

Marc Leuthold's 'Fault':

Situating Sculpture

by Glen R. Brown

*Buenos Aires, 5 in. (12.5 cm) in height,
carved, marbled stoneware, 2008.*



Circular forms rippling with a wavy fluting that recalls in its rhythmic disposition the spiraling septa of a nautilus shell, the fragile, radiating gills beneath a mushroom cap or the undulating patterns molded in the sand of a river channel: the signature sculptures of Marc Leuthold are so strongly suggestive of natural phenomena that one may be forgiven some initial skepticism upon learning that they are not abstractions from nature but rather purely “non-objective works mediated by an interest in improvisation and intuition.” In this respect they are deceptive, like the famous Barnsley’s Fern, which seems a fairly accurate depiction of a particular species of plant but is in fact a diagram generated solely through the logic of mathematical fractals. While Leuthold’s method of creating compositions involves intuitive association rather than adherence to the dictates of a numerical system, the results are every bit as distinct from deliberate representation of the natural world.

In order to convey this point to his audience, Leuthold has generally attempted to situate his sculptures within a conceptual framework by accompanying them with text when presented in solo shows. In the first such instance, at the Banff Centre, Alberta in 1993, the text was a poem titled *The Man Who Eats Green Apples*, composed specifically for the event by the Korean ceramist Sung Jae Choi. In 2000, for the exhibition “Hints” at the University of North Carolina, his work was paired with an excerpt from Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*. For a more recent exhibition at Gallery Pakh in New York, Edward Dyer’s short Elizabethan poem *The Lowest Trees Have Topps* was hand printed by John Horn of Shooting Star Press both on a large scale for the wall and in a smaller version for distribution to gallery visitors. In each case, the literary elements were invoked to transport the viewer to a level of poetic association and emphasize that Leuthold’s method is not oriented to representation but rather to “the way a jazz musician or an Abstract Expressionist might work with clay.”

The occasion of a 2008 exhibition at the Mark Potter Gallery of the Taft School, a venerable private high school institution in Connecticut where Leuthold was invited to serve as a Rockwell Visiting Artist, provided the most recent opportunity to influence the reception of his work by pairing it with a literary excerpt. After some deliberation, he settled on a passage from D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which, as a sexually explicit novel that tendentiously flaunted obscenity laws in Great Britain when first published in the 1920s, appealed to Leuthold’s sense of irony. “*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was burned and banned by governments in D. H. Lawrence’s time,” he comments. “It is seldom assigned to students, who can no doubt relate to its themes of disillusionment and sensuality. The venue for the exhibition, the Taft School, was founded by

the brother of President Taft and is a model of excellence that is relatively conservative and structured; *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is not on the summer reading list. Despite the message—or perhaps because of it—the show was enthusiastically received by students and faculty at the school.”

The suggestion to consider a quote from Lawrence came from New York painter, Dawn Clements, whom Leuthold had met while the two were serving as visiting professors at Princeton University and with whom he had collaborated on a few previous projects. The idea of collaboration had appealed to Leuthold since the mid-1990s, when he assisted Neil Tetkowsky with a multi-media performance, “Industrial Ikebana,” that paired Tetkowsky with a Japanese master of floral arrangement. “I’ve never forgotten the power of this kind of synergy between two creative artists,” Leuthold says. “Dawn is an extraordinary painter who has given me invaluable feedback about my artwork and has encouraged me to do the same for her. When I was invited to have the show in Connecticut, I talked with her about how I could use this non-commercial venue to develop my work. It was Dawn who tossed me a copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. I pecked through the book and came up with about six possible texts.”



Maureen, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, carved, marbled porcelain, 2008.

