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Maake is an independent,
artist-run print publication
and project space
featuring contemporary
artists and artist-run
projects

Linda Sormin

Linda Sormin explores vulnerability, upheaval and change through sculpture and site-responsive installation. Born in Bangkok, Thailand, she immigrated to Canada with her family at the age of five. After working in community development for four years in Thailand and Lao PDR, Sormin studied ceramics at Andrews University, Sheridan College and Alfred University (MFA 03). "Fierce Passengers", Sormin's recent immersive work, was installed at the Carleton University Art Gallery (Ottawa, Canada) this spring. She exhibits internationally, most recently at Wuchangshuo Memorial Hall (Shanghai, China) and Jogja National Museum (Yogyakarta, Indonesia). Sormin's essay *Are you land or water? Love notes to Buddhas* has been published in the book *Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture*. She is currently Professor of Ceramic Art at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in Alfred, New York.

Statement

The site looms above and veers past, willing me to compromise, to give ground. I roll and pinch the thing into place, I collect and lay offerings at its feet. This architecture melts and leans, hoarding objects in its folds. It lurches and dares you to approach, it tears cloth and flesh, it collapses with the brush of a hand.

Nothing is thrown away. This immigrant lives in fear of waste. Old yogurt is used to jumpstart the new batch. What is worth risking for things to get juicy, rare, ripe? What might be discovered on the verge of things going bad?



Interview with Linda Sormin

Questions by Beatrice Helman

Hi Linda! Thank you so much for talking to us. Do you have a first memory of making an object or a drawing?

When I was nine, I attended a one-room school out on Atherley, a country road near Orillia, Ontario. When we weren't outside making leaf/snow/tree forts or little boats to float down the nearby stream, I was constantly drawing and making animal figures and bowls out of plasticine. At recess, we'd pile up our wooden desks like mountain ranges, turn out the lights, climb to the top of the desk pile, sit on our haunches and howl like wolves. As a wolf, I always kept my plasticine bowls with me. That seemed like a natural thing to do.

I wanted to ask you about architecture and the relationship between ceramics and architecture, the way that lines and curves are used to communicate. Do you see a relationship existing between the two?

Ceramics and architecture make space for human interactions. The lines of a vessel, the curves of a hallway, the volumes, angles and planes of ceramic and architectural forms invite us to eat, drink, walk, run, sit, hold, lean, pause, move and connect with each other in specific ways. This is really exciting to me, that a thing or a place can influence how we inhabit the world – what we do, how we move, where we go, what we might be able to perceive or imagine.

Can you talk about the physical process of working with clay—are there motions you return to over and over? Do you find that the physical action influences your mental state or vice versa?

Clay offers itself as language, with limitless variations in tones, cadences, dialects. Through hand building, wheel throwing, extruding, slab work, press molding, and up-cycling waste ceramics, I build momentum and introduce unlikely parts. Rhythmic, hand-pinched grids push against translucent porcelain slabs, cling to thick, hollow extrusions. When I make forms, I think about sound and resonance, silence and volume. I welcome dissonance and intricacy, improvisation and risk. Repeating gestures like pinching, pulling, coaxing a line of clay forward, keeps me hopeful, intuitive and alert.

I read that your work “explores vulnerability, upheaval and change through sculpture and site-responsive installation.” Can you talk a little bit more about these themes?

The Disillusionment of the Toiler, a large scale ceramic and mixed media installation, was commissioned by the Everson Museum for their 2016 Biennial. In this work, I made oversized, extremely fragile, hand-pinched ceramic grids that were so heavy that when put in place in the gallery, they fractured under their own weight. The resulting shards remained on the gallery's concrete floors as fugitive elements, and a physical record of events.

More recently, for my installation *Fierce Passengers* (2018), I invited people in Canada and the US to offer objects to be included in the installation – things that represent for them things that they've lost, or longed for, or held onto during times of change and upheaval. I was thinking about how culture carries us, like “Fierce Passengers”, through times of transition. What stories might be told through objects, of the lives of people who have once owned them? In the month following the opening of this exhibition, CBC Radio asked me to talk with Canadians on a lunchtime radio show. Listeners were invited to share their stories of things they had held onto or left behind in times of transition. The objects people called in about ranged

from a collection of dolls held onto by a woman who immigrated alone to Canada as a child, to souvenirs kept by a survivor of domestic violence, to the belongings of a family seeking safety in a new country.

When you refer to site responsive installation, can you talk about what led you to it and what function it serves in your work? I'm particularly interested in the relationship between vulnerability and change. Are these themes that have resonated throughout your life or something you have come to be interested in over time?

I worked in community development, disaster relief and humanitarian aid in Laos in the 1990s. I was, of course, struck by the fragility of human life and the unsustainable structures that humans build, both physically and institutionally. As an immigrant to Canada from Thailand, change and upheaval have always been central to my experience. When I was invited to create an installation at the Carleton University Art Gallery (CUAG) in Ottawa last year, I was immediately drawn to the instability of the local clay, Leda clay, which puts the architecture in my nation's capital at risk (Ottawa is in an earthquake-prone area). Leda clay turns to liquid, causing landslides, when hit with force. I imagined CUAG's high-ceilinged gallery as a dry dock, and together with the help of a skilled carpenter and gallery preparators, built the form of a ship's hull to house ceramic forms and objects donated by the public in its fictitious "hold".

