CHAPTER EIGHT

Expressing Care for the Earth

Ruth Duckworth believes that her work has changed over the years. 'It has become less romantic and at times much harder. Can I, in my work, express what I feel about life? About being alive? What I feel about the earth and its creatures? What I feel about the beauty of the earth and its fragility? To me my life and my work are relatively unimportant compared with the drama of the planet. The health of the planet and how to keep it intact is what matters most to me. The earth is so fragile and beautiful, it needs so much love and caring and not just by me. Can I express any of that in my work?'

In an article in American Ceramics 10/2 Michael McTigue referred to Duckworth as having 'caring hands', saying that she was interested in trees because they were protective and that her manipulation of the soft, pliable clay, rather than chiselling and carving hard stone or wood, allowed her to work with feeling and spontaneity. Henry Moore expressed it well, he says, in his book of 1934, The Sculptor's Aims: 'Every material has its own individual qualities. It is only when the sculptor works directly, when there is an active relationship with his material, that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea.' But Duckworth acknowledges that every generation's 'truths' are only half true. 'I often have to make my clay do what it doesn't want to do,' she says. 'In porcelain, you are fighting it. It wants to lie down, you want it to stand up.'

Ruth Duckworth wants her porcelain forms to show the imprint of the human hand. 'What originally fascinated me about porcelain was its fragility in the unfired state. A sort of testing of my ability to be caring and nurturing enough to

DUCKWORTH
INUZUKA
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make a piece that would survive my handling it. How fragile can I make it and have it survive?’ Duckworth is quoted as saying in 1991. Her early works, usually coil or slab-built, are, as the British writer Tony Birkas has observed, nearly all asymmetrical. ‘Not the studied asymmetry applied to a circular form before it dries—the calculated ellipse with its origins in the thrown bowl. Her work has the asymmetry of an apple or pear which grows in response to sunlight or physical circumstance. From nature’s perspective, most living things are asymmetrical.’

Duckworth uses light to define and bring detail to form. ‘Her training as a sculptor working in stone and wood reinforced her own predilection for a limited palette,’ writes Michael McTiggan, ‘but too, too, does her emphasis on form over colour. Many of her works are white with shadow and texture to provide contrast and detail. In those works where she juxtaposes dark against light for contrast, the colour introduced is usually black or brown. Rarely, a pink or other colour is introduced. Her murals and wall reliefs provide evidence for Duckworth’s preference for form over colour.’

Duckworth recalls that she wanted to be an artist from an early age. But at the Liverpool School of Art, where she was a student for four years, she found herself restricted by the traditional rules of learning. ‘Her work never wanted to be controlled in the narrow sense,’ wrote Henry W. Rothschild for the Triennial of la Porcelaine, Nyon, catalogue in 1992. Rothschild believes that Duckworth shows persistence, spirit and genius with the work becoming simpler and more refined over the years. In an article for American Craft in 1991, Harrie A. Vanderstappen comments on some of Duckworth’s architectural works: ‘In 1964 Professor Harold Haydon invited Duckworth to teach at the Midway Studios of the University of Chicago, a one-year appointment that turned into a permanent move to the USA and heralded a new phase in her life and work. The earliest and most spectacular evidence of that phase is the monumental wall sculpture Earth, Water and Sky, 1968, commissioned for the entrance hall of the Hind’s Laboratory for the Geophysical Sciences at the university. This work, Duckworth says, ‘made me look at the sky and think of the heavens, and that really put me into the context of the thought that all these forces and those of the world we live in grow from a common energy.’

The opportunity to execute large-scale works was one of the compelling reasons Duckworth remained in the USA, noted Harrie Vanderstappen. Over the next two decades the Hinds installation was followed by other wall reliefs in stoneware and porcelain. In The Creation (1984), commissioned by Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue in Hammond, Indiana, the seven days of creation as told in the Book of Genesis are sequentially depicted in text and illustration in a large spiral. Starting in the centre with the uniformed universe, the story unfolds with the appearance of mountains, water, light and living things, and ends in paradise with the figures of Adam and Eve. ‘This was an unusual excursion for Duckworth. She explored the phenomenal world and transformed it into one of her own, with textures, planes, fluid surfaces, gestures and colours. All function in an exceptional harmony of order in which the organic interactions of living things and their surroundings clearly follow the story inscribed in the spiral. A 2.4m (8ft) long porcelain mural (1979) is one of Duckworth’s many works of the ’70s and ’80s in which clearly edged and shaped sheets of porcelain overlay rows of gullies. The thin sheets dominate, floating like clean-cut ice floes viewed from above. At intervals, they reveal zigzagging membranes underneath. Gentle bulging surfaces mix with a world beyond of crisping clefs and bubbles, sinewy activities of a hidden energy.’

