

# Ceramics

MONTHLY



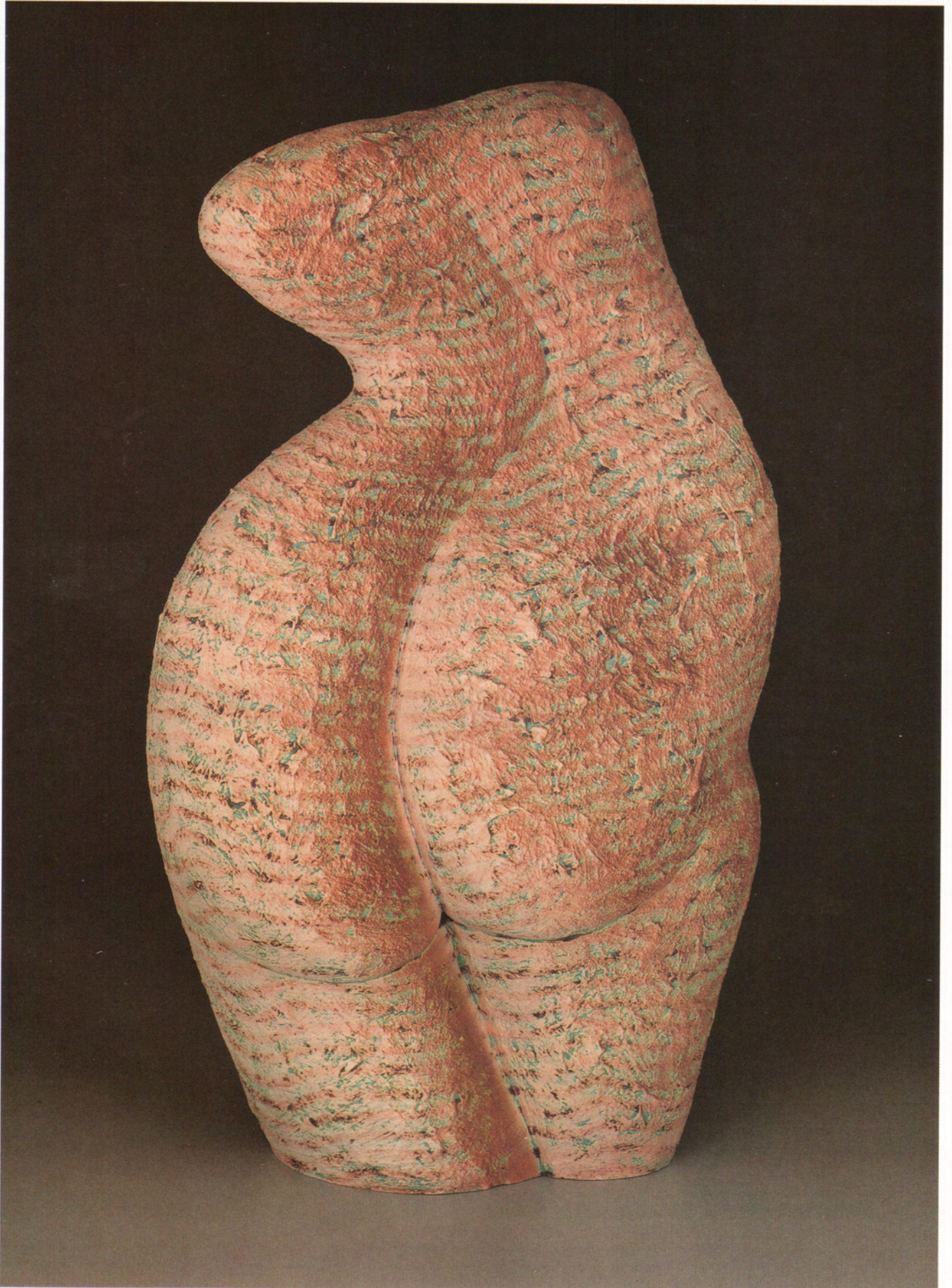
MURPHY  
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SOAP

# Accepting Change

by Donna Polseno



*Ceramist Donna Polseno in her Floyd, Virginia, studio; change, both physical and emotional, has been a substantial influence on her figurative ceramic vessels.*



*Untitled figure vessel, 38 inches in height, coil-built earthenware, brushed with thick slip and stains fluxed with Gerstley borate.*



THE DESIRE to express aspects of the universality of human experience, such as the ability to adapt, survive and find one's own sense of power in the face of adversity, has been of primary importance in my recent claywork. Particular experiences have led me in this direction.

Five years ago, I was striving for liveliness and a sense of motion in vessel forms through the use of color relationships, overlapping patterns and asymmetrical form. It was a while before I recognized that, quite naturally, I was using the human figure as inspiration. Once conscious of this source, I could push my own sense of active form farther. The historic relationship between pottery and human form (neck, foot, belly, etc.) suited well my intention of taking these symbolic references to the edge of what seemed possible.

