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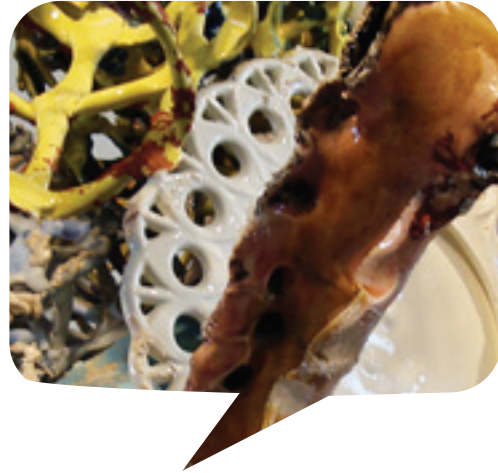


6

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Exploring Chaos and Fragility: an Interview with Linda Sormin

by Tracy Teagarden



Linda Sormin is a Toronto-based artist who teaches ceramics at Sheridan School of Craft and Design. She studied ceramics at Andrews University, Sheridan School of Craft & Design, and Alfred University, where she earned an MFA in 2003.

Linda Sormin's clay-based sculptures and installations, which often incorporate found or donated objects, explore societal issues of consumption, waste, and survival. Her works are visually chaotic, physically intricate, delicate and colorful. Comprised of thinly pinched coils and found objects, her works interpret collected stories of personal histories, and explore contemporary conflicts. Ms. Sormin has exhibited nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include the Jane Hartsook Gallery in New York City, a commissioned work for the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen Norway, the Denver Art Museum, and gl Holtegaard in Denmark.

I spoke with Ms. Sormin about her work in a coffee shop in Oakville, a suburb of Toronto.

Tracy Teagarden: What are your thoughts or feelings about the fragility of your pieces?

Linda Sormin: I've been curious for a long time about the fragility of human existence: how vulnerable in the world we are as people, physically. In other ways, as well: I worked in humanitarian aid and development in Asia for three and a half years. During that experience I learned more about issues and strategies of human survival. At the core of this kind of learning is continuous consideration of the tentative nature of our living in the world.

TT: When do you consider your work to be complete? Is it ever complete? Is it always an ongoing process?

LS: It's very ongoing: going to the work in the studio and then moving away from it, and going back and having conversations with people. The work changes as it comes along with me in what I'm doing. Last year, I was in Norway for a period of nine weeks. At the end of the nine weeks you have to be "done", but the work hopefully isn't done; hopefully it's open-ended enough to continue to interact with the people who come into the space and continue to ask questions about the geographical region, or of participants in the work.

I revisit the work continuously too, even after it's been removed from the site: the images and the writing about it continue to be a living thing. Recently, I wrote a piece for a research group in the UK called *Ceramics in the Expanded Field* [www.ceramics-in-the-expanded-field.com]. Even though the work is down I'm still grappling with how it came into being, what it might mean.

TT: How do these installations relate to the space they are being installed in?

LS: Well, the piece in Norway responded to a group of Buddhas in the space. They were Sui, Tang and Song dynasty marble Buddhas, along with a lot of ceramic collections, and ceramic artifacts in this space in the museum. I responded to these found ready-mades by building structures that wrapped around them and drew on their iconic presence for chemistry. For example, the closeness to precious works like the Tang dynasty camel or horse: there is a charge created by building close to objects like these. If it's a big public space, I'm interested in how I can bring a different kind of movement through

the space. How can I invite people closer, or open up a kind of tenderness in relationship to the space that isn't there without the work? Other times, if the space is heavy with meaning from past lives or past interactions then I'm reflecting on those in the forms and the objects that I bring into the space. So, in the Denver Art Museum, I was really interested in the mining industry there, and what kinds of objects the miners were using. One of the technicians helping with the installation loaned me his father's miner's hardhat. Including things that are meaningful and personal from people's personal stories is important. Gathering objects to reflect and respond to the people who have held them and/or who have owned them...

TT: When you install your work how much is planned out? Do you install intuitively, or do you already have an idea of how the work will fit together in the space?

LS: It's been different for different installations. It is a combination of purposes. When I went into the West Norway Museum of Decorative Arts I was invited to make a large installation in the middle of the main hall, which was very grand and traditional European (style), very public and central. When I went in to that space, I didn't feel a connection to it. I walked into another part of the museum, where I saw this lineup of the Tang and Song dynasty Buddhas. They seemed culturally stranded, and the objects seemed out of place. These figures were arranged in a way that invited a certain kind of adoration - I'm curious about and drawn to that kind of "paying attention" to things. I requested that the museum allow me to work with those objects. I asked questions like: Do I want the work to be in the spotlight - at the center of things - or do I want the work to be contingent upon things that already exist in the space, responding to narratives and problematic structures that open themselves up as possible ways of telling stories?

