

Studio

CRAFT AND DESIGN IN CANADA

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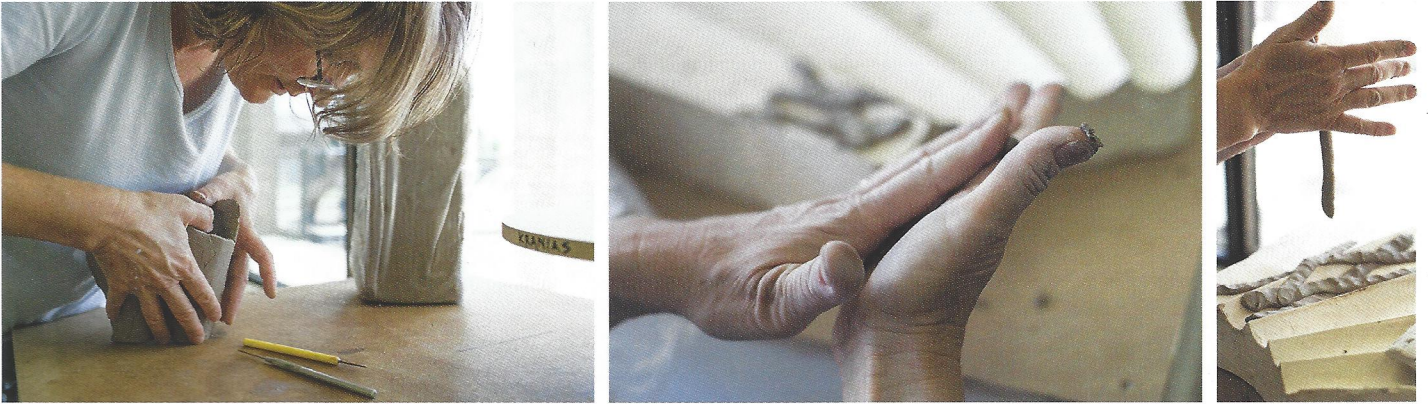
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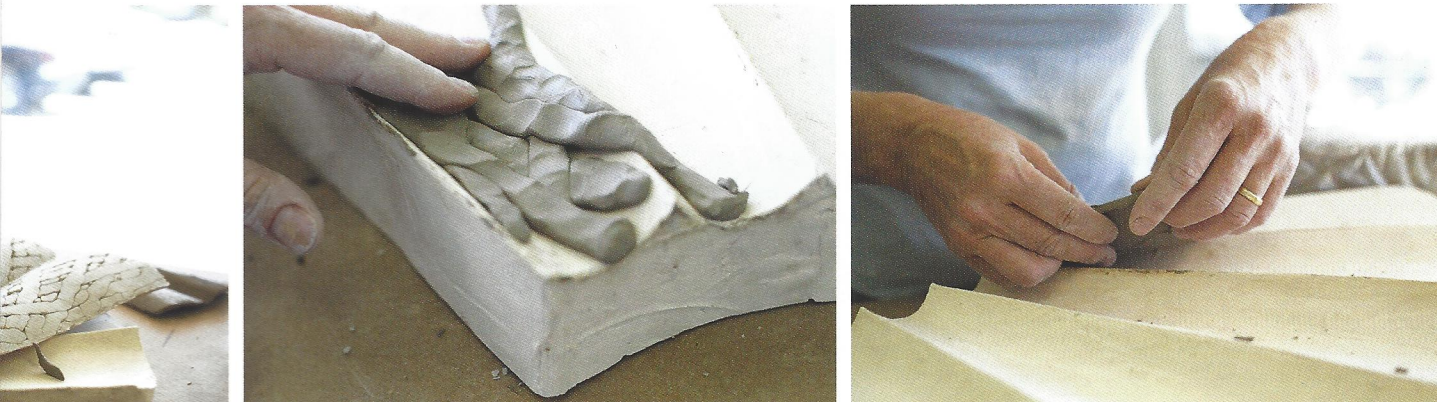
Making, Material, and Orientation: My Process in Clay

BY KATHY KRANIAS

I am a contemporary artist who makes clay sculptures with my hands without the use of a pottery wheel. As a handbuilder, my specific practice results in forms that express the gestures and asymmetry of the human body, and the condition of the human being as she moves and experiences the world. What is central in my practice with clay is how the forms emerge while I am making. What remains unchanged is that human intimacy and attachments are central to my process. I orient myself towards these things because they are what matter most to me. In this way my process sustains my spirit and I express my identity as a feminist artist.

Scholar Sara Ahmed defines feminist artists as those who do not “put to one side” the intimacy of familial attachments in their creative work. Ahmed posits that feminist creative practice is shaped by attachments.¹ I do not begin with a preconceived design in my mind and then execute it with the material; rather, the sculptures develop in the act of making. As I work, I alter and form the clay, feeling and thinking as the material is exposed to air, my hands, water, and heat. As clay transforms from a moist solid to a leather-hard state, and eventually to a dry, brittle material, my hands and mind move in relationship to these changes. This attention to the material properties of clay in the process of making meaning defines my art practice.

The historic metaphysical separation of mind from matter has led to misconceptions about artistic creation, including my own. The genesis of my sculptures happens as my mind interacts with the material in the moment of making, rather than through a mental image or concept, which I project onto the material. As an example of this division, in 1986 anthropologist Maurice Godelier defined art as “an object formed through the imposition of *mental* realities upon *material* ones”. But our contemporary world considers the matter differently. Anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that attention be redirected toward the properties of



ABOVE Kathy Kranias in studio
PHOTO MARINA DEMPSTER

materials and away from the object as a totality. It is through practical engagement and sensory perception that skilled practitioners partake in a world of materials, where the environment “unfolds” and the materials in it “occur”.