Then a serious car accident kept

me from working for several months. The most devastating injury was the loss of an eye. When it was possible to begin working again, I picked up where I had left off, even though I felt I was coming to the work quite changed. How could I translate what I had been through emotionally, as well as physically, into my work?

I have always worked intuitively more than conceptually. Fifteen years ago Wayne Higby told me: "Even if you don't know what you're doing, keep working; it will come to you." Since then I've often taken that advice to heart, trusting that if I keep working, things will become obvious.

Back to work in the studio after the accident, I began exaggerating the features of these figures, without actually deciding to do so. This became a cathartic and healing act by which I felt I could give life and energy to the pieces. They quickly blos-

somed into forms like voluptuous fertility goddesses.

Archetypal fertility figures were meant to contain, protect and nourish the life spirit. Exaggeration of the torso was a way of expressing the uniqueness of the life-giving qualities of the feminine form. With my vessel figures, I am striving to create this same exuberant fullness and quirky exaggeration.

One of the ways I have personalized this archetypal image is by extreme movement, which is the antithesis of many historic fertility goddesses; they were often portrayed in stiff poses—earthbound and immobile. My figures always seem in motion, twisting, leaning and bending, often to the point of precariousness and uncertainty.

The motion of the figures (expressing the tenuousness of life), and their voluptuousness (expressing the full-



*Remodeling the barn on their farm (TOP) yielded separate ceramic studios for Polseno and her husband, Richard Hensley.*

ness of life) are the visual concerns that interest me most, because I am dealing with them on a physical and emotional level simultaneously.

The forms are coil built slowly from white earthenware. I like taking the time to do this, because I live with them as they grow, and they often take on a presence that was not foreseen in the original sketches. A few years ago, before the vessels literally became figures, I was building them from slabs. Atlanta ceramist Andy Nassis came to visit and said: "That's nice. But why are you using slabs?" Well, that was just the way I had always worked, but I was actually at a point of frustration because it was difficult to make the shape as articulate as I had envisioned. The switch to coil building brought immediate fullness and implied movement.

Once the form is complete, a very thick coat of slip is brushed on the surface to create another level of movement through its visual depth and sometimes swirling motion. I want this texture to draw one in and yet set one apart at the same time, in order to give a sense of being more than just reference to a physical body.

After a bisque firing, stains (equal parts Gerstley borate and Mason stain) are brushed on, then wiped off the surface. The primary purpose of the body painting is to symbolize transformation and spiritualization, rather than being mere ornamentation. For instance, spirals on the goddess' bellies are well known as ancient symbols of life and death.

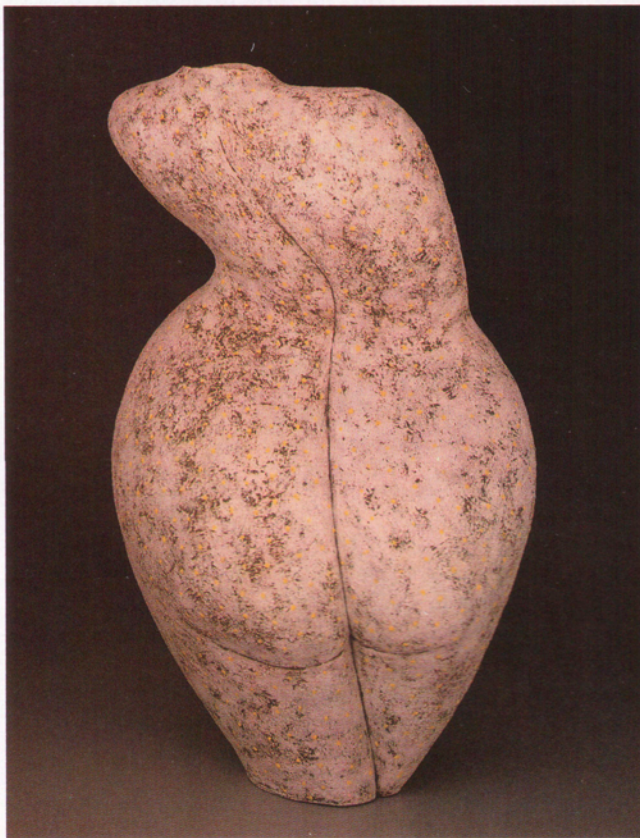
I work on just one vessel figure at a time now, as it seems to be the only way to stay in touch with the piece. Also, this way of working fits well with my production line—slip-cast vases, ewers, bowls and cups. I began making a few this way years ago. They are cast from a Cone 7 porcelain slip, then bisqued, glazed black or sprayed with a dryish, pebbly slip and delineated/decorated with black stain mixed with 10% frit.