For another stoneware mural commissioned in 1984 for the Dr R. Lee Animal Care Center in Chicago through the city’s Percentage for the Arts Programme, Duckworth uses broken spirals and partial spheres mixed with triangular intrusions in and over a square tile band, all in soft tones of blue, green and earth colours. Vanderstappen continues: ‘While it appears on the surface to be unsatisfactory, her work reaches form from worlds larger than life as well as from its miniature appearances. In both the small works and the large there is the same monumentality, a secure interaction between a life forever in flux and a form which catches that life when it stops for a moment to take a breath in the hands of Ruth Duckworth.’

In an article by Theo Burger and Kim Coevert for Ceramics: Art and Perception 11, Duckworth agreed that she liked working on a large scale. Between 1968 and 1990 Duckworth received commissions for more than 20 wall murals, ‘each different in terms of theme and form but all in layered relief and all speaking of fertility, regeneration and the cycles of life.’ The references in books and journals to the work of Ruth Duckworth are numerous and all reveal a care for the larger world of nature and the earth. Currently a touring exhibition and catalogue, curated by Theo Burgers and Jo Lapaar, is celebrating the achievements of this artist.

Since receiving his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, in 1987, the Japanese artist SADAMI INOZUKA has worked in clay, creating large-scale environments in which the metaphor of the insect and
his identification with what he calls a ‘bug’ allow him to address questions of nature and human nature, as well as his experience of living between cultures. He writes: ‘My concern with space, scale, time and transformation evolves out of my process of working and dealing with materials. The ceramic medium itself, which involves the transformation of raw material through the forces of fire, air and time, carries much of the unspoken meaning of my work. I have always tried to create installations and freestanding sculptures which pose questions and allow viewers to find meaning in my work through their own experiences and interpretations. Recently, I have become interested in the microscopic world, particularly of bacteria and viruses. I am interested in their adaptable nature, scale and relationship to the human body and environment.’

In the catalogue of a 1990 exhibition at the Joseph D. Carrier Art Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, the curator, Denise Pillon, wrote: ‘Sadash Inuzuka’s Bug Dreams II employs dramatic contrasts in scale, texture and materials to create a landscape in which the contradictions in the natural and human worlds are expressed symbolically. One of the expressive means by which the artist dramatises the union with nature is through manipulation of scale. By inflating the scale of elements of the natural world, Inuzuka invites the visitor to participate in an insect’s perception of his environment. However, the design of the gallery entices the observer to explore the installation from higher levels and, in so doing, certain complexities unfold. Through his installation, the artist proposes that there is an underlying symmetry to the worlds of both man and insect.’

In the installation Dear Lake (1996), Sadash Inuzuka required viewers to step up on a platform in order to see his imaginary landscape. He had covered the entire floor with wet clay slip, which dried into lines and cracks during the following days, ‘releasing messages of discord, portents of disaster’. Dear Lake alluded to an endangered lake situated in Deer Lake Park, where the Burnaby Art Gallery is located. Inuzuka wanted to draw attention to our interference with nature. ‘Undoubtedly, from an ecological perspective, the solution to human-created environmental problems will require a fundamental rethinking and restructuring of human processes, relationships and systems, including our social, political and economic systems,’ he said in an interview with Grace Eiko Thomson, curator, for a catalogue on this work shown at the Burnaby Art Gallery. Inuzuka states that it is not his desire to actively intervene in nature, he is more concerned with questioning human experience in nature. ‘Through the spectacle of art, Inuzuka evokes in the viewer ideas about her or his own spiritual and elemental connectedness with nature, making a space to consider the multiplicities of issues which surround the various meanings of nature.’ Working on a similar theme, River, an installation at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia, directly addressed the plight of the Delaware River, a complex river system with saline and fresh-water areas which flow through a variety of habitats, both urban and rural. All of the problems of industrialisation and urbanisation are evident in the history of this waterway.

Sadash Inuzuka was born in Japan in 1951 and studied at the International Institute of Art in Kyoen in the early 1970s. He migrated to Canada in 1981. Shortly after his arrival, he registered with the ceramics department of Emily Carr College of Art and Design, in Vancouver. His interest in aspects of human nature, which preoccupies him today, began as a negative experience when he was compelled as an immigrant student to deal with the complexities of his own nature. The artistic freedom he sought in migrating to the Western world was not so easily accessible. The four years at Emily Carr and two at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan were a difficult period of acculturation. Marginalised as an immigrant, lacking the classroom language of study and discussion between instructor and student, he kept his nose to the potter’s wheel, positioning himself in control by producing prodigiously to compensate for the felt handicap and isolation. In 1987 he graduated from the Cranbrook Academy of Art, receiving a Master’s degree in Fine Arts. Sadash Inuzuka’s training as an artist in Western institutions has not eliminated what is sensed by some viewers as a Japanese quality in his art and he admits that it is impossible to shake this off, that his work is related to Japanese aesthetics, even though he is undoubtedly influenced by Western processes and format.