Materiality is another term used by Ingold to describe artists’ attention to material processes in their search for meaning. Rejecting the mind/matter binary that views materials as inanimate, Ingold defines materials as active constituents of a world in formation, and claims that “things are in life rather than life is in things”.² His philosophy of materiality radically alters the myth of artists as heroic and god-like creators of things, and instead places them as active participants in a transforming world, a world that is becoming.

When I work, I open my awareness to the material vitality of the clay. I sense the intensities of clay’s fragility, strength, and plasticity; it is these properties that give rise to the sculptural forms I make. My experience of vitality in material is what political theorist Jane Bennet calls “affective”;³ a new approach similar to Ingold’s because it advocates for the erasure of binaries such as life/matter.

In its plasticity, clay responds to plaster surfaces through different hand pressures. It can mimic a raised surface texture with subtle hand movements. The many soft clay coils stick together to form a slab of clay, taking on a new form that resembles a textile of meshed fibres. Over the course of an hour or so, the clay dries a little and hardens, gradually separating from the plaster mould. At this point the clay is stronger and ready for me to construct a free-standing form in space.

I begin a period of experimentation and play with these damp clay slabs; a kind of improvisation akin to the process used by musicians. When I am finished joining these slabs together to enclose a volume of space, the resulting form appears garment-like and somewhat resembles a vessel, yet one that is open at

both the top and bottom. Joining the slabs together is a process only possible due to the inherent ability of clay to be re-wetted, carved into, and joined when still moist. There are specific moments when I interact with clay in these various states; I am attuned to the material while I work with it.

This attunement or dialogue between myself and clay is described by Ingold as “correspondence”. Similar to a question and answer exchange, each gesture I make extracts a response from the clay, and the final form unfolds through my rhythmic movements. The long, hand coiled pieces are gestural lines that are essentially traces of my bodily movements, and it is through these repetitive, rhythmic gestures that the sculptures emerge. I think about these gestural lines as three-dimensional sketches that do not necessarily specify or articulate, but rather suggest.

The gestural sketches tell a story through the movements issued by my body; they are the dance. As I repeatedly coil, place, and press the pieces into the mould, a mesh is formed. Each time I make these meshes of lines, I discover something new. Ingold differentiates the lines of “meshwork” from the spatially constructed lines of “network,” and suggests that the lines of meshwork are lines of growth, or “lines of becoming”.⁴ Similarly, I think about the mesh lines as traces of my own growth and I recall a nest made by a bird, or a hive made by a wasp, a dwelling created through the gestures of a body. My sculptures are dwellings made by my own bodily gestures; they are lines of my own evolution.

In the event of making my sculptures, the coming together of clay, water, air, my hands, my arms, my torso, gravity, force, my mind, movement, my daughters, my husband, my mother, my father, the bird singing in the tree, suffering, joy, anxiety, and freedom is a process where no one thing has importance over the other.





RIGHT Kathy Kranias, *Invisibility Cloaks*, 2018, press moulded clay with underglazes and glazes, 56 cm x 28 cm x 28 cm each.
PHOTO MARINA DEMPSTER

LEFT Kathy Kranias, *I am a Dancer* (Danaids Series), 2011, press moulded paperclay and glazes, 30 cm x 24 cm x 15 cm,
PHOTO MARINA DEMPSTER

My personal history arrives during the event of making, and all things seem to level out and become relevant and important; the present and the past. The bird singing joyously outside my window as I work. The anxiety of trauma surfacing from my experience of sexual assault as a young woman. Other relationships, thoughts, feelings enter my mind and are received by my hands as I work; my mother, my father, my husband, my daughters, their freedom, and mine. To make things in this way is a human way of making. The event of making art is a field where many things converge.

This notion of things coming together, where there is no hierarchy of being, is described by contemporary philosopher Ian Bogost as “flat ontology.” This idea does not conceptualize humans as monarchs, but rather places them “among beings, entangled in beings, and implicated in other beings.”⁵ Flat ontology does not distinguish between categories of things but rather handles all equally.

Bogost embraces the principle of flat ontology, but cautions that it is an ideal, introducing instead the term “tiny ontology.” Rather than the spaceless, flat plane of flat ontology, Bogost suggests the “point” of tiny ontology. The point is a dense mass of everything contained entirely, encompassing the haphazardness of a mess or the logical organization of a network.⁶ My sculptures are tiny ontologies: they are messy yet organized, and are created amidst the chaos and order that is my life.

Within the chaos and order, I find metaphors in the material processes of clay which I choose to foreground. The many open spaces formed as I loosely mesh coils together evoke personal

metaphors of emptiness and loss, such as in *I am a Dancer, Danaids Series* (2011). This was a meaningful process for me as my young daughters matured and became more independent, and I experienced feelings of loss. The dense meshing together of clay pieces to form wings, roots, and branches in my current works such as *Growing Wings* (2017), *Within You Without You* (2018), and *Invisibility Cloaks* (2018) are metaphors of growth and transformation. These works mark my changing relationship with my daughters as they transition to their adult lives, and I have a new one.

Reflecting on my process, hand building functions as a deeply personal activity of communication, survival, and transformation. Interacting with the vitality of clay, I partake in a materiality articulated through the gesture of my hands, spirit, and mind. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Sara Ahmed, “Orientations Matter.” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2010), p. 253.
2. Tim Ingold, “Materials Against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14.1 (2007), p.12.
3. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2010), p. 56.
4. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture*. New York, NY: Routledge (2013), p. 132.
5. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (2012), p. 17.
6. Bogost, p. 22.