TT: Is a piece ever broken? Or do pieces just get recycled back into new work?

LS: Sometimes they're broken and then they get recycled back into the work. The process of building and un-building is cyclical and something that naturally happens. It doesn't always feel good. When I was a grad student at Alfred I was making very fragile pieces, and trying to make them in an unsentimental way as much as possible. If



Ephraim Wood, 2010

Photo courtesy of Lucy
Lacoste Gallery, Concord, MA.

17"H x 37"W x 26" D



Roaming Tales in Surrey, 2007,
Surrey Art Gallery.

something was soaring or was buoyant or fragile I wanted it to be fully that, and not worry about the preciousness of the final object. But after several months of trying to not involve my “feelings” in the work - when a piece would fall on the ground and I wouldn’t feel anything at all - then I realized that something important had been lost from that process. I’m invested in making objects that are articulate and extraordinary and exquisite, materially, visually, and formally; and in terms of conceptual approach. But if I’m so far removed from it that, if it falls and breaks and doesn’t have any impact on me, then I feel that I’m not pushing toward the edge of what I’m trying to do. I strive to work in ways that are risky for me, and for objects. If an object has value to me then, in that sense, broken pieces have intensified significance. Something I care about has fractured; something’s been lost. Collecting these shards and knitting them back into new works is a significant gesture for me.

TT: When you’re making your pieces and you’re pinching coils together, how fast are you working? Because you say that your heart isn’t in that piece when it breaks, is it because of the speed that you work, or the idea that these pieces are fragile and they could break, that you are removing yourself from that?

LS: When that piece broke at Alfred, and I didn’t feel much, I shoved the shards aside. I was working pretty fast, yes, but also not with the awareness I’m investing in each piece since then. That was a real turning point for me: when I realized I wanted to feel that heightened sensitivity around making things. But I do work fast. I pinch pretty quickly. I feel alert at this speed of what’s happening. With each pinch, I am measuring time with material and gesture. A form can gather information and unfold information. Objects in the making contract and expand with my intentions, and that slowness and quickness is meaningful. When I lose a piece now, I really do feel it. That doesn’t mean I won’t take the parts and try to transform them into something else, but I am ambitious for each component. I’m pinching a whole linear element that unfolds over several hours, several days, but I make more than one at the same time. The amount of output that I’m trying to explore and the speed I’m trying to embody in the work has a lot to do with the modes of high production. In 2000, I went to China

and visited the studios and workshops in Jingdezhen, where people are making ceramics at such a great volume, without preciousness. I was really impressed by that. I would watch the potters work all day long and how much came out of that: quick and unfussy, and the lack of self-consciousness was very important to me. So, I'm hoping to work in ways that aren't precious or overly self-conscious, but still be highly aware and sensitive to what's happening.

TT: How did you learn to install your work? Was it a trial and error process? Do you always use assistants to help you install?

LS: I learned it like I learn most things: by groping through the process, stumbling through what to do next, and how to do it. I tend to work with what's at hand: found material, found space, found companions, helpers, assistants, collaborators- whichever category people fall in. The people I encounter during those times are central to how the work can unfold. Often I'll come in with my own vision for how things should expand and grow physically in the space but, often, personal stories from other people - and the way they might touch material when you allow other hands into the work - that kind of collaboration becomes really beautifully layered.

TT: When I look at your work it's hard to see obvious influences. Where do you get your inspiration? Who influences you?

LS: Some of my favorite sculptors have been Ólafur Elíasson, Gabriel Orozco, Janet Cardiff and Jessica Stockholder: artists working in intelligent, insightful, and critical ways, but also very materially exciting ways. The colleagues that I had when I was in school have continued to inspire and influence me. I've been encouraged by their investment and commitment to shaping their ideas through ceramics. My students and colleagues influence me as well.

TT: When you receive donated broken ceramic forms, are they incorporated into the piece immediately? If so, how? Do you fire the objects right into your pieces? Or do you put them away for the next project?

LS: I do both. Sometimes, if I'm installing right then, it goes directly in. Someone might hand it to me and I stick it right in and incorporate it. I place the raw material (i.e. clay) and build around it, and other times they travel with me in boxes. They stay on a shelf and wait for the right

moment to enter the conversation.

TT: When you do receive something, is it always a ceramic material? And, if you don't have a chance to fire it into the piece, how are you incorporating it into your sculpture or installation?

