



"Animus," 40 inches in length, slab built, raku fired, \$2000, by Pamela Earnshaw Kelly, Montrose, Pennsylvania.

Raku Sculpture

by Pamela Earnshaw Kelly

It is no accident that my raku-fired ceramic sculptures are dominated by images of bulls, calves and cows. I was brought up on a large dairy and breeding farm in northeastern Pennsylvania, and animals were everywhere. Huge, black-and-white, Holstein dairy cows dominated the landscape. I remember watching as newly born calves struggled to stand. Some could not take that first breath and were carried out to a remote corner of the farm to decompose. On the farm, the cycle of life and death is not an abstract concept.

My father was a breeder of world champions. People would come from all over the world to see our cows. They

were cow superstars, but that didn't mean much to me as a child. What I remember more is the farm as a paradise for the senses.

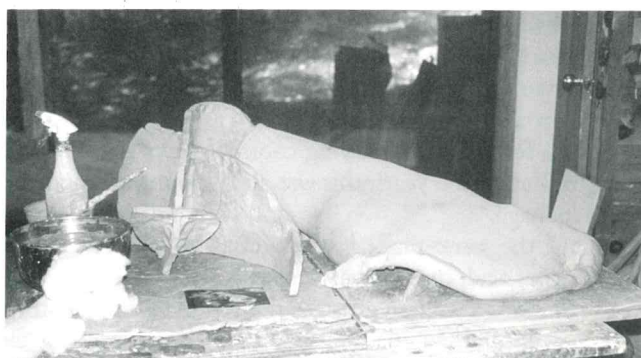
The ruins of the previous generation's Victorian mansion overlooked our comfortable white clapboard farmhouse and octagonal barn. The old section of the barn, with its fieldstone foundation walls of chipped whitewash, was filled with scratchy sweet-smelling bales of hay to climb. The granary was filled with mountains of oats to jump in. There were cartloads of soggy beet pulp that I would squirt with a hose and watch expand like a giant sponge. And of course there were the animals.

When I was 18, I left home for Syracuse University in upstate New York. At that time, I had little inkling that my connection to farming would end abruptly with my father's death four years later. Nor did I appreciate then how great an impact that pastoral life had had on me.

My prolonged separation from the farming world of nature started at Syracuse University when I decided to major in interior design. The error of this was not apparent until I was three-quarters of the way through the program. I realized the profession was not for me, but since I could at least earn a living as a designer, I finished the requirements



Some of Kelly's sculptures are formed from a single slab that is shaped by pushing up from the underside, but larger figures require an armature.



The armature is made either of clay, which remains in place, or other sturdy materials, which are removed as the piece dries and can support itself.



"Tigress," 40 inches in length, assembled from six clear-glazed sections, raku fired in three kiln loads, \$4000.

for the degree. Up to that time, I'm not sure I knew what an artist was, but I was beginning to realize I needed to make art.

I was drawn to Japanese watercolor. Like good jazz, it had a combination of spontaneity and discipline, order and chaos that appealed to me. It was an active medium with room for surprises. But the flat surface of the paper was frustrating.

I took my first course in sculpture at the State University of New York-Binghamton shortly after I graduated from Syracuse. The next couple of years, I worked as an interior designer, but spent as much time as possible making sculpture at the university foundry. I worked exclusively in metal, first producing abstract bronze and steel sculpture, later casting figures. The abstract

work taught me how to analyze three-dimensional form, but it was the human figure that allowed me to express myself. Representation seemed a more direct language for me.

The process of sculpting in metal, however, is anything but direct. I needed a more responsive medium. It was a visit to the Johnson Museum on the Cornell campus in 1986 that turned me toward ceramics.

The museum's ancient Oriental collection enthralled me. I loved not only the forms, but especially the surfaces of the works: layers of colored slip eroded by the passing millennia, corroded bronze, and opalized glass. I felt these surfaces expressed certain truths about the nature of existence; art, like life, though perfectly conceived and executed is subject to time, misfortune and pre-

carious existence. Yet miraculously these objects did survive.

I needed a medium that could somehow express the same delicate yet enduring strength as these artifacts. It seemed the process of firing clay could serve as an apt metaphor for the erosion and transformation that in nature take place over aeons.

Although I have felt disconnected from much of the art, especially sculpture, of the late 20th century, the art of various early cultures has provided me with reassuring links. For me, Egyptian and Mycenaean god and goddess figures (part animal, part human); geometric, almost minimalistic Cycladic sculpture; exquisite animal totems of Oriental and other neolithic cultures are extraordinarily powerful images.

Just as I was beginning to under-

stand what I wanted to do artistically, my husband and I decided to have a family. Two babies soon made concentrating on art all but impossible, so I signed up for a figure modeling course at night. For several years, this was all I could manage.

