

In conversation with Emma Gray California Biennial 2008 catalog

Emma Gray: I see ceramics as your calling card. To what extent is clay at the center of your practice?

Anna Sew Hoy: It definitely is a center. As a sculptor I make things with my hands. And clay was the first material that I used, even before I knew I wanted to be an artist. I started taking figure-sculpting classes when I was in high school. At that point I thought the apex of art was Rodin. The practice of sculpting the nude and studying Rodin has definitely influenced my work in that I now experience a sculpture by walking around it, watching surfaces and relationships change as the sculpture is seen from different angles. I think that way of looking stems from those figure-sculpting classes.

EG: I don't think I have seen a sculpture of yours without ceramics.

ASH: There are the Sapporo beer can sculptures and sculptures made out of cut logs, just two examples among many mixed-media works. I will use any material I deem necessary in order to make a piece. Ceramics reentered my work around 2003, after my discovery of an ideal ceramics studio in Los Angeles. Maybe ceramic seems rare in the context of contemporary art, so my clay works stand out.

EG: You are one of a few people invigorating a fairly staid art form.

ASH: It was a freedom for me to use clay; there wasn't anybody I knew who cared about making artwork with it. So I was just doing what I wanted in clay, as if no one were watching. That was invigorating.

EG: When working with clay, it can feel like groping around in the dark, as one is so concerned with the feel and texture. I was thinking about that in terms of your work. Can you talk about your use of black?

ASH: Visually it's very stark. A gallery is usually white, so if you work in black, silhouettes and shapes can be seen clearly.

Blacknoir is the name of the line of functional goods that I produce. Rather than being about color, for me the name is more about the repetition of those two words side by side: *black* and *noir*. With that title I was copying a tendency in Japanese fashion to name clothing lines in Western languages. My work comes from a clash of cultures or a multiplicity of cultures. I draw inspiration from many places and layer it all together.

As for "groping around in the dark," I don't have a preconceived idea of how my sculpture should look. My work comes out of a dialog with the materials I use. Clay is one of the easiest and most satisfying materials because it's so responsive. You touch it with your thumb, and that thumb mark is there. It's exciting for me to be able to leave evidence of making through those gestures. Clay is plasticity, responsiveness, and memory—an ideal material.

EG: So there is constant discovery?

ASH: And a constant risk of everything being destroyed. The making of ceramics is a theatrical process because fragile clay can break at any stage, from drying to firing. It involves both earth and fire. I teach ceramic sculpture at the University of California, Irvine. We recently conducted critiques of students' work, and my students

were setting things on fire as part of their presentations. I asked them, "Why are you such pyros?" They responded, "We are in ceramics class, and ceramics is all about fire, and that's why we are here!" The process of using clay is dramatic and satisfying.

EG: At one point you dropped your hobby of clay and went to the School of Visual Arts. Did it occur to you to make work with clay then?

ASH: No, because once I got to Manhattan, I realized that my idea of art was antiquated. I was embarrassed, and I had to struggle to catch up. I spent all my time in galleries learning about contemporary art. I never touched clay during the four years I was in school because it was not part of what anybody was talking to me about. I forgot about clay. Then in 2000 a couple of friends who are artists in Mexico invited me to a residency at Cerámica Suro, a ceramics manufacturer in Guadalajara. The factory owners wanted to have an art collection, and the way they did it was to invite artists to do residencies in the factory and keep some of the work produced there. All they had was clay. I spent three weeks with my hands in clay, nine hours a day.

EG: So it stuck from there?

ASH: That was the first time I made something in clay that wasn't an anatomical nude. In Guadalajara I was making really strange, globby forms that were precursors to my faceted scholar rocks and dreamcatchers. The materials I use to make sculpture continue to be varied, but that residency in Guadalajara brought clay back into my consciousness as a material for making art.

EG: Making all those sculptures of the nude must have been informative in terms of understanding scale and proportion. How well does it serve you now?

ASH: It definitely taught me about looking carefully and how to see things in the round, and about proportion as well. And because sculpting the nude was a hobby, I didn't know I was learning something useful.

EG: Lately there's more of an installation focus to your work. Is this a new direction for you?

ASH: I am always conscious that an object in a room is competing with everything else in a room, so in that way I am always focused on "installation," and how to set up the room so that it becomes the right frame for my work.

I want to push the work for the California Biennial toward the production of a more performative space, more of a set, where there's potential for action. The viewer will be made conscious that she is moving around in space, around a sculpture, that there is a possibility of her picking something up and holding it, and thus being in a real and physical relationship with my work.