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CLAY – A VEHICLE OF MEMORY

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CERAMICS – A LANGUAGE

Vlad Basarab



Vlad Basarab

PhD Candidate, Doctoral Studies, National University of the Arts, Bucharest, Romania

vladbasarab@yahoo.com | www.basarab-art.com

Vlad Basarab, born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1977, is a ceramics artist combining working with installation, land art, video and performance.

A former Fulbright researcher and a Rasmuson Foundation for the Arts Grantee. Basarab has had over 20 solo shows in the US, Europe and China. He started working with clay in 1986 under the guidance of traditional Romanian potters from Horezu, Victor Viçşoreanu and Dumitru Mischiu, declared UNESCO living human treasures. In 2001, he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Alaska Anchorage and in 2013, a Masters of Fine Arts from West Virginia University. He is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics and of the National Council on Education of the Ceramics Arts (US).

CLAY – VEHICLE OF MEMORY

Keywords

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CERAMICS – A LANGUAGE

Through my ceramic work and my experience in working with clay in various parts of the world, I look at how clay and ceramics have been forms of communication and are means of transmitting memory. I found in clay's geologic transformations and in the human interventions it underwent, a metaphor to comment on both fragility and permanence of the human condition, as well as on the different perceptions of time and memory.

Giving form out of clay is like writing, composing new meaning from a large database, yet it is empowering when you dig your own clay to know that you are the first human to touch it and are free to make anything you want out of it. My aim for the artwork that I produce is to generate a thought process in regards to how memory is transmitted and oftentimes altered, how accurate information is in general.



Figure 1.
The Library, part of the exhibition Coast to Coast, The Brâncoveanu Palaces Cultural Center, Mogoşoaia, Romania, 2016, woodfired earthenware 960° C, 536 x 550 x 67 cm, installation view
Photo: Vlad Basarab

**Figure 2.**

The Archaeology of Memory, the three stages of the one-week-long erosion process, installation, unfired clay books, wooden table, clay; 579 X 335 X 81 cm, Mesaros Gallery, Creative Arts Center, West Virginia University, Morgantown, 2013, Photo: Vlad Basarab

Clay, as a material, allows us to look at layers of strata belonging to millions of geologic years, while ceramics, as a process, has facilitated communication for thousands of years. Through the transformative journey of clay, we can draw a parallel between geological and historical meaning, memory facilitating the link between both processes, on one hand the natural formation of clay from the erosion of rocks, and on the other hand, ceramics, the process through which we bring clay back to its original rock-hard state.

The human technological ability to turn clay into rock aided by the technology of firing ceramics in kilns, has contributed to the advancement of culture and human civilization. I found in clay's geologic transformations and in the human interventions it underwent, a metaphor to comment on both fragility and permanence of the human condition, as well as on the different perceptions of time and memory. Part of my research in China, North America and Europe has focused on using local clays, which I dug up, mixed and fired at different temperatures. Based on the fact that each place has its own history, I believe that the local clays contain memories of place and time.

**Figure 3.**

The artist digging for Lillesville clay, Star, North Carolina, USA, summer of 2022

This is both constraining and empowering because, on a conceptual and metaphysical level, clay yields explorations of the past, while granting us the ability to physically and chemically transform it.

My ceramic works and installations become extensions of my investigations. Digging clay in various parts of the world is a subtractive process. While removing parts of the earth crust, layer by layer, I passively engage in the process of decoding it. While clay, on one hand holds geological memory and ceramics, human memory, clay from an unaltered pit has the power of never been reached and touched before by humans, therefore it is empowering to feel that you have the privilege to make something out of it for the first time. Preparing it from scratch, mixing it with water and at times with shredded paper, I seem to bring it to a neutral state allowing me to employ my own vocabulary. Shaping clay is a manifestation of energy that allows for the formation of new memories, it is a method of encoding new meaning.

The act of creation in clay compared with the natural and human ability to raise from the ashes, references how cultures, memory and knowledge can be recycled, transformed, interpreted.

Giving form out of clay is like writing, composing new meaning from a database of what may seem random.

**Figure 4.**

The Censorship of Memory, the artist ripping pages out of American encyclopedias, coating them with clay slip and hanging them during the performance at NCECA Project Spaces, Seattle Convention Center, USA, Photo: Vlad Basarab

The history of writing is connected to clay as the first forms of writing were on clay tablets. The reason I do not write on the sculptural interpretations of books that I create is because I want people to engage in exercises of imagination in regards to what they may contain, while also encouraging them to reflect upon their own history and ultimately write their own stories. My goal is for my audience to research about their personal and family past in relation to history. The ways memory and images are interpreted is through the process of imagination by decoding information, which was previously encoded. Understanding the past is looking at memory and history with a detached, critical eye despite the fact that it is rather difficult to stay neutral when it comes to your own history or personal memory. The process of finding the key to understanding the past and the present is vital for the evolution of societies and cultures. The acknowledgement of the wrongdoings of the past is the first step in moving forward.



Figure 5. *Books of Memory*, terracotta, installation, 190 x 800 x 530 cm, National Museum of Art, Timișoara, Romania, part of Secret Wings exhibition, Art Encounters Biennale, 2021, Photo: Vlad Basarab

My aim for the artwork that I produce is to generate a thought process in regards to how memory is transmitted and oftentimes altered, how accurate information is in general. This is one of the reasons that I explored the theme of books for such a long time (2012 to present), through various media: clay and ceramic sculptures, time-lapse and real-time videos, photographs and performance. Some of the work dealt with the systematic destruction of books, making a parallel to how culture came under attack at the hand of totalitarian regimes.

