

DOUCET-SAITO

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by Lucie Amyot

I have to start by saying "mea culpa"; as an outsider to this fraternity, I have to plead guilty to the accusation of neglect (of the ceramic medium) addressed to us this morning by Mr. Leopold Foulem. A few years ago I was working on an exhibition dealing with primitivism in modern sculpture, and remember that while we moved heaven and earth to get a little wooden doll by Picasso, we completely ignored all his oeuvres in ceramics. On the other hand, when it came to Gauguin, we did consider his ceramic work, perhaps because it was so rare, but unfortunately it was all in a museum in the Scandinavian countries and they said it was too fragile and could not travel. Anyway, when it came to the talk on Lucio Fontana this morning, I was grateful because while I knew his paintings and sculpture, I had never seen the pieces shown. I had not paid attention, like so many others in this profession, and I still don't understand how this prejudice can remain in the 20th century.

Artists who are better known for their work in what is traditionally described as high art find that when they use material associated with minor art the art establishment tends to ignore this part of their work, as we see in the case of Lucio Fontana. However when artists with established reputations in the craft world move into high art, stone, bronze or marble sculpture for example, they risk not only being abandoned by the craftspeople, but also indifference, if not disregard and disdain, from the art world. I'm afraid that Doucet-Saito may face just that situation.

To describe Doucet-Saito, I cannot find better words than the ones used by Jones in his catalogue essay: "a two headed, fourhanded organism uniting two personalities and two cultures in a way that is difficult for most people to grasp, and that is sometimes a puzzle to themselves." Louise Doucet and Satoshi Saito were born three years apart, but on different continents and in different cultures, Louise was born in 1938 in Montreal, where she graduated in 1960 from the École des Beaux-Arts; Satoshi was born in Tokyo in 1935, where he obtained a degree in economics in 1961. At the end of that year he came to Montreal to do graduate work at McGill University, They met in a pottery class and they have worked together ever since.

From 1963 to 1967 they worked and studied in Japan. Since then they have been living and working on a farm in Quebec. They have exhibited widely in Canada and abroad, notably in the 1979 exhibition at Tokyo's Isetan Museum in the exhibition Shigaraki; 800 Years of Clay and Fire, and in 1982 at the 40th ceramic exhibition at Faenza in Italy.

Like other artists, they want us to stop and look, to experience their work without a curtain of words of interpretation, as I have said, if there is a difficult position for artists, they may be encountering it now, but I'm not sure it is even making a dent in the sense of security they have. Perhaps it is because they have each other, and I cannot imagine a more ideal situation for creative people than to have as their mate, someone who not only loves them but also understands their artistic or creative endeavour.

They are not preoccupied with the question of what is craft and what is art. I am sure that this is the influence of Japan, not the effect of an individual or a school, but more of Japanese life and culture, and its view of pottery as not simply a craft but a high art with an ancient tradition. Saito says "We do not discriminate between stone and clay, but others do, as we know, The slab pot may command the same kind of interest as a Picasso" LOUISE adds "A work is valued for its integrity and vitality, the currency of its vocabulary, and its capacity to hold its own within a collection of Greek, Etruscan, Chinese or Pre-Columbian work."

After twenty years, they feel they have mastered the technique and material, and that they are free to take more risks. This is how they discover other techniques, and it becomes their personal language. With it, they can express ideas and emotions and can be as creative as they want. Ideas and emotions – those really are the key words.

So we are back to the eternal question, what is art? Is it uniqueness? Vasarely's multiples did away with this criterion long ago. Is it material? Dada and surrealism did not require noble material, and more recently *Arte Povera* also used poor materials. Earth works are destroyed by erosion, but they are considered high art. Christo's packages are tied and untied, and Tinguely went further when he built a machine for Montmartre in 1960 that was meant to, and did, self-destruct. Is it collectability? We know what happened to the artists a few years back when they rebelled against the marketing of their work as a commodity collectors and museums, undaunted, Carefully made acquisition of the documentation of the

No-longer-existing works ...! What is art, then?

Is it more to the point that bravura, mere technical virtuosity and exceptional skill lead to academic art and eventually commercial art? We only have to remember what can happen to magic realism, and see the dangers in that direction.

We are left searching for a definition and I would like to retain the one uttered by Suzanne Foley in the Whitney catalogue for the 1981 exhibition Ceramic Sculpture, Six Artists:

"The craft point of view is clearly understood; craft relates to materials rather than to intent. Craft implies that the perfection of skill in realizing an object is the goal of making it, that all aspects, material, image and design, are utilized to that end. In art, the skill utilized to make an object creates the realization of an idea, the end to which all the other elements are employed. The art is judged on its achievement and import of its ideas for visual expression." And she adds "There are works of art in the craft tradition as much as there are works of craft in fine arts."

In 1982 the Doucet-Saitos had an exhibition in Toronto at Harbourfront. I was completely taken with their work because I saw and read it strictly as sculpture. That was how I felt competent to deal with it, and not as works in clay. I could not have appreciated the subtleties and techniques and the excellence in dealing with the material. But I could certainly appreciate what they were doing with form. Any angle that looks like a right angle in their work is, never quite a right angle. A slight twist always humanizes the form, removes it from being a cube or a square, or even a tilted cube.

Low boxes, open, more like urns with decorated relief panels are reminiscent of work done in other cultures.

They date from 1980. Later work deals with volumes, solid and then cut with slits; doing away with the vessel. I compare it with Brancusi's The Kiss, a plaster cast made about 1908/10, a work in the Lettner family collection preceding his very famous Kiss. Both use a minimum of means to arrive at expression and give life; barest form with the barest incisions on it.

Another work is a column that inserts stone between volumes that are done in clay. The stone, once it is cut, is very solid, and will not move, while clay has fragility, bulges and moves until it is fired. What comes across here more clearly than in any other work is the difference in what can be done with material when it is completely understood. This large piece, over a metre high was very ambitious. Part of the preoccupation was to try to overcome the constraints of clay. Size was one of the limitations, and other mediums are incorporated to overcome the fragility and the size problem.

In another work with stripes, the Doucet-Saitos went back to basics, starting with a rectangle or a pure form. They moved into an area, in this case not too successfully, of making one piece seem a mirror image of another.

The best value here is this question of equilibrium, the unease created, the sensation that the piece is not quite resting properly. But as sculpture it looks terribly dated, an exploration that has been done before. That is, I suppose, one of the dangers of anyone going into another field. You mustn't re-invent the wheel.

In their search to overcome the limitations of clay, they had one of their works translated into granite. It is in a garden in Oakville. One of the tests is whether a work that is normally half a foot high can be blown up to this size and still stand up. I think you will find here that the monumentality and quality did stand up.

Another work, quite different, is a commission for a fireplace in the Cover-nor-Ceneral's residence in Quebec City at the Citadel, a most sensuous, almost erotic chimney piece. Some details of it were available at the Koffler exhibition.

After experimenting with bronze and marble, they return to clay. They have discovered that granite can break easily, marble will chip, bronze is difficult to deal with, and the patina never exactly suited one's purpose and that clay is, after all, a marvellous material.

Thank you.

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