About the same time, I saw Mary Frank's clay sculpture. What a revelation! Here was a woman artist working with a sculptural material that had the gestural quality of watercolor. In her hands, clay seemed to have a soul.

I decided that as soon as my sons were in school, I would take a course in ceramics to learn all I needed to know about clay (in one semester!). Instead, I learned all I did not know; but I fell in love with clay.

Because my cellar studio was not useful for ceramics and there was no room where we lived to build a studio, a new house and studio became necessary. For the next year and a half, the house and studio consumed all my time.

I designed them both, using Japanese architecture as a model. My plan was rooted in the Shinto notion that a structure is simply to provide shelter for

the contemplation and worship of nature. My plans called for large windows to look out into a woods populated with deer and wild turkey. Now, wide eaves cover verandas, which surround a living area and enclose a Japanese courtyard. A stone path leads from the house to my 34×34-foot studio, which consists of one large workroom and a small glaze-mixing room downstairs, and a clean space for display and storage upstairs.

In 1988, when the house was finished, I resumed my studies as the only graduate student in ceramics at Marywood College. Matt Povse, director of ceramics, managed to encourage me in spite of the fact that I didn't listen very well and continued to make the most improbable things out of clay. The first year almost everything I made broke. My M.F.A. show reflected my exploration of subject matter and medium: 30 human figures, four abstract pieces, a number of large vessels, and one calf relief sculpture.

It became clear that to develop I needed to narrow my subject matter. My long-standing interest in Eastern

philosophy and meditation led me to the ideas of Carl Jung. Jungian psychology gave me the tools to explore the unseen world of dream, myth and imagination. Images from childhood, which appeared in my dreams and imagination, led me ultimately to my current work. The creatures I create are as much about human nature as they are about the beasts they represent. As symbols, they inform parts of me unreachable by the intellect, places only art and nature can touch.

The language of clay, like nature, teaches me new things all the time. All my work is formed from a commercial raku clay. Many of my relief sculptures begin as a single slab that I shape by reaching under and pushing up, carefully stretching the clay as I watch the surface texture transform. I am careful to reinforce the underside as needed for structural integrity.

For larger free-standing sculptures, I construct an armature either of clay, which is left in place, or hard materials, which are removed as the piece dries and can support itself. I then drape the armature with slabs. Like the relief



Kelly shaped the belly of "Animus" from a slab suspended from a padded horizontal bar.



"Sacred Cow," 38 inches in length, slab built, surfaced with rutile, copper and lithium, raku fired once to Cone 05, \$2000.

pieces, I reach inside the work, exerting pressure from the inside. The integrity of the clay surface is very important. I try not to touch the surface unless absolutely necessary. What the clay is doing is usually just as interesting as what I am doing, so I take great care not to lose it.

At first, I refused to mask the surface with glaze. When I visited the "Ceramic National" at the Everson Museum in Syracuse several years ago, however, it became clear the proper surface could be powerfully expressive, complementing the nature of clay through color and texture. I was reminded it had been the surfaces of ancient Oriental ceramics that had inspired me to make the switch to clay in the first place.

Although I knew just the kind of surface I wanted, it took several years of experimenting to get it. Unable to get suitable results at Cone 10, I lowered my firing temperature to Cone 6. I still had little success. Finally, I dropped to the Cone 05 range, and things started to progress.

Using some of Gerald Rowan's oxidation glaze recipes (see his glaze articles published in CM throughout the 1980s), Robin Hopper's line blend techniques (see his CM series in consecutive



When removing pieces for postfiring reduction, Kelly dons second-hand firefighting gear and goggles.



The pieces may be smoked inside a garbage can or placed on the ground and covered with combustibles.

issues from September 1988 through February 1989) and Robert Piepenburg's book, *Raku Pottery*, I came up with a palette of mercurial surfaces. I still use glaze sparingly, though, preferring to layer different oxides (rutile, copper and iron) and slips to build a complex surface. My clear glaze is a 50:50 blend of nepheline syenite and Gerstley borate. If I am lucky, I fire only once, slowly, to Cone 05, then do postfire reduction.

Since I don't bisque fire, I do not own an electric kiln. I fire in a large raku kiln built in 1992. I had an air-conditioning company fabricate a large sheet-metal chamber that, with the aid of a counterweight, can be lowered into the kiln to reduce larger work; combustibles are introduced through an opening at the top.

Larger pieces are designed in sections that will fit into the kiln. Rather than being a drawback, this dividing up of large pieces has proven to be interesting both conceptually and visually.

There is a magical quality to the firing. Here, if all goes well, spirit and the physical world come together in objects that express time, yet are somehow timeless. Mud is transformed into stone. Surface is transmuted into sensuous substance. If I am very lucky, intangible intuition becomes art. ▲