Books have been vehicles of transmitting knowledge and that is also why they were targeted and destroyed primarily by burning during attempts of political and cultural effacement. Concerned by the impact of censorship on world culture, I aim for my artwork to not only generate a visual stimulation, but an analytical approach about the significance of memory, identity and cultural heritage. Besides means of transmitting knowledge, certain books facilitate us the expansion of our ideas, and ultimately an ability to decipher. Much like a book, it is my goal for my artwork to stimulate the audience to ask questions. Besides the conceptual and philosophical dimension, my intention is for my work to also contribute to an educational experience.

The Archaeology of Memory series springs from the desire to signal the loss of collective culture and memory and to engage the audience in exercises of reconstructing the past. It signifies the need to dig through the layers of history in order to retrieve altered or hidden meaning. The created contexts are intended to inspire the audience to search for lost or tampered information.



Figure 7.
Path of Knowledge
 installation view
 part of Books of Earth
 solo exhibition, 2016,
 Museum of Art
 Arad, Romania
 low temperature woodfired
 earthenware 960 °C, clay
 1300 x 250 x 30 cm
 Photo: Vlad Basarab

The sculptural representations of books, which I created by using native clays and local firing technologies are means for me to create exercises of personal and to some extent collective memories. The transformation of clay through the ceramic process allows for metaphoric interpretations of how memory continues to exist and how ceramics is not only a form of communication, but a universal form of language, a way to connect to people.

The work I produced in the US (2012-2013) focused on the fragility of knowledge with unfired raw clay as the central element. In ephemeral, perishable performative installations and videos of clay books being eroded by dripping water, I wanted to emphasize the vulnerability of culture, seen both as a natural course, but also as the result of political and ideological activity.

In Europe (predominantly in Romania, 2014 - present) my work took a new turn. I began firing the work in the attempt to reach some stage of permanence. Firing clay books inevitably referencing the destructive act of historic book burning. By creating large installations of books and thus working with multiples, I looked at each object individually, but also at the whole, each sculpture representing a piece of a greater puzzle. By working with local earthenware clays and using abandoned traditional kilns fired with wood, I aimed to connect myself to how pottery traditions used to fire the local clays.

The installations representing abandoned or excavated libraries took on the scale of monumental land-art ensembles. Large books, at times monumental, were meant to represent historic books, codices, encyclopedias containing all memories of the world.

They were exhibited in various historic buildings and museums in Romania and the Republic of Moldova and each time they took a new dimension and configuration in relation to the space I was exhibiting them. I continued to use raw clay as a unifying element that the books set on, as the historic background was full of cracks and layers.

The cracked raw clay stood as a reminder of how fragile, imperfect and vulnerable we are in understanding and preserving what we seem to understand.

Figure 8.
Library of Memory
 terracotta and porcelain
 500 x 200 x 230 cm
 Ceramics Biennale
 Cluj-Napoca, 2017,
 installation view
 Collection of the
 National Museum of
 Contemporary Art
 Bucharest, Romania
 Photo: Vlad Basarab





Figure 9.
Library of Memory
terracotta and porcelain
500 x 200 x 230 cm
Ceramics Biennale,
Cluj-Napoca, 2017
installation view,
Collection of the
National Museum of
Contemporary Art,
Bucharest, Romania
Photo: Vlad Basarab

Figure 10. (below, left)
Porcelain with
red iron oxide
reduction fired 1300° C
Jingdezhen, 2017,
48 x 37 x 10 cm
Photo: Vlad Basarab

Figure 11. (below, right)
Book of Memory
stoneware, reduction
fired 1300° C
40 x 38 x 13 cm, 2017,
Collection of Artron
Art Group, China
Photo: Vlad Basarab

In China, in 2016, I created around 130 ceramic books made of porcelain and stoneware, oftentimes mixing the two materials together in order to search for different colours and surfaces. By firing at high temperatures in a gas fired kiln I focused on creating a reduction atmosphere in the kiln, in order to flux out the iron and to create self-glazing surfaces.

When working with different clay mixtures that I create in different parts of the world, I am faced with a new vocabulary through which I reinvent my own language.

This also brings me to situations where I am faced with challenging stereotypes about clay culture and taboos as far as how to use clay.

This is more obvious from the individual book sculptures that I created in China, more exact in Jingdezhen. The work that I later made in China (2017, 2019) aimed to explore new ways to contextualize the theme of memory.

China also allowed me to be more detached, to experiment new things and to use different means to create the historic background. In 2016, I used mirrors for the large installation which I site-specifically created for the Liling Valley Ceramics Museum, the mirror allowing the Chinese audience to reflect upon their own family memories and history.

In 2019, for the large solo show at China Ceramics Museum, Jingdezhen, I used stainless steel to bridge the idea of the self with that of the other, almost becoming a double Doppelgänger.

The stainless steel allowed the sculptures to continue in space by both shadow and mirrored image. Movement was a key component for the Folding Memory series (2017 to present).

Clay has become a means for connecting me to different geographical and geological dimensions, some familiar, yet some remote and harder to understand, nevertheless ceramics has been the language, which bridged ways to local cultures and traditions, which at first seemed impossible to penetrate.



Looking back at my experience as a ceramist working in China on seven different occasions, ceramics felt like a second language and oftentimes, it managed to bridge the language and the cultural barrier.

Figure 12.
Book of Memory
porcelain with iron oxide and
red stoneware, reduction fired
1300 °C, Jingdezhen 2019,
44 x 52 x 18 cm
Photo: Vlad Basarab



Figure 13.
Garden of Memory part of
100 years anniversary of Romania's
independence exhibition,
Cantacuzino Castle,
București, Romania, 2018,
red earthenware, 960° C,
1300 x 300 x 60 cm
Photo: Vlad Basarab