LS: They're not all ceramic. Like I mentioned before, museum objects are often lent to me, and the museum technician in Denver lent me his father's hardhat from the mines. It brought so much meaning to the piece. So, in that case, I'm suspending pieces into the installation and then using raw clay, not over the wires and materials but through the object, using raw clay pinched as interstitial tissue to connect parts of the story to each other, formally. Things are often suspended or sometimes half-buried in rubble. Sometimes they are underneath structures and sometimes they are transformed. Often, when people loan me something or give me something I have their permission to break it, to transform it. I can shove it into Egyptian paste. Or I fire things together with glaze, if I can connect things that way. I prefer clay body and glaze interface as part of a very traditional language of how we bring form together in ceramics. If it's something that's of a different material: metal, part of a car door, or a fender, then it's fired with the piece or shoved together in some way.

TT: Do you ever reject objects that have been donated to you?

LS: I'm sure I have. I can't think of anything off the top of my head. If something is too big to take away or lift and there is no one to help, then I can't take it, but I don't think that's ever been offered to me. If it's not what I need at the time, I try to transform it by fracturing it or combining it with something else.

TT: Your works are very colorful. What is the role of color in your pieces?

LS: I think, like any visual artist, I'm looking for some colors to push and pull in the work and to emphasize something coming out at you. More than color, the glaze quality is what I'm very interested in. Whether a piece is low-fired, nail polish, girly-girl, trashy, or sparkly: that kind of low-brow fun could be right beside something like a classic cone 10 copper red, or a shino¹, or something "revered" like a

¹ Shino: A glaze used in ceramics ranging in color from white to orange

wood-fired component. The skin of my ceramics is a way to explore taste and how taste reflects our values in culture.

TT: Do you do multiple firing using all these different components of glaze on the objects?

LS: Yes! For sure. Some of my pieces can go through nine or more firings. So, I often down fire², or I'll start with a high fire and then I'll fire down. Bare earthenware might resonate with the history and narrative of the *Terracotta Warriors*. Clay bodies can be invitations to experience history for a moment, in addition to expressing something contemporary or what we, at this point, feel is contemporary: it's exciting for me.

TT: Your sculptures require an armature. When pinching your coils into place, what kind of armature are you using? Does the armature become a part of the piece?

LS: Yes! It's often a part of the body of the piece. Often, extruded coils create a skeleton for the work. It could be a part of the architecture that is now part of the piece. So, at the Denver Art Museum there was a very large wall that went beyond thirty feet. I only built up to twenty or so feet and the piece leaned away twenty degrees, so that becomes not just armature, but part of the physical stance of the work.

TT: What led you to use coils and chaotic forms in your work?

LS: Well, I started here at Sheridan as a thrower. I really love the throwing process and in 2000, I was a summer apprentice with Timothy Smith, a potter here in Ontario. I was very deeply invested in the vessel and walls and containment and the breath of a vessel. When I started to play with my understanding of pots I tried to turn things a bit inside out. I was curious about what could be an alternative to a wall; would it be an open latticework? What is the difference between closed volumes of breath and open spaces? I still see some of these grid forms as ways to hold and contain things.

Ceramics has a tendency towards addressing chaos in ways that other ways of making don't. We all learn there is an element of not

being able to control the wheel or, when something is drying, there is always this effort to try to keep things under control. And yet we invite processes which make that completely impossible, whether that spinning wheel or the speed of how you extrude something, or the helper. There is so much you can't control. The way that the fire affects the piece... the whole practice is a way for me to reflect on letting go of control and also, maybe not embracing chaos, but just struggling with what we do with chaos in contemporary life and contemporary reality.

TT: I read the article *Metaphysical Materiality* written by your former professor, Linda Sikora. It's amazing that she was so invested in what you were doing that she actually wrote about your work.

LS: That was in 2009, six years after I graduated. I was really moved that she was able to connect with the work that was being made in the UK, and grateful that she took the time to think about it. When I make work there is always hope that someone will want to understand or think about it. That kind of conversation is what propels me. When a colleague takes the time to reflect and to analyze and engage with the things I am engaged with; it means a lot to have that kind of conversation.

TT: Your work is very complex. How are you able to maintain visual clarity? How do you ensure there is order in the work when it seems so complicated?

LS: I don't think I ensure there is order. Do you see that there is order? (laughs) I'm not trying to control the work visually to establish some kind of clarity. The nature of contemporary living makes it obvious to me... I want to reflect the realities of contemporary life. Things aren't always in focus; they're not always in proportion. So, when things are out of proportion or overextended it reflects in the kind of living that we're experiencing.

TT: Is chaos an aesthetic in your work? What is it about that busy, chaotic aesthetic that you find appealing?

LS: Hmm... I'm not finding chaos appealing. (laughs) I find that it's something we confront and I'm hoping viewers will confront through material and through the way that ceramic structures and the found elements fling themselves through the space. That kind of physical

² Fire Down: This process involves multiple firings. It usually starts with the first firing of the highest temperature, and each firing thereafter consists of lower and lower temperatures.