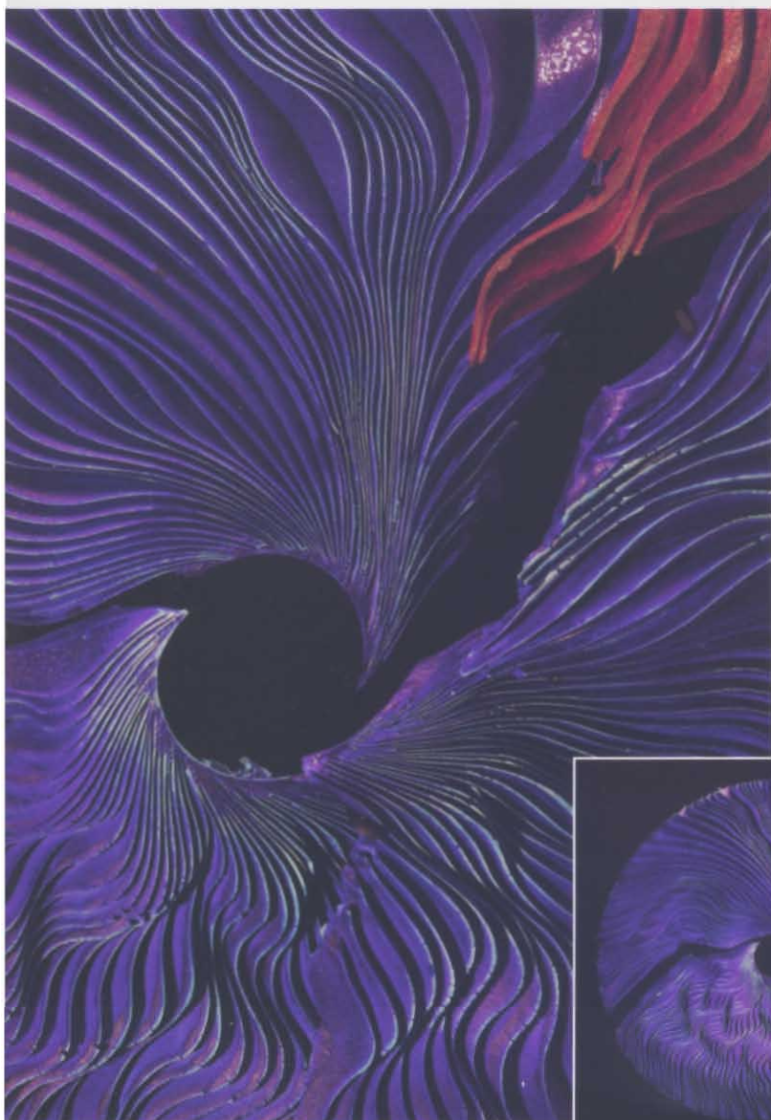
In consultation with Clements, Leuthold settled on a two-paragraph excerpt emphasizing the intrusive effects of technology on the sense of private experience in the modern world. From this passage he extracted the word “fault” to serve as the exhibition’s title (a choice particularly appropriate given the cracked or otherwise broken nature of several of the sculptures included in the show). These literary borrowings proved to be only the starting points for a more extensive contextualization of Leuthold’s ceramic works. With the encouragement of Clements—who was familiar with the loose, improvisational ink paintings that Leuthold had produced after a 2003 residency in Seto, Japan and had even loaned him some six-foot brushes so that he might explore the possibilities of larger scale—he adopted the plan of covering the floor of the more than 1000-square-foot gallery

with paper, rendering a spontaneous painting on this surface, then installing ceramic objects on pedestals and other supports within the scheme of the aesthetically conditioned space.

With Clements’ help and several rolls of five-foot-wide, deckle-edged, 140-lb Fabriano Artistico paper provided by gallery director Loueta Chickadaunce, Leuthold began what would be an arduous two-day process of cutting and gluing together large sections of paper and employing white gaffer’s tape and polyvinyl acetate (PVA) adhesive to attach the whole securely to the hardwood floor. “It was quite a job,” he recalls, “and we wished that we had brought kneepads. For hour after hour, we glued and taped nine rolls. Afterwards, with white walls and floor, the room glowed under the gallery lights. It was like being in the desert or at the North Pole.” Little time remained to contemplate this starkly white environment, both daunting and exhilarating for the possibilities that it presented, since installation of the exhibition was slated for the next morning. Between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m., Leuthold executed the painting, all the while aware that there would be no opportunity for a second chance should the composition prove a failure.

