



"Majic Schiff," 6 inches in height, handbuilt stoneware, constructed in two pieces over a bisque mold, with oxide and lichen glaze, fired to Cone 6 in oxidation.

Mystic Traveler

by Larry Westlake

The boats that comprise the recent work of Canadian ceramist Laurie Rolland continue a voyage of discovery begun 27 years ago as a student looking for her own voice in a medium then dominated by men. For an artist concerned with addressing the issue of life as a fragile, vulnerable embodiment of spirit, clay offered many appropriate means of expression. The references and associations that inform the current series of boat-vessels are consistent with ideas that have found expression in Rolland's work from the beginning—acknowledgment of mortality and celebration of spirituality.

The philosophical focus of her work is strongly influenced by her orthodox Christian upbringing and adult reassessment, which displaced that tradition from the position of absolute truth

to that of mystic allegory. The intensity of belief that the early teachings fostered remains with her, though the conviction of incontrovertible knowledge has departed, and the resulting provisional understanding of the relationship between mortality and spirituality has commanded her attention and directed her choice of symbols.

Rolland searches for symbols that have a degree of universality—images that have meaning across cultures because of similarities they share with the experience they symbolize. These symbols are removed from their context of orthodoxy, and placed in a context of direct tactile and visual experience to support the content of the work.

"Reflected through the disillusionment of the 20th century, tribal and court art meet, triggering conscious and

unconscious memory traces, thus creating a shared mythos. By putting together ancient symbols with images that surround me," observes Rolland, "I try to create my own vocabulary, but a vocabulary that resonates for others, too."

Pragmatic considerations have also directed Rolland's approach to her medium. Her working style developed from early recognition that full-time dedication to her work was essential to its full development. Within her financial limits, this meant concentration on economical and relatively transportable equipment with flexible siting requirements (oxidation firing) and small-scale production. Her handbuilding techniques developed in response to the perceived parameters of oxidation firing.

At the same time, the work had to earn her a living without throttling the

creative source. This resulted in the decision to develop two main bodies: one in which consolidated ideas were adapted to production processes and produced in sufficient volume to eke a living; and another in which more complete freedom of imagination and exploration of means and forms were fostered and indulged. The latter work was specifically for public exhibition and display. The more functional ware provided the income that made full-time dedication to clay possible.

The two areas of pursuit have each yielded experiences that have informed one another. While the exploratory work runs ahead in ideas and the demands it makes on both creative and technical problem-solving, these demands are met by the skills refined by the less glamorous discipline of production.

Reading and research play important parts in ordering, directing and

supporting the progress of exploration, but it is the physical interaction with the materials and methods that makes the forms and their associations work together. Her constant involvement with the clay reveals possibilities through both accident and assimilation; in many instances, the hands arrive at inspiration by their own industry and activity, and the intellect is the receiver/follower, recognizing and classifying, linking and rationalizing, annotating and filing the revelations that the hands turn up.

Her extensive sketchbooks are more like a map than a plan, a record of what has been successfully explored, rather than a prospectus of possibilities. "Working this 'tenacious plastic earth' while it is wet and mobile, I find that a clear statement is possible and pure expression given dominance.... Work is always done in a series, with variations and improvements happening naturally. A

sketchbook is consulted and used, but often the 'seeing' must first be done with the material itself."

She uses a commercial buff-colored clay body, and fires to Cone 6 in an electric kiln. "I often begin pieces by making parts from thin slabs that are textured with long roller stamps, and cut and rolled into varying lengths and widths, and sometimes made into sticks or pointed reeds. The roller stamps are made by texturing coils that have been extruded, using ceramic dies that I have made. Because I have specific symbols I want to use on these pieces, the mark-making tools are important. Often I think of myself as a tool maker, as I also make the molds to hold and support these complex objects.

"The expressive format offered by the ideas inherent in the boat forms has inspired a more methodical and intricate method of working. Sometimes



"Winged Gate," 9 inches in height, handbuilt stoneware with thrown disks, with slip glaze wash and glaze stains, fired to Cone 6 in oxidation.



"Ab Intra," 21½ inches in length, stoneware, handbuilt inside a bisque mold, with slips and oxide wash, fired to Cone 6 in oxidation.

pieces are made draped over a mold and then removed to continue to add work on the interior. Some slab-built pieces use only a rigid open-sided supporting form for the base.

"The plastic nature of clay is a characteristic I enjoy and wish to emphasize and take advantage of. Some parts are allowed to become nearly leather hard before soft slabs are laid over and under—the continual dichotomy of hard and soft is a pervading influence on how I want these pieces to be perceived.

"After a soft bisque, surfaces are treated with washes of stain and glaze, with some areas wiped or sanded off.

"The boats I make recall female archetypes as symbols of passage, empowerment and salvation. Structural allusions to the basic working properties of boats, their context in primitive cultures, and the idea of death and decay are all relevant. I consider the metaphor of the 'uterus ship,' vessels within the vessel, and so work the inside and the outside concurrently.

"The double-hulled vessels deal literally with the inside and outside; they are hollow containers that contain themselves as another layer of content. The symbols impressed into the clay assist in reifying the vessel as symbol. The marks are at once conscious and random."

At the same time, there has been the conscious effort to make the surfaces



"Arc Navalis," 29 inches in length, stoneware, handbuilt in a bisque mold, with slips and oxide wash, fired to Cone 6 in oxidation.



"Matrix," 12½ inches in length, handbuilt stoneware with oxide and glaze wash, fired to Cone 6 in oxidation, by Laurie Rolland, Sechelt, British Columbia, Canada.

and forms appear effortless, uncontrived and organic, as if growing or dying in inevitable response to natural forces. "Some of the podlike boats have ribbed interiors resembling the fragile, decayed remains of birds and insects or the delicate veins of leaves. The idea of vessels for the water—their ability for strength in containment despite their apparent fragility—is important to me."

The bird-as-spirit, a symbol used frequently in Rolland's work, is often referenced in the boat pieces by a wing-spread-like overall shape (particularly the "Reed-Boat" series), by surface decoration or by the inclusion of found feathers or bones.

Metaphors or symbols for the self are invested in almost all her work, whether implicit in the feminine nature of vessel, or explicit as a representa-

tional element. Early work included self-portrait elements emerging from or being absorbed by the body of the piece.

Water is also a recurring image, often as an undulating line or an array of raised lines, and is a fundamental element like clay/earth. It symbolizes duality, change, the life source, and feminine characteristics of gentle perseverance and tempestuous ire. Association makes water and its qualities part of the content of the boat pieces, even when not referenced by surface markings, structural decoration or the fused, jewellike puddles of slumped glass that are found in the bottoms of some.

Themes of vulnerability and mortality, spirituality and endurance have been dealt with through both image- and form-based symbolism. The boats usually appear fragile and occasionally ag-

gressively threatening on the same protective principle that many vulnerable organisms use—that often the best defense is a good bluff.

The hulls represent the corporeal aspect of our nature; their cargo of spirit/self is invoked by the symbols on the surfaces, implied by the enclosed volume or occasionally tokenized by found and altered objects contained within.

Through this work with the boat-vessel form, Rolland has developed "a vehicle for linking together ideas about the female vessel form, religious iconography, organic intent and a quest for wholeness."

The author *Larry Westlake was an exhibition curator for ten years; he now designs and builds wooden boats in Sechelt, British Columbia, Canada.*