

Bradley Miller

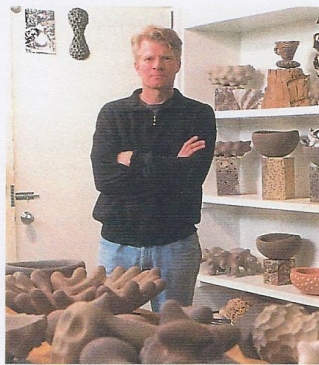
by Laura Dixon

PHOTOS: BRADLEY MILLER, KATHINA MILLER

"Biomorphs," up to 11 inches in length, high-fired and tumbled stoneware.

The low window shelf of the sunlit studio is lined with abstract, figurative pieces shaped from recycled clay, and polished smooth in a rock tumbler. Most have a feminine reference; some are more ambiguous. "I am interested in how forms merge. Two images coming together can create so many meanings," explains Colorado artist Bradley Miller, reaching for a piece. "This figure could be a mummy, or a fetus, or a pregnant torso, representing three primal events: birth, union or death. My works are often contemporary reconfigurations of ancient and universal imagery."

Miller suggests that today, because we have access to so much global information, our society has lost a collective moral framework. Unlike his Norwegian ancestors who lived by a set of commonly understood standards, Miller says that he has given up the traditions



Bradley Miller in his Woody Creek, Colorado, studio.

of his heritage. For him, to completely buy into one belief system would mean denying the validity of the immense range of beliefs throughout the world.

"Twentieth-century art is about dealing with the information," says Miller. "Artists are trying to find their context in the world by creating new images about what is important in their lives. Contemporary artists have so few formal guidelines; we can do anything we want. Historically, art has had much stronger formal guidelines. This may seem limiting at first, but it resulted in incredibly beautiful pieces because it allowed the artist to focus on nuance and subtlety of form. In my most recent work, I've gone back to the primary form, the basic human figure."

Miller received an M.F.A. in 1977 from the University of Oregon where he studied with Bob James, George Kokis and David Stannard. Because he studied in the Northwest where the museums have strong Oriental collections, Miller's work is affected by the



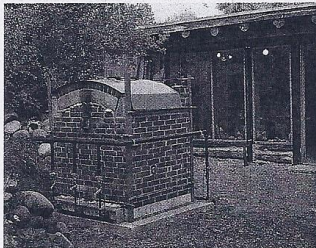
"History Series #15," 13½ inches in height, stoneware, 1984.

Oriental aesthetic. "It has to do with a reverence for organic form—a reverence for nature as opposed to an urban aesthetic."

By focusing on the human figure, Miller says that, conceptually, he has been "working up the food chain." His early sculpture reflects his interest in molecular science and patterns in nature, themes that still permeate his work today. His repertoire included rocks, primal images, base-life forms, viruses and microscopic organisms.

While in graduate school, Miller began experimenting with a half dozen small—less than ½ cubic foot—table-top kilns, which assembled into what he called a "fire bench." These small kilns were fueled by propane, natural gas and electricity.

"Working at that scale you don't have a lot to lose and much to gain," assures



Miller fires to Cone 10 in an updraft gas kiln outside his studio.

Miller. "Firings were very inexpensive. I would form a piece, load it wet into the kiln to candle overnight, then fire it the next day. I learned a lot because the small variations that showed up with each firing would influence the next load. Although I occasionally experiment with low-fire, commercial glazes, I have never been interested in learning

about glazes. I am intrigued by the rock-like quality of the clay. I want to see how clay surfaces can evolve in color and texture. An unglazed piece has a solid look through and through, whereas glazed pieces have a surface. Psychologically, the two feel very different."

The first pieces he fired were solid ceramic spherical "stones" up to 5 inches in diameter that had been polished in a ball mill to simulate river wear. Several of the large stones cracked unintentionally. He salvaged the pieces, tumbled them again and reassembled them.

