

## Jennifer Brazelton: Essential Structures

*I juxtapose the macro and the micro to highlight visual parallels and to remind us that we are structurally connate with the world around us.*

Relationships and interdependence are building blocks for Jennifer Brazelton's work. Her intricately constructed ceramic forms re-present and abstract our daily environment. Using extrusions and pressmolds to generate mass-produced parts, she arranges multiple elements in layered, formal relationships. The work is simultaneously apprehended as convoluted highway ramps and as Petri dishes. Our human point of view oscillates wildly. Are we inside it or outside it? Governed by it or controlling it?

Brazelton describes herself an abstract artist. To abstract is to summarize, express a quality greater than individual elements; to look at ideas. But how do we look at an idea? In our increasingly sophisticated world, bombarded with visual signals, Brazelton's approach utilizes common practice. The artist employs abstraction by visual blurring between very large and very small points of view. Repeating patterns - bacterial colonies or farm fields - show an arrangement of orderly elements whose purpose includes generation, protection and nurture. Brazelton reduces these components to reveal essential elements of the governing structure.

Her inspiration comes from visual patterns as apparently unlike as maps of San Francisco bus lines, viral colony growth patterns, or machine gears. Patterns of the urban environment contribute to her organizing principles of visual composition. The mechanical formations hide the hand of the artist. What is revealed is the mind of the artist.

This intensive investigation began during graduate study at San Francisco State University. For her thesis exhibition, Brazelton took the view from a plane as her point of departure, creating scaled landscapes of fields and cities as seen from the sky. Relationships of size and space, especially hidden aspects, change with distance. The abstracted perspective which allowed new visual relationships to emerge intrigued the artist, who says, "*Long airline flights provided inspiration in the ever-changing landscapes...layered over each other. Rivers and roads became branching trees, human veins, and knots of rope.*"

Brazelton's highly thoughtful work includes installation and social practice, such as *Pieces of What*, a large-format work recently exhibited at the Richmond Art Center. The wall-mounted piece is a complex pattern of circular blue forms, with irregular interiors in formal shapes suggesting a labyrinth. Viewers experienced a focusing of vision, from the large view across the gallery to face-to-face inspection of color and texture of individual components. Brazelton says: "*Color for me expresses emotion/ texture can suggest many things simultaneously.*" The composition evokes a map, with implied movement, pathways and destinations, and the dissected tubular forms reference the human lymph system, called a *transport system* in medicine.

The *Lamentations* series critiques the American practice of war as business. War has changed very little for soldiers at the human level, even as weaponry has moved from stones to smart bombs. This is the aspect that Brazelton addresses. What is war? is it the nightly news? The body count, which was dinnertime viewing fare during the Vietnam era? *Lamentations: Growing American Culture* resembles a giant sunflower. Very close reading reveals that the 'seeds' are hundreds of tiny heads of soldiers in helmets. The generic little

heads call up our tepid reaction to the newspapers listing their deaths, where each face receives one square inch of newsprint in a format as ultimately anonymous as Brazelton's minute castings.

Brazelton's *Neighborhood* series looks at the gated community concept in terms of organic generation and protection. Much map-based art uses the original cartography, altered but still inherently familiar at a casual read. Brazelton further abstracts this, remaking the world in terms of the connection between a baby's head and an electronic gatepost.

*Neighborhood: Crossroads* is an attenuated oval shape with three swelling apertures, symmetrically placed around a saw-toothed red form. The color of the red form, its shape and the texture of the wet red glaze all evoke organic growth. Small spurs on the edge of the red form reveal themselves, on close reading, as baby heads. They are slick and mottled with red, like newborns. At the core of these implied lives is the nurture and protection of the babies inside the gates. Very real human conditions drive families to choose survival and guaranteed protection through such exclusivity. Today's most exclusive retreat in the world is found in the manufactured islands near Singapore, quite literally a world of one's own, which is what Brazelton asks us to consider. Aerial views of these new constructions bear an uncanny resemblance to Brazelton's clay communities.

Brazelton's process, like the work she creates, is an intricate layering of intimate and monumental structure, fused into a new entity. She says "*My creative process is about absorbing and filtering ideas and information.*"

It is important to the artist that the works are beautiful, and that they meet exacting standards of technical construction and formal composition. In order for the close relationships between macro and micro structures to prove out, they must be accurately made. The necessity for getting all the details right at this level makes Brazelton a meticulous worker. Although her careful attention to detail is thorough and considered, she remains open to spontaneous evolution, and the clay contributes its unique unpredictability: "*I love the unknown element, especially the results of kiln firings. You might think you know what is going to happen, but often it is not what you expected. This can be both good and bad.*"

Brazelton uses abstraction to reveal hidden structures stripped of nonessential elements. Engaging her detailed work is provocative, as we are called upon to exchange casual perception for a thorough awareness of how closely enmeshed we really are. To be connate can indicate that dissimilar elements are forced together. The layers of such connate structures vary extremely: water in rock, charged ions in soap, soldiers at war. The protected family inside an exclusive community is also confined there, linked through social expectation and practice. Brazelton's ceramic works locate and examine these hidden relationships, creating a fascinating new lexicon.

*Jennifer Brazelton's work is exhibited nationally and appears in numerous publications. She maintains her studio at the Voulkos Dome complex in Oakland and teaches at California State University, East Bay, Merritt College, Ohlone College, and San Francisco State University. Brazelton lives with her husband, artist Tom Michelson, in San Francisco.*

*Susannah Israel is a well-known artist, writer and educator living in East Oakland.*

