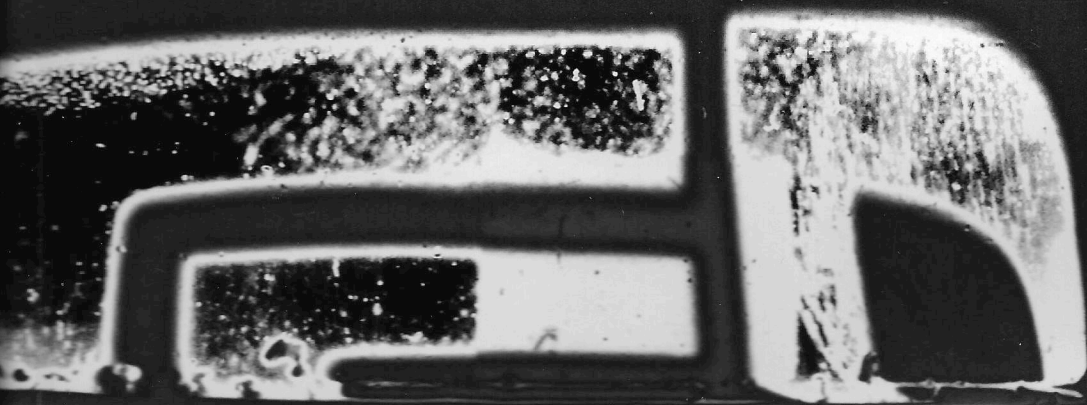


# T U D I O

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**COVER:** *Half Full, Half Empty.*  
Photograph by Al Karevy.

**FRONTISPIECE:** *Firing, April 30, 2009.*  
Photograph by Scott Goldberg.

**OPPOSITE:** *Black Raku Teabowl, square with four stamps and gold repair. Thought to be ninth Ryonyu, mid-Edo period circa 1780. Private collection. Photograph by Rostislav Eismont.*

# The Third Prince

by Graham Marks

I started working in clay in high school in 1967. I received a BFA in ceramics in 1974 from the Philadelphia College of Art and an MFA from Alfred University in 1976. For ten years I taught ceramics, first at Kansas State University and then at the School for American Craftsmen at Rochester Institute of Technology. From 1986 to 1992 I was the head of ceramics at Cranbrook. In 1992 I stopped working in clay and went back to school for three years to study acupuncture, and since 1995 I have been working in private practice and in a small community hospital.

When THE STUDIO POTTER asked me to consider writing something that might pertain to the theme of "failure," I was quite perplexed by the weighted connotations of the word. Had I failed? Is that why I was being asked? As a teacher, I had always tried to make a case for what one can learn from any failure in the ceramic or creative process, so with some perspective and distance I decided to take a look in the rear-view mirror, so to speak, and to examine my life in clay and my shift away from that world.

I immediately encountered the danger of writing a narrative such as this: in looking back at events, one can make them sound tidy and logical. They weren't, and it is only through hindsight that I can start to find connections between some aspects of my life that at the time felt quite disparate and disconnected.