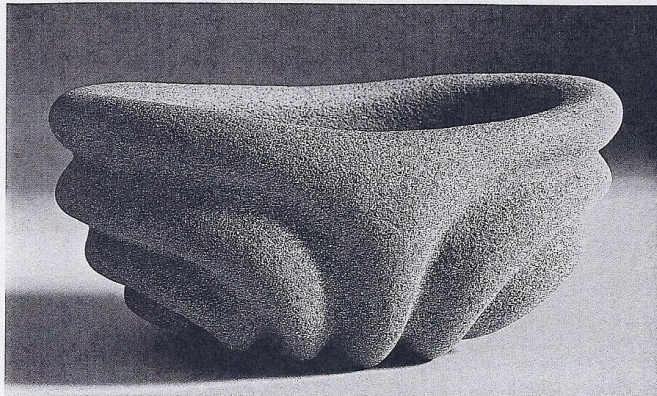
"The forms that emerged were an unexpected delight. Then I had the idea that I could intentionally reproduce these forms by wrapping clay pieces in tissue paper and compressing them together. During the firing, the paper burned out, leaving the pieces free from one another. These pieces were tumbled and reassembled. The forms that emerged were beautiful but inherently different from the cracked forms."

Through a little research, Miller found that these forms, close packing of spheres and cracking patterns, were operative at all scales within the universe. Photographic studies of bubbles revealed that when spheres come together into packing patterns, they form the tetrahedron, a four-sided triangle.

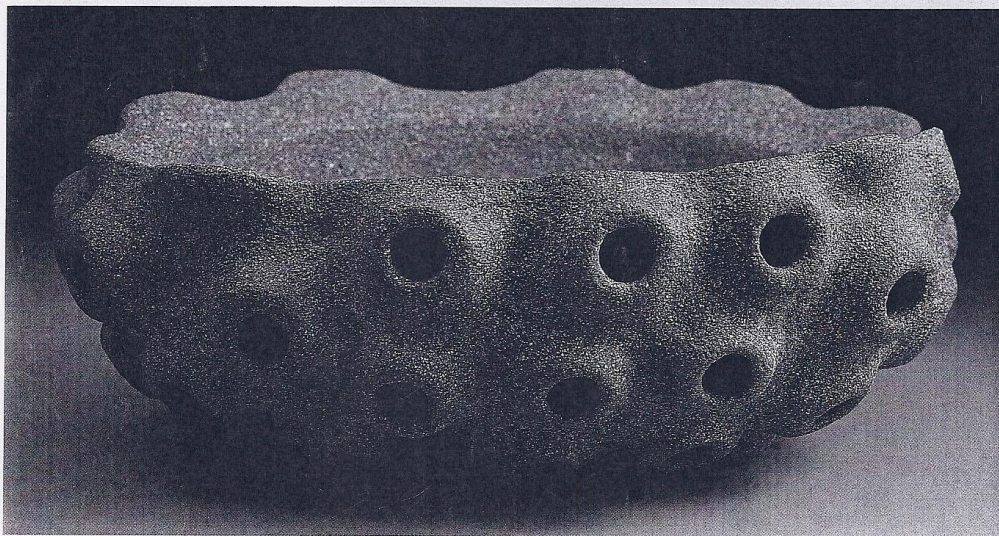
Today, after working with the form for many years, Miller believes that the universe is built on tetrahedrons, and that intuitively we know that we are an extension of this. "You know," exclaims Miller, speaking of cell division, "in the early stages of embryonic development, we are tetrahedrons. Maybe at some complex level, emotions can be explained this way too."

He remains "interested in how the universe works. Although I am never going to understand how the universe operates, there are parts that interest me formally. I am curious about how the forms come together in a way people respond to at some primal level."

Experimenting with the fire bench in the early 1980s, Miller learned to work with thick, bricklike forms fired



"Double Spiral Bowl," 9½ inches in length, stoneware, tumbled in a rubber-lined jar filled with water and silicone carbide grit, 1994.



