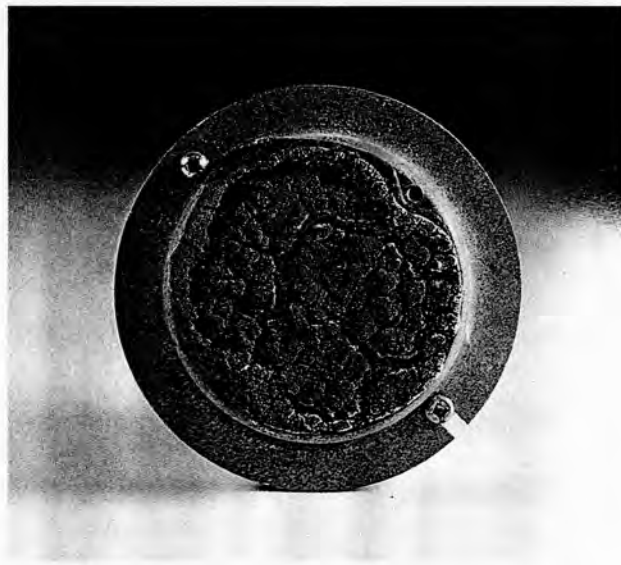
Calgary sculptor Walter May was “shocked” into questioning this omnipresent system when he heard—ironically via radio—that there are 127 dams on the Columbia River. The abstraction and absurdity of this statistic initiated a series of small works of particular interest to ceramists in that they include clay as an important component. These works reflect upon technology, the ecological impact of hydroelectric projects, and upon the subtle

system of control and coercion generated through the seemingly innocent and “user-friendly” presence of electricity in the home.

For a number of years, May’s work has addressed purposes to which we put ordinary objects and tools. Earlier works consisting of multiples of similar yet discrete objects pointed to our compulsion to categorize, define and value everyday objects. Faced with a series of more than seven or eight items, viewers are forced to make choices and to impose their own categories for selecting and organizing the mass of objects into legible units. The choices we make reveal significant biases or assumptions of which we are often unaware. In 1990, at Mercer Union Gallery in Toronto, May’s installation of some forty modified stools encouraged personal or comical comparisons: some stool tops were cone-shaped, some resembled hats or watering cans, while



The clay-filled electrical boxes are often like small paintings; yet May sees them as part of a system, rather than as individuals.



others assumed gendered identities that bordered on the scandalous. For some viewers, shared properties of material or form became the connecting link between units. For others, memories of familiar objects—now magically transformed—stimulated more personal engagement. Viewers became actively involved in making and defending their choices to each other, which introduced an element of performance into the installation.

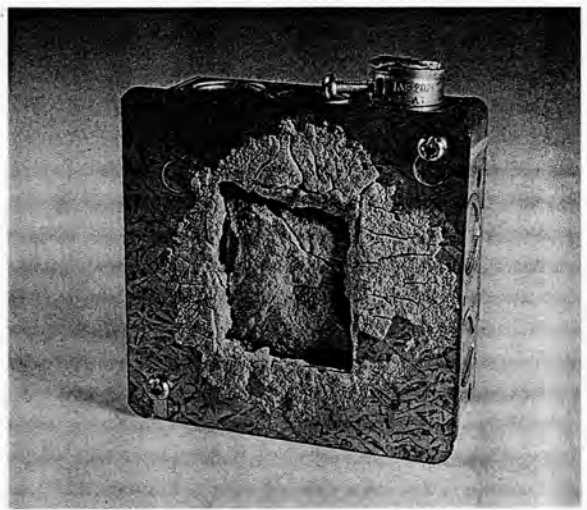
For May, performance is linked to gesture, purification and learning more about the specifics of a material or situation. "Cutting Down the Overhead," a performance in 1989, inaugurated the move to his present studio in southeast Calgary. In front of an appreciative audience and assisted by fellow sculptors Gordon Ferguson and Blake Senini, May removed an awkward central truss system with a chain saw. The marrying of a useful task, which transformed the industrial space into a more efficient studio, with self-conscious art activity pointed dramatically to connections between art and larger social contexts—connections that are fundamental to these new works as well.

The new series in May's studio consists of two basic components: ordinary electrical boxes and unfired clay. Galvanized boxes, enhanced with a variety of cables, attachments, and altered face plates, have had their prepared openings stuffed, poured, or "plugged" with clay. From these modest and seemingly

unprepossessing origins, May produces a wide variety of visual effects and highly individual components. The clay has been chosen for its color and physical properties; it is mixed with water, rhoplex and occasionally with black iron oxide. Processes such as rapid heating, adding additional layers while under layers are yet damp, and alternating layers of different color or consistency exploit the natural tendency of the material to shrink and pucker, gurgle and spill forth. The surfaces range from hard and leathery, pitted and corroded, to fragile and feathery. In places the surface layers fold, split or pull away to reveal the subsurface. Some boxes recall both children's water color pans and the natural ochre paint pots in nearby Yoho National Park. The similarity between the natural and the artificial is deliberate and tantalizing.

I viewed a large number of these boxes in May's studio, where they were lined up along one long wall. Their seductive surfaces compelled me to approach and examine them one by one. May's ingenuous process of mixing, coloring and manipulating the material invokes pleasure and physical engagement. Some of the boxes are slyly humorous: it is difficult not to read a small round hole that has oozed and slumped back as a belly button. The contents of one box has percolated up and out of its hole, and subsequently shrunk back, hardened and loosened. I was tempted to reach in and wiggle the congealed mass like a loose tooth. The





boxes recall the body, but the body as a child perceives it as something risible and unruly, prone to rude noises, unplanned eruptions and private sensations. The playfulness of the process recalls childhood memories of warm afternoons spent by stream beds, toes in the mud, or of culinary experiments with mud pies and stone soup. Even the authority of the larger switch boxes, which most clearly invoke issues of power and control, seems subverted—enchanted or bewitched—by its subjection to these rituals based on earth and water. Clay is the central element generating the sensuous experience of these works, and the many properties and metaphysical attributes of clay are activated by May's direct and experiential process.

The visual attraction of these objects-cum-paintings is sufficient to sustain their interest as art. On a formal level, they make strong connections to painting, sculpture and contemporary ceramics. Reflecting on the arbitrary nature of categories, these small works challenge viewers to question what is intrinsic to each. May, however, insists they be viewed as components to a larger whole. He has exhibited twenty-five boxes linked together by their cables, and he anticipates more elaborate installations. At this writing, a smaller version of this, which included electrical boxes and related computer drawings, was to be on view at Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary. February 20 to March 20. In full-scale installations, viewers will be directed to contemplate the larger

system of electrical energy: dams on rivers, the impact on ecosystems and the unquestioning ease by which we have adapted our lifestyle to fit this technology. Political implications such as who owns, who controls and who makes the necessary decisions regarding use of this energy will be openly addressed.

What is most striking about May's work is the degree to which each component has been considered and incorporated into the larger order that embraces it. This work, like much contemporary art, resonates on a metaphorical level. Metaphorically, the units suggest body cavities, seed boxes, geological samples or systems of circulating energy, all of which refer ultimately to artistic process and creative energy. Such a reading recalls shamanistic or occult references associated with Joseph Beuys. What makes this work more interesting, and perhaps more contemporary, is its insistence on the literal, the metonymic, and the actual social experience that defines our ordinary encounter with these materials. By incorporating both natural materials, such as clay, and mass-produced components, these works point concretely to the uses we make of the natural world. They question our unthinking acceptance of the inevitability and "naturalness" of technological choices.

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