How do you resolve a feeling of being out of sync with your work, or being unsure about where to go next?

In "Fierce Passengers", I followed the sense and logic offered by my materials – especially the Leda clay. I brought samples of the clay to my colleagues in Ceramic Engineering at Alfred University, who scanned the clay with their electron microscope. I then projected these images in the installation. I studied images of landslides caused by Leda clay, and poured this clay into the gallery space, allowing it to spill through the wooden structures and ceramic forms I built. I invite misbehavior in my materials, then respond with my own transgressive acts. Sometimes this involves "destroying" parts of the work, crushing a pile of plates with a ceramic sculpture I've built, or "opening" up my work with a hammer.



Fierce Passengers (people on boardwalk), 2018. Ceramics & mixed media, dimensions variable.

**Do you find that your physical surroundings, or emotional surroundings, influence your work?
You seem to have worked in a variety of stunning but very different locations!**

Place does influence my work, but even more so I'm influenced by people I meet and conversations and interactions I have with them. I invite community participation in workshops and installations. In post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, local artists generously shared their personal stories, images and forms with me. Together, we built "Salvage" a large scale collaborative installation that was exhibited at Louisiana Artworks, then its parts divided up between the participants, who took them home. This approach of working with individuals in communities grounds my work in shared narratives.

The word 'ceramics' has such a wide reach and so many definitions. Can you talk about what defines ceramics, to you personally?

Ceramics is fired clay. I'm fascinated by this soft, wet/red/river-bed or cold/white/rock-mountain material – it endures, transforms itself through the extreme heat and trauma of fire. Working in ceramics offers me the immediacy, the sensuousness of touching clay with my bare hands. Ceramics offers theatre, high drama. It embodies issues of survival and fragility, resilience and vulnerability. Its shifting identity and confusing status as "national treasure" vs. marginalized medium in the context of different cultures and subcultures interest me. Because of these contradictions, ceramics is a rich place from which I can observe, re-present, interact with and critique power structures and inequalities in society, art and institutions – in museums, for example.

What is the relationship between ceramics and storytelling? I've always found something like clay to be so fascinating because not only does it change form, it seems to hold emotion, to hold the past within its very self.

A piece of clay or an immersive installation – whether it's something I squeezed together yesterday, or built for 3 months in a Norwegian collection of Chinese Art – tells the story of how it came into being. A ceramic object or space conveys the place of its origin, of the people and cultures that shaped it, and also perhaps of me, or the historical individual maker. Whether it was meant to carry water or wine, store grain or cosmetics, pour tea, or carry the body of a loved one into the afterlife – the historic potter or sculptor shaped clay to meet her needs and the needs of her fellow humans.

My work is a response to human needs, our loss and our longing. As analytical as I may strive to be, raw emotions do fuel my making process. From sweetness to anxiety, confusion to anger, apprehension to joy, grief to desire, my work fuses old ceramic processes with common human experience. The ways I build a form or an installation, break it open, douse it in glaze, smear it with nail polish, sprinkle it with gold leaf, shove it against a wall, upturn it, or distort it through thermal violence, all tell stories through color, texture, gesture and cultural reference. More than anything, the ceramic space offers itself to be physically as much as visually explored. This haptic experience – of understanding ceramics through one's own body, through proximity, movement and the senses -- invites us to encounter stories first-hand, in real time.

On your website, the words "Nothing is thrown away. This immigrant lives in fear of waste." I was just really struck by the beauty of these two phrases in particular, and was hoping you could talk about them in relationship to your work?

I grew up in an immigrant family and we moved around a lot. As the location of home was constantly shifting, I held onto objects as a way to maintain a sense of familiarity. Things became place-holders for me, reminding me of who I was in relation to where I had lived. I embed souvenir ceramics, shards,

figurines and other keepsakes in my abstract sculptures. I find them in thrift shops and garage sales, or they are offered by students, colleagues and people from various communities in which I've worked. I find it difficult to part with these things, especially since I'm prone to instantly love how a glaze behaves, or to become hopelessly attracted to the shape or fineness of a shard. I also tend to obsessively attach some kind of meaning or narrative to these fragments. They want to become something, they offer endless potential. I can't throw them away. Instead, I knit them into my sculptures.

Looking at your work, I felt this kind of current of energy running through it. Is that something you're conscious of? Do you find that you're almost shaping energy, or giving it a vein to run through?

Yes. I try to stay alert and not "zone out" – the gestures of making don't lie. As I stretch the clay, pinch, connect, add and tighten and add coils, I'm coaxing forward the lines of a 3-dimensional drawing. Shaping this energy into a spatial experience is a tense process. Even when I move into making recognizable things like florets, ribbons, birds, etc – I want them to surge, to be directional and driven, to embody the urgency and risk-taking that, for me, reflect authentic experience.

Do you have any projects, shows or residencies coming up?

My sculpture "Sketch for Wet Dream Architecture" has just arrived in Denmark for the group exhibition "CERAMIC MOMENTUM - Staging the Object" at the Museum of Ceramic Art Denmark. I'll be going to Denmark for the opening and international symposium on May 10th. I find that my thinking and studio processes get charged through these kinds of exciting interactions with fellow artists, so I'm really looking forward to meeting up with friends and colleagues there, travelling together and sharing ideas.

Thank you so much for talking with us!