Roaming Tales in Surrey, 2007

Detail, Wooden scaffolding, clothes-dryer drum, plastic garden fencing, looping sound and video through center of drum.



encounter is something that I want to invite. If parts of the work are chaotic then they are clustering and contracting in ways that set up another space in the installation to offer an explosion of material and meaning.

TT: Why is there a fascination with installation? It seems like fewer people are making traditional sculpture and are more focused on installation art. What are your thoughts on this?

LS: Installation might be what we've been calling it for fifty years, but ceramicists have always been engaged in the environment and in interactivity and in relational modes of being. Ceramics have been

Terracotta Warriors – clay armies buried in the ground. Is that an installation? Or is that environmental work? Ceramics has always been an active part of something else: dishes in a kitchen move and invite use and play and contemplation, burial pots across so many cultures offer portals to the afterlife... Ceramics has always traditionally and historically been alive in these ways. But also, in the '60's, people were doing land art, so I'm not sure if installation is becoming hot now, or not.

TT: Would you rather create installations or are you content creating object-based works?

LS: I don't have a preference. I'm interested in how material and space might be transformative and provocative, and if that's in a thing I can hold in my hand, or crawl through or put in my mouth, then that's a valid mode of inquiry. As a contemporary artist I feel fortunate to have all of these possibilities open to me.

TT: How do you decide a piece would work better as a sculpture or as part of an installation?

LS: It's an interesting question because it asks why I start making a piece. There are many different reasons why I would grab material and start forming it. The question can be what shape might an idea take, or how big or small, or how light or soft, or how thin or thick might this idea be? How might it lean or hover? How might it behave? How might this idea, or motion, or the sense of something, or this intuition about something behave in space?

TT: So, you create work and then decide if this is going to be part of an installation? Is that something you think about beforehand?

LS: (laughs) I don't think I'm usually thinking about what to call it beforehand. It usually starts with clay that's available, or clay that I find or am drawn to at the moment. More recently I've been starting with what might the skin be like. As artists we have to keep asking ourselves questions. I have to keep asking myself, how do I stay alert? What keeps me surprised and infuriated, and noticing the things that get under my skin, and what's worth making work about?

Looking at a thing and experiencing it with awareness: am I close to this thing, am I distant from this thing, how far back am I? How do I change the thing, or does this thing change me? How does it transform an experience, or the way that I move my body?

TT: In your installation, *Roaming Tales*, visitors had to bend their bodies through the space to experience the installation and the video components. Was the manipulation of their bodies something that you found interesting?

LS: I wanted to experience what it felt like to be viewing ceramics from below and from above and to share that with other bodies in the space. That piece was at the Surrey Art Gallery. The stories that were being told through the videos were stories of young people who were dealing with really difficult situations in the areas they lived, and

that was overlaid and overlapped and layered with objects that they made with me. Having the moving images and the stories being told by these people brought a range of diverse voices into the work that resonated with the different textures and positioning of objects in the space. I wanted to invite the viewers to play, to experience something different with their bodies through this physical, gestural, textural and audible storytelling. Not all the storytelling was through language; some of it was through sound. There was sound of participants breaking ceramics in the space and arguing about what they should do next in their collaboration with each other, or relaying personal stories of difficult things that they've experienced. That tension and difficulty was knotted up in forms as well as in the ways that the stories overlapped with each other. That sound takes up more space than some of the objects that are more ephemeral and more transitory than the presence and textures of the video – the moving images.

TT: It seems like ceramic artists are more interdisciplinary now than before. You seem to do this as well within your work. Why is that important?

LS: When I'm in the frame of mind of making, in the act of making, I don't really have these words [interdisciplinary] in mind. I see what's around me. I see what's available. It's a very basic human way of using the resources around. A lot of it comes from picking through secondhand stores and making use of scarce resources, dumpster diving. There is still this curiosity about what people throw away, how objects inflect the lives that they previously had. To survive as humans we need a diversity of all kinds of problem solving. I'm interested in unfamiliar ways of coming up with solutions for contemporary problems.

TT: You said in your artist statement that nothing is trash; pretty much everything can be re-used. So, using these objects found by dumpster diving: do you know where these objects are going to go within the piece, or is it intuitive?

LS: It's very intuitive. It's a feeling, a response to that object, an excitement about this phrase or chapter from someone else's story that I can roll into mine. It's very much about collecting stories.

Linda Sormin in her office at the
Sheridan School of Craft and Design.
Photo by Tracy Teagarden



Linda Sormin's images can be viewed online at lindasormin.com.