



Oh-so malleable clay!

In studio with Bruce Sherman

If you've read the Tom Robbins' classic *Skinny Legs and All* you'll no doubt recall a certain group of animated inanimate objects which move and talk their way through the tale. The same fantastical magic that breathes life into these objects, and whispers through all of Tom Robbins' fiction, inhabits the work of New York City based artist, Bruce Sherman. Working primarily in ceramics, his compositions are mystical and mysterious, playful and wry, and whimsical. They're also just down right beautiful. Vibrantly colorful, his sculptures are composed of hand-rolled and shaped slabs that are joined together into totemic arrangements. Flat planes, cylinders and thrown forms are embellished with stylized features and faces, resembling spirit forms from another dimension. Hands, eyes and eggs, symbols of rebirth, renewal and consciousness, are common motifs in his work. Describing his compositions as a "cast of characters", Bruce's sculptures are at once endearing and appealing, but also a little bit strange. Who are these creatures and where do they come from? His figurative constructions make us wonder as we try and piece together the narrative that imbues them with life.

Bruce has exhibited in solo shows at White Columns in New York, South Willard in Los Angeles and Kaufmann Repetto in Milan. He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions across the United States. We visited him in studio to find out about his approach to art, life and more.

www.brucemsherman.com

text and interview by Layla Leiman

Featured image:

Bruce M. Sherman
Seeking Myself
glazed ceramic
18 x 8 x 5 inches

AMM: You've mentioned, and it is apparent, that your work explores spirituality and a connection to the natural world. Living and working in New York City, do you find it possible to connect with these ideas in your daily life and creative practice?

BS: Spirituality is a tricky word for it can connote so many different ideas and points of view. It does point to the impression that there are finer and coarser energies. It's a worthwhile search to approach how to open up to more vibrant energies which are apparently always available to one whether in a busy metropolis or the countryside. It's somewhat a question of wishing to be open. Certainly, it's almost automatic by the ocean at sunrise or sunset. But it is possible to connect anywhere; so not truly subject to place or time. I had a teacher who said it's a good place to be "in the center of the cyclone".

AMM: You've exhibited widely in the USA as well as in Europe. What have been some of the turning points or milestones in your career thus far?

BS: I've been so appreciative of the many exhibition opportunities these last few years.

Having Matthew Higgs show my work at White Columns at their space and at Independent Fair a few years ago was a turning point for a much wider exposure.

AMM: Your sculptures remind me of the troop of inanimate objects that feature in Tom Robbins' novel Skinny Legs and All, alive with a magical life-force that propels them into our world and blurs the line between fantasy and so-called reality.

BS: I haven't read "Skinny Legs and All"; I just ordered a copy. The idea of magical forces does attract me. There are hidden forces that do enliven us.

AMM: Your compositions are really playful and imaginative. What is your process? Is there much experimentation in the way you work?

BS: It's both satisfying and challenging to be playful. Our imaginations are waiting to be explored. Visual artists, musicians, writers and many others in the creative realm are fortunate to have a vehicle for expressing the inner child in each one of us. Even Christ said "be as little children".

AMM: Color is a prominent feature in your work. What appeals to you about this and how do you develop your palettes for each work?

BS: I would surmise that the cave painters would have used many colors if they were available! Certainly the ancient Egyptian artists and the Mayan artists did. In my work the large palette of colors and surface/texture from gloss to matte create effects that influence color. It's an effort to find the colors that seem right. I have no set formula, but work intuitively. I do re-fire certain pieces many times. A teacher long ago said "to ask the pot what color(glaze) it would like to be".

AMM: What's the relationship between your drawings and your ceramics in your artistic practice?

BS: Drawing is a way to focus and augment focusing. It's a time to be still and follow the line and see where it goes. It is or can be very intuitive, filled with unexpected surprises. It's an interesting unknowable journey. And so is the work with the oh-so malleable clay; especially in hand building and shaped slabs.

AMM: Conceptually, what are some of the ideas you're currently exploring in your work?

BS: Some ideas being explored:
To listen fully
Being open
Vanity
Prayer
Searching for finer energies (often through humor)
Searching for my true Self
Quietness
Our animal nature
New birth/ newness (eggs)

AMM: Do you have a motto or philosophy that you work by? What is it?

BS: I don't have a set philosophy but I usually don't want to know the final result. I hope to find a hidden potential and assist in it being seen and realized.

AMM: Ceramics as a medium has an inherent dualism between functionalism and non-functionalism. Your work seems to playfully respond to this. Can you tell us more about working in this medium?

BS: Ceramics has been used for useful objects through the centuries: bowls, plates, tiles, vases (also plumbing pipes, toilets and space rocket materials and more). Many useful objects are sculpture too. I like the range of being able to make "art" and return to the useful object like a bowl. There's satisfaction in making a bowl that serves a purpose. This making serves others and the world. Lately I've been making bowls and vases with narrative threads that depict "ideas" and stories. In my mind, a great bowl is as valid as a work of art as a great painting.

AMM: One can clearly see the influence of Cubism in your work. What else influences and inspires you artistically?

BS: What appears as a reference to Cubism is an interest in a children's toy called PlayPlax, which is a set of interlocking colorful plastic shapes. I've co-opted this idea into clay slabs, putting them together then cutting and carving. I'm very lucky to be exposed to a great deal of art. One learns new ideas and points of view through looking at both contemporary and ancient art. I try to bring together the two histories through my work and hope it can be

sincere, humble and maybe profound. Japanese aesthetics and their relationship to clay are also on my mind.

AMM: What does your studio look and feel like? Does your environment influence you creatively?

BS: My studio is fairly tidy with lots of shelves. There's a wheel area, a slab roller area and work tables. Though in the middle of Manhattan, there's a modest backyard. A frog (named Bisque) has lived in the yard for three years now. Amazing! Usually there's music playing of a wide range. It's very comfortable and relaxing and never a stressful environment.

AMM: Do you have any upcoming exhibitions or projects to share? What's next for you?

BS: Yes, I have works being shown with my New York gallery Nicelle Beauchene at the Dallas Art Fair in April 2018. I'm one of many artists contributing to a show of tabletop works at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut in May 2018 curated by Amy Smith Stewart and David Adamo. A solo show is planned with Nicelle Beauchene for 2019.



Bruce M. Sherman
The Reader
ceramic and glaze
19 x 12 x 8 inches



Bruce M. Sherman
Matisse
glazed ceramic
10 x 7 1/2 x 9 inches



Bruce M. Sherman
Woman with Fish
ceramic and glaze
22 1/2 x 11 x 18 inches



Bruce M. Sherman
Quiet Figure With Plant
glazed ceramic
17 x 16 1/2 x 7 inches



Image (top):
 Bruce M. Sherman
Large Vase
 glazed ceramic
 15 1/2 x 11 x 11 inches



All images in this feature are courtesy of the Bruce M. Sherman and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery



Image (top, left):
 Bruce M. Sherman
Large Bowl (White)
 glazed ceramic
 14 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 4 inches

Image (center, right):
 Bruce M. Sherman
Open vertically and horizontally
 glazed ceramic
 15 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 7 inches



Image (bottom):
 Bruce M. Sherman
Searching for True Central Self
 glazed ceramic
 26 x 16 x 16 inches

