

*Empowering Voices Essay*

By Paul S. Briggs

Pinch-forming has long been a meditative process for me, yet I have always thought of myself as an artist who works primarily in clay, with slabs. The pinching was what I did while my slabs were stiffening. Which mean I had plenty of time to pinch. And so, 100,000 hours later I am able to explore a number of different forms, most recently Jomon inspired forms and yunomi and bowls. This is actually the first time I've used pinching to make functional ware. In short, I've only made vessels that referenced nature, but nature was not the initial impetus for the work. About 15 years ago I decided to make the pinching the work for a few years and they grew from about 4 inches to about 12. Nature was important to understand how transitions took place from stem to sepal to petal or how pinecones rested on the ground. But largely the experience is an intuitive response to the clay and process.

The slab building is where my ideas have always entered the world. Slabs offer me scope to philosophize concretely. My mind is ordered and slowed down when slab building. I enjoy the puzzle of construction. It may have to do with how compelled I am by the spiritual aesthetics of ancient architecture. In any case, the following projects are the most recent slab-built reflections in clay.

Working with issues related to suffering and inner pain is not my preferred subject matter. My usual practice has been to work meditatively and or to make work about my philosophical musings concerning spirituality. But for the last few years my usual practice has been disturbed by the social conditions that have developed around, the world waking up from history. The first group of 20 or so Personae were made at the beginning of my realization that who I am was being thwarted by my social context. The persona that I projected was not my usual easy-going self and my ways of being in the world became dominated by fear. This manifested as boxes that were made to confront the viewer at eye level from the wall and concealed much of the process which can only be seen by peering through nontraditional gender-symbol openings. The inner workings of the pieces were more or less available depending on how much of the construction fell on the outside and how much remained on the inside of the vessel-like form. Formerly the work brought me to the ideas of Gaston Bachelard in his book, *Poetics of Space*, in the section, *The Dialectics of Outside and Inside*. The work dramatizes inside and outside on a continuum that cannot be defined physically or metaphorically. I focused more on Karl Jung's descriptions of personalities that were neurotic or leaning toward the

neurotic, disintegrated, imploded or in some way compromised in the balance of conscious and subconscious.

The next group of work derived from this theme were the Cell Personae. I received a grant to fund the project titled, The Impact of Mass Incarceration of Black Lives. While by and large the first grouping personae were up against the usual struggle of being whole in society, the Cell Personae are about the lasting effect of incarceration on families, individuals and communities. Once one is labeled a felon, whether you are inside or outside of the cell, life is lived in the prison industrial system for one's persona is perceived as a cell persona. And this is true as a stigma in our society, on job applications and in one's ability to generally participate in democracy is curtailed and in most states one can no longer cast a vote. My goal was to make 25 of these pieces following the information of Pres. Obama made popular when he said "So let's look at the statistics, the United States is home to 5% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's prisoners. Think about that." We have also come to know through the research of Michelle Alexander in her book, The New Jim Crow, and through the film 13TH directed by Ava Duvernay, 40% of incarcerated persons in the United States are black with another 19% being Hispanic, while Blacks and Hispanics make up 13 and 16% of the US population respectively. I will complete 3 sets of 25 or more Cells. Mass incarceration in the United States is a crisis for people of color and it is a crippling epidemic and a system of social control. Formally, in this work the relationship between inside and outside became conflated due to the unrelenting impact and reach of incarceration into the lives of American citizens.

The present work deals with suffering and strength by refuting a vessel using some of the same visual language developed for the Cell Personae. But these pieces are more universal in not referencing any specific population. I return to answering questions about how one copes in the face of failing institutions, traditions and social systems. I am amazed at the strength ordinary people can exhibit and how they persevere and even thrive though facing great social, economic and relational obstacles. This work is neither gendered nor is it about race, it does not respect person. Formally, it is using metaphor and metonymy. To be doubled up inside, tied in knots, feeling tight all over, is how many describe the everyday tension of existence in a society seized by pandemic and strivings to wake up from history and create a more just and loving society, the beloved community. The wounded, broken, pierced and knotted vessels have a presence of dignity and a certitude. The ability to be is not canceled but only refuted.