"Holder," 11 inches in length, high-fired and tumbled stoneware, 1993.

over a five-day cycle. He began making sedimentarylike cast landscapes, which today serve as the bases for the bowls and cups that he handbuilds and carves with spirals and other mythic symbols. The bases are blocks of geology, each one a discovery when Miller cuts them open with a lapidary saw.

"I began to elevate the bowl to make it more important, putting it on a pedestal to make it and the contents more significant. Bowls are elemental, essential tools. They really are an extension of the hands. Bowls work in a minute part of the universe. They are very specific to being on the surface of the earth.

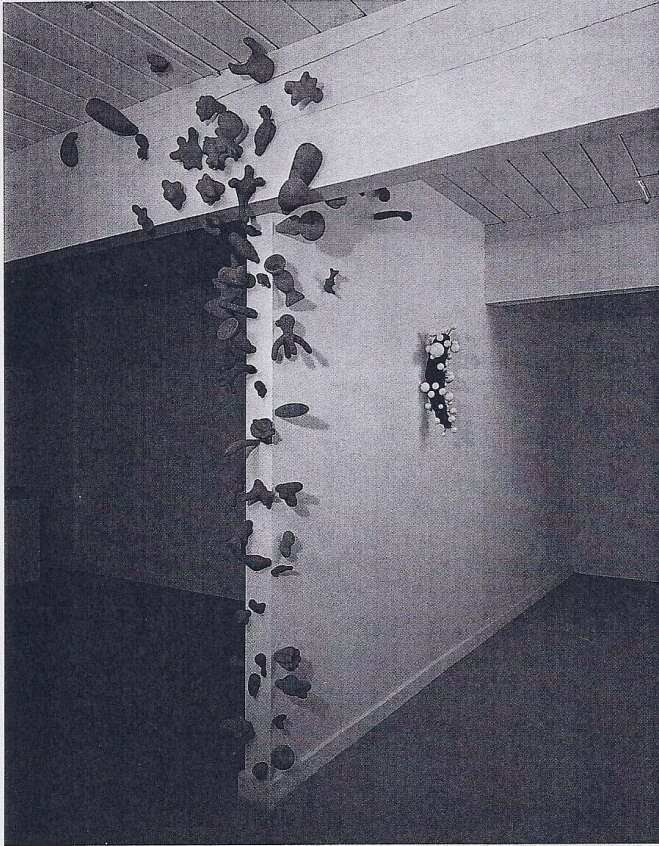
A friend of mine was in a monastery in Burma. She was stripped of every worldly possession except for a mat, a robe, sandals and a bowl."

After graduate school, Miller and his wife, Mollie, were invited to run the ceramics program at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, a nonprofit school near Aspen. Miller recalls that at that time "the facilities weren't very good, but people wanted to be in the mountains in the summer, so the ranch was able to attract a strong faculty."

In 1984, Miller became the executive director of Anderson Ranch, a position he held until 1992. Looking back

on his directorship, he commented: "I didn't realize how much of my creative energy it took to run the ranch. I kept on making art, but the organization continued to grow and it became impossible to do both. During that time, Mollie and I built a home and studios, and it became clear that it was time to get back into my art full time. I've come to realize that my personality is much better suited to art making than to administrative meetings."

Now Miller spends much of his time working in his studio overlooking the Roaring Fork River in Woody Creek, Colorado. Most of his clay is recycled



