

A Profile of Sculptor Mark Gordon

January

2009

by Kathy Daughety, Director of Public Relations, Barton College, Wilson, North Carolina

A native of Rochester, N.Y., Gordon serves as an associate professor of art at Barton College in Wilson, N.C., where he has taught ceramics and sculpture in the art department since 1999.

Gordon came to Barton from Whitmore, Calif., where he taught at The Cascade School from 1995-1999. Other appointments have included serving as a graduate teaching associate at The Ohio State University followed by an artist-in-residence position at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa. Gordon served as a lecturer at Drake University in Iowa and at Sonoma State University at Rohnert Park, Calif. He also was a Fulbright Lecturer at the Facultad de Artes, Universidad Nacional in Obera, Argentina during the summer of 1991.

In addition to an artist-in-residence position at East Carolina University, Gordon has also held visiting faculty positions at the University of California at Davis, The San Francisco Art Institute, University of Michigan, and Whitman College in Washington State. He has held numerous art residencies across the nation as well as Caracas, Venezuela; Cairo, Egypt; Madrid, Spain; Jerusalem, Israel; and La Romana, Dominican Republic. Gordon has presented over 100 lectures and workshops in 19 states and seven foreign countries. He has been recognized with numerous awards and grants.

From 1980 to 1983, Gordon designed and implemented a ceramics studio at Altos de Chavón, creating a vocational workshop for the people of La Romana in the Dominican Republic. He returned in fall 2006 when he was invited by the Igneri Foundation to jury the Third International Ceramic Tile Triennial or Elit-Tile 2006-2007 international ceramics exhibition.

Most recently, Gordon was highlighted on the September/October 2008 cover of "PotteryMaking Illustrated." His article "Pushing the Envelope," led the magazine's list of titles with a step-by-step process of joining dry clay to dry clay.

Ironically, Gordon's professional career didn't begin in art, but as a newspaper reporter in a small Vermont town. He also served as a volunteer firefighter and a yoga instructor. His undergraduate studies included Bachelor of Arts degrees in both philosophy and physical education at Oberlin College in Ohio, and Gordon's graduate studies culminated in a Master of Fine Arts degree from The Ohio State University in Columbus. Gordon shares, "When you combine Plato with yoga and swimming, it can sometimes result in unexpected ceramic inspiration."

In turn, that inspiration allows him the opportunity to experiment, create, and transform his favorite medium as his curiosity dictates. "The physicality of clay, along with its remarkable ability to freeze action and respond to physical impact or retain any fleeting impression, immediately and permanently captured my interest," says Gordon. "Clay is a universal medium: potters' vessels have formed an essential part of material culture. My work explores inherent properties of clay transformed through the kiln's incandescent fire. For as long as I can remember, I have been making things and adapting forms. During the Eisenhower era, my parents first noticed this tendency when I nailed wooden blocks to my tricycle. I revel in the joy of creation. If you ask me why I choose to work in clay, I'll tell you it's because I get to play in the mud and build fires! And, I approach this creation of form as an ongoing experiment, seeking new direction through variation."

It's that experimentation with form and surface, combined with an element of mystery, which draws viewers to his work. "Often, in the vessels, classical Greek or Chinese forms seem to be echoed in my

clay shapes,” Gordon continues. “Alternately, the non-vessel ceramic pieces may refer to architectural fragments, biomorphic musings, or combined geometries.”

Gordon goes on to share that his young son, Max, and his dad, Irv, have been influences in his evolution as an artist. Max keeps him centered with a child’s remarkable sense of wonder and inventiveness. And his dad, an accountant and realtor who plays tennis at the age of 82, still embodies an ongoing athleticism that provides a continual reminder to always counterbalance the intellectual with the physical.

Gordon’s inspiration is often derived from an eclectic mix of nature and plant growth, animal skeletons, machinery, scrap yards, and through his international travels. Gordon sees his artwork as a melding of idea and action, of inspiration and impulse—all within the context of steady work, labor, and effort — “thinking” combined with “doing.”

“I have traveled throughout the Mediterranean and Caribbean observing and documenting pottery and brickmaking,” he continues. “Knowing these traditional clay artisans has contributed to my education. I continue to make ceramic vessels to celebrate and maintain a connection to traditional potters worldwide.” His favorite piece of artwork in his home is a small stone axe head from the Dominican Republic, which he bought near the end of his three-year teaching sojourn on that island. He describes the shape as streamlined and smooth, offering that the (pre-) history of the object lends itself to a certain amount of mystery.

And, it’s this blend of curiosity and creativity that Gordon brings into his classroom. Gordon believes that within the academic community, an art program fulfills a vital role in promoting visual literacy while fostering creative exploration and challenging students to question the way the world presents itself to them – it’s a unique opportunity to explore nature and culture. “From the pyramids in Egypt to the mysterious stone heads in the Easter Islands to Stonehenge, humankind has expended large amounts of human capital to create artworks that say something about how we perceive our place in the world,” shares Gordon.

He ends his remarks by sharing, “When students engage in the challenge of studying art history and creating their own artwork, they harness the use of imagination, aesthetics, chemistry, coordination, and intellect. And, when a student’s interests extend to connect science, mathematics, social studies, and reading with the traditional realm of visual art, the opportunity for guided cross-disciplinary research helps a student develop a deeper understanding of all subjects.”