The creative aspect of this work comes in spurts—when I am designing and executing a new form. I draw inspiration from the coil-built figures for the slip-cast pots, and they in turn manage to financially support me and the larger pieces. So far the combination of work provides a nice balance. Keeping up with both does entail a

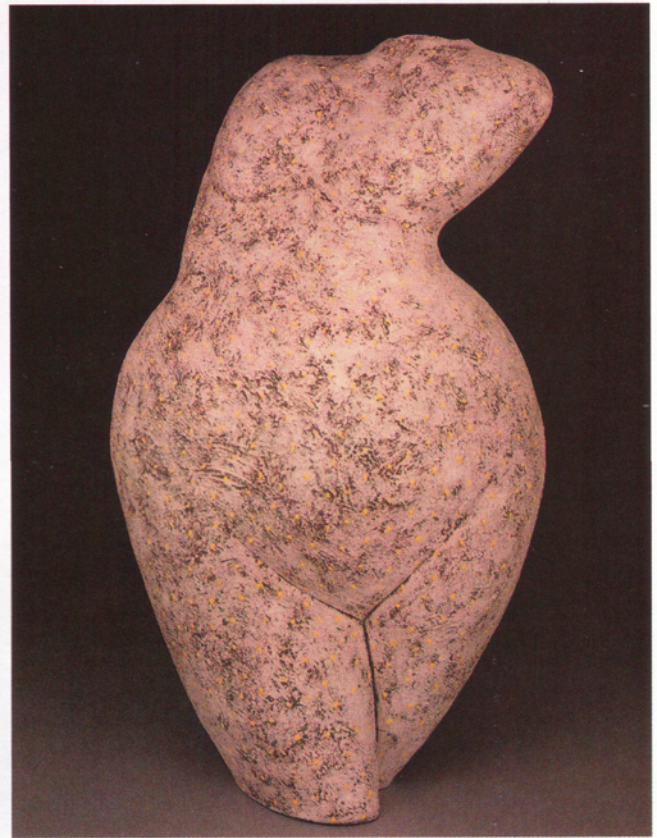
lot of hours, but it seems a small price to pay to be able to live and work how and where I want.

For 13 years I shared studio space with my husband, Richard Hensley. It had never really bothered me, but when I received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, I tried to forget about immediate bills and just think about what I needed most as an artist. It came to me while planting tulip bulbs—my figure vessels were getting bigger and I needed my own space. The new studio on the second floor of our barn is relatively uncluttered and faces south (instead of the northerly direction of the old space), with a balcony looking toward the hillside. I'm still amazed at the difference this has made in my work attitude and therefore in the work itself.

So many things can effect change in our work. Some are subtle; some have great impact. I think that I used to resist change in my life more than in my work, but accepting change as the one thing we can count on is one of the universal experiences that I have had to come to terms with and have tried to incorporate into my life as a visual artist. ▲



*Back and front (RIGHT) views of an untitled "goddess" form, 33 inches in height, coil built, stained, fired to Cone 04.*



*To express the tenuousness of life, Polseno uses twisting, leaning, bending—often to the point of precariousness.*



*Fertility figure, 26 inches in height, earthenware with slip and stains;  
"spirals are ancient symbols of life and death."*



Earthenware figure vessel, 35 inches in height, coil built, brushed with slip, bisqued, stained, fired to Cone 04.



Inside Donna Polseno's studio: chalk drawings pinned to a door suggest new forms in the planning stage; the small mold (left) is for a line of cast production figurative ware, which in turn financially supports the larger, handbuilt forms.

## Recipes

### Earthenware Body

(Cone 04)

Talc .....	30lbs.
Ball Clay .....	30
Cedar Heights	
Goldart Clay .....	100
Medium Grog .....	25
	185lbs.

Dry mix this body with one handful of nylon fibers.

### Porcelain Casting Slip

(Cone 7)

Custer Feldspar .....	18lbs.
Frit 3110 (Ferro) .....	2
Nepheline Syenite .....	70
Ball Clay .....	50
Edgar Plastic Kaolin .....	36
6 Tile Clay .....	10
Flint .....	14
	200lbs.

Add 356 grams of sodium silicate to 10½ gallons of water before mixing with the dry ingredients.

### Pebbly Slip

(Cone 7)

Borax .....	4.31%
Opax .....	6.68
Talc .....	12.93
Tin Oxide .....	2.59
Frit 3110 (Ferro) .....	24.35
Ball Clay .....	12.07
Edgar Plastic Kaolin .....	20.26
Flint .....	16.81
	100.00%

Spray this slip for a dry, pebbly surface.

### Leaded Black Glaze

(Cone 7)

Frit GF-18* .....	80%
Edgar Plastic Kaolin .....	10
Flint .....	10
	100%

Add: Black Mason Stain ..... 10%

\*A lead-bearing frit available from General Color and Chemical Company, P.O. Box 7, Minerva, Ohio 44657.