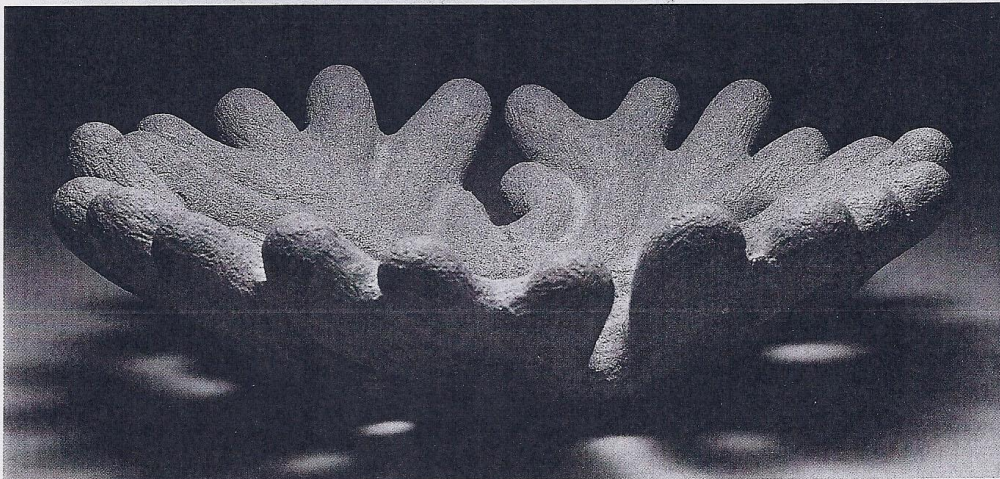
from unwanted clay from nearby Anderson Ranch Arts Center. "My clay bodies are not reproducible," insists Miller. "I haven't used a recipe or formula for over 15 years."

For his figurative sculptures and rocks, he mixes scrap stoneware, earthenware and porcelain, and to this he adds coarse masonry sand, sawdust, vermiculite and grog. "I get a broad variation of textures, colors and stonelike finishes. For instance, the sand from the local quarry has chunks of feldspars in it that turn to black glass. Occasionally, I'll get a total meltdown. Some of my more interesting bases have been made of sludge from sink traps."

Miller fires his pieces in a 16-cubic-foot, updraft kiln fueled with natural gas. For the thickest work, he takes four days to fire to red heat, then one more day to hit Cone 10. "My kiln often has a 3-cone spread between top and bottom, which adds variation."

Most ceramists unload a kiln and immediately see their results, but this is

"Floaters," displayed to 9 feet in height, stoneware and steel, 1992–1993.



"Radiator Bowl," 18 inches in length, handbuilt stoneware, fired to Cone 10, 1994.

not the case for Miller; approximately 90% of his work is either tumbled or cut with a rock saw after it comes out of the kiln. "Like raw geodes must be opened to reveal their beauty, I must first take away something from my work by grinding or cutting to reveal the finished piece."

Miller wants a smooth, sensually finished form that is tactilely interesting, so the bowls, rocks and figurative pieces go into two 5-gallon, rubber-lined jars filled with water and silicon carbide grit. These tumble at 120 rpm for 12 hours to 1 week, depending on the desired result. The landscape bases are sliced with a 2-foot diamond lapidary saw to disclose the layers, then attached to the tumbled bowls and cups.

Figurative clay sculpture and bowls and cups on landscape pedestals fill the neatly laid-out space, along with wood and stick sculpture and vaporous color drawings on rice paper injected with energetic lines on a background of deep opaque colors. "I work in a lot of media," admits Miller. "I am attracted to drawing because you can express things that are ethereal. Sculpture is more static. Individually, none of my pieces expresses a complete idea. To understand them, you must look at the whole. It is like when words come together into sentences and paragraphs to create a book. There are many parts to my work, and I am just now beginning to see how they relate into some larger concept."

How risky is it to give up the steady paycheck of an administrative job for the uncertain life of an artist? "When you're an artist, your income fluctuates wildly from month to month. There is a business side to the work that you have to keep up—sales, getting galleries, tax records, etc. We bought a Powerbook for correspondence and acquired a 4x5-inch camera for quality photographs." Last year, everything came together for Miller when he received a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowship.

"The important thing is that I continue to evolve. I don't want to become



"Trophy Series #4," 13 inches in height, stoneware, 1987, by Bradley Miller.

stagnant. There is a dilemma when an artist creates something the market responds to. You get stuck going into production and the process isn't all that creative. It's easy to lose the context. To

keep things in perspective, I try to remember that everything is basically re-processed rock. Everything comes from the earth and returns to it—computers, the space shuttle, my work, us." ▲