Embracing the risk—and, in fact, voluntarily heightening it in response to Lawrence’s reference to the illusory nature of seclusion in a dark wood where the harsh strains of industry penetrate—Leuthold adopted the extraordinary strategy of turning off the gallery lights before wielding a six-foot brush to apply the watery ink. “I moved around, treating the brush as an extension of my body, recording progress through the space,” he remembers. “I wanted to echo the kinds of movement—though on a larger scale—that I make when I carve the ceramic work. Afterwards I turned on the lights and studied the results for quite a while. Then I continued to paint, this time with the lights on, responding to the initial painting. Then I splashed ink on the painting in a couple of crucial areas. A little shaky, I called *Dawn in*. I was in the “zone” and welcomed feedback.”

Clements, whose own works have approached seventy feet in length, immediately appreciated both the internal flowing integrity of the large composition and its effectiveness as a complement to Leuthold’s ceramic works. “Exuberant yet controlled,” she later observed, the painting “is a spontaneous choreography with big washes of line, lively spatters from the flourish of a stroke, deep puddles of ink and water that eventually dry in an organic and irregular way as the pigment settles to the bottom like silt in a pool. It’s fluid yet precise. The drawing, though, still seems in flux like the slow contoured carving of the wheels.” Situated on pedestals above, and in some cases squarely upon, the meandering path of liquid line and dry traces of a less saturated brush, the ceramic pieces in the exhibition could not help but relinquish the formal autonomy that might otherwise have generated an illusion of



Purple, 19 in. (48 cm) in diameter, earthenware with barium copper matt glaze, 2008.



PHOTOS BY EVA HEYD UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



Fault exhibit at the Mark Potter Gallery of the Taft School. Inset: Leuthold painting Fault installation, 2008. Photo: Yee-Fun Yin.



solitude. Instead—and recalling Lawrence’s pronouncement on modern industry’s absolute administration of humanity—Fault permitted “no hermits.”

While exhibitions such as *Fault* are not likely to become the norm in contemporary ceramics, they do occupy an intriguing middle ground between the installation format and the display of independent sculptures on pedestals. They can be interstitial in other respects as well. The mixed-media aspect of *Fault*, for example, rejected the disciplinary autonomy to which ceramics has been prone, and Leuthold’s incorporation of the literary excerpt—which invoked the long tradition from Duchamp to conceptual artists of the 1960s, text artists of the 1980s and a host of language-oriented artists today—frankly acknowledged that the experience of art is not simply a material matter. By enveloping his ceramic sculptures with other media (painting and words) Leuthold carried the conceptual aspects of his work beyond the process of creation and into the realm of interpretation and commentary. In this respect, *Fault* was no doubt every bit as revelatory for the artist as it was for any other viewer of the exhibition.

“He went down again into the darkness and seclusion of the wood. But he knew that the seclusion of the wood was illusory. The industrial noses broke the solitude, the sharp lights, though unseen, mocked it. A man could no longer be private and withdrawn. The world allows no hermits. And now he had taken the woman, and brought on himself a new cycle of pain and doom. For he knew by experience what it meant.

It was not woman’s fault, nor even love’s fault, nor the fault of sex. The fault lay there, out there, in those evil electric lights and diabolical rattlings of engines. There, in the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanized greed, sparkling with lights and gushing hot metal and roaring with traffic, there lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform. Soon it would destroy the wood, and the bluebells would spring no more. All vulnerable things must perish under the rolling and running of iron.”

D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Florence: Orioli Press, 1928, p. 117.