

An ovoid view: from here to antiquity

by Susan Dodge Peters

Scottsville sculptor Graham Marks' Syracuse exhibition may be his last in the region.

Graham Marks is a sculptor who works with one of the most ancient materials, clay: with one of the most ancient techniques, coil construction: and with one of the oldest art forms, the vessel.

In some place other than an art museum—on a desert, or even in a natural history museum—his work might first be taken for a work of nature, a petrified dinosaur egg, perhaps, or as an artifact from a pre-historic civilization, a burial vessel.

For all its connections with ancient arts and civilization, though, Marks' work is utterly contemporary. For the past few years, he has been working with one basic form: an enormous ovoid shape that he slices cross-wise just as the sides of the egg-shape begin to taper past the middle.

The shape of Marks' newest work, now on exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, is familiar, as are his approaches to the interiors and many of his surface details. What is different and important about this show, however, is the degree to which he has pushed these forms and the ideas that are embodied in them.

There are nine pieces here, all made over the past year. Seeing this many at once was a revelation in itself. The richness and complexity of the pieces reveal themselves slowly. I actually felt my

attention intensify, and gradually I began to see more and more.

Marks' work is at once tremendously seductive and impossibly difficult to write about. In the presence of these enormous, enigmatic forms, our own imaginations run rampant. Association after association rises to the surface. They could be dinosaur eggs, or gigantic geodes. They could be fossilized seed pods or meteorites. They look, too, as if they might be ancient man-made objects, burial or ceremonial vessels, perhaps. But for all the alluring possibilities, nothing quite captures them; they are finally utterly mysterious, elusive, unnameable.

In speaking about sources for his work, Marks has mentioned the importance of the ceramics of neolithic cultures. He finds in this ancient work "a feeling of trying to grasp forces much larger than the individual—chaos, storms, change... these vessels are an attempt to give intuitions form."

Marks has layered these deep, primal feelings with the concerns of more modern, more self-conscious humankind: issues of opposites. They are at once, Marks said, "old/new, hard/soft, male/female, man/nature, in/out." The miracle and mystery of Marks' sculpture is that it can be everything at once. The works touch the deepest primitive hollows in us as well as beguile the vanity of the intellect.

Technically, as well as conceptually, Marks' work is remarkable. The pieces are all hand build and individually fired in kilns he constructs around each piece. The pieces are constructed upside down, with the opening of the piece facing the ground during construction. The walls are then built with layer upon layer of earthenware coils. Though the final pieces often look like solid masses of clay, they are essentially hollow.

Many of the pieces are double-walled, that is, a smaller vessel is set within the larger one. Some of them have round openings, others narrow slits. A number are not open at all; the ends are planar surfaces, like the cross-section of a tree stump.

The external surfaces are as mysterious and entrancing as the interiors. Tight little tailored mounds—hobnails—cover a number of the pieces. He sandblasted the surface of other pieces inscribing it with marks that look familiar and foreign at once. Occasionally, he mixes bits of metal hardware—springs and screws—into the clay. Once fused with the earthenware, they



Graham Marks at work on a coil construction.

Jamey Stillings



Earthenware clay, coil construction, by Graham Marks.

Jamey Stillings

are trapped like fossilized skeletons in stone.

Until very recently, Graham Marks lived and worked in Scottsville and taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology. The work in this exhibition was made during a sabbatical year and was financed by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, which was administered through the Pyramid Arts Center. He has, however, just moved to head the depart-

ment of ceramics at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, so this exhibition, which is truly exceptional, may well be the last chance in this region to see Marks' work.

"Graham Marks: New Work" continues at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse through November 2. The show travels to the Sculpture Center in New York City in January, 1987.