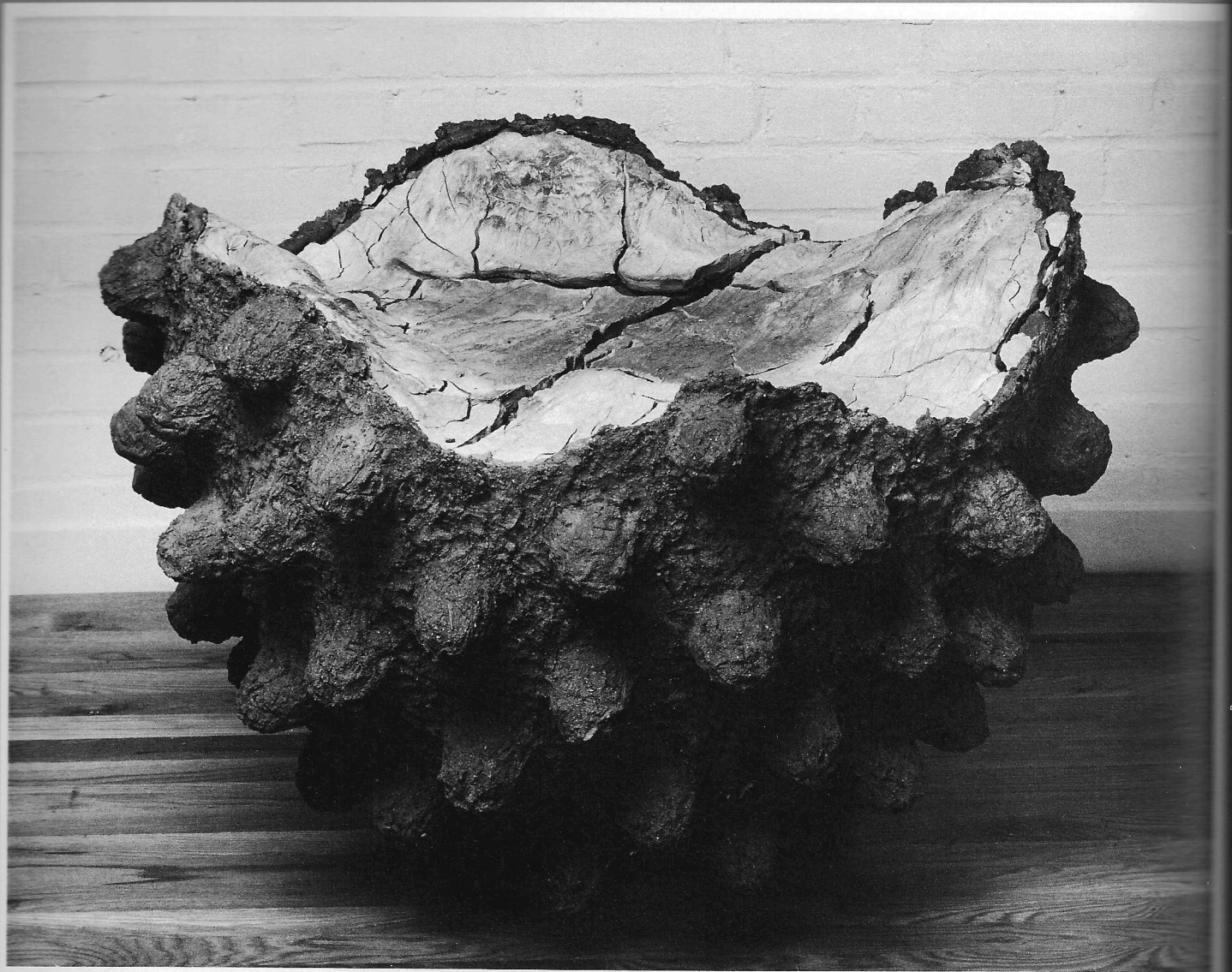
When I discovered the world of ceramics, I assumed that I would spend the rest of my life and career working in it. But in 1991 and 1992, a confluence of events and realizations about my studio work led me to an unexpected change. In late 1990 I described my growing involvement in community and environmental issues in the Deep Nature issue of THE STUDIO POTTER.<sup>2</sup> I had just been arrested for committing civil disobedience, along with a number of citizens of Allegany County (where











ABOVE: Pot, 1990. Coil construction, reduced earthenware, 32 x 31 in.

PRECEDING PAGE: Pot. (detail).

Alfred University is located and where our family spent the summers) who were working to block the establishment of a nuclear waste dump nearby. Along with the environmental challenges I described in the article, I tried to articulate an internal dilemma I was feeling. Discovering a voice within me that firmly said “No!” and then acting upon that voice, in concert with a community of people who shared the same depth of feeling, was very powerful. The history and destiny of our county were

profoundly altered.

After intense involvement with this issue, the question then was: how do I reenter the life of my studio? Speaking of the way I had worked for many years, I wrote, “My own method of working involved control and deliberateness. For instance, I went through elaborate strategies to prevent the clay from cracking by slow drying it under plastic for three to four months. Through an assertion of will I intended to subdue the plastic life of the material.” And then, describing

how my working method changed, "I went back into the studio and proceeded in a manner opposite to my established practice...I made a form and left it uncovered by the open window to dry..." A photograph that accompanied that article illustrated a piece with huge fissures that were the result of my new way of working. Forces of nature – heat, expansion, contraction, oxidation, and reduction – were all asserting themselves and creating a literal rupture in the work.

About a year later came a rupture in my life. A surprising malaise overtook me in a way that I had never experienced. I felt totally "out of gas." I managed to maintain my teaching obligations, but psychically I felt as though my present was dying within me and that my future was totally unknown. During the months that I felt stuck in this place, I discovered, in therapy, a word for what I was feeling: *liminality*. It comes from the image of a doorway and describes the moment of metaphorically standing between the past, where one came from, and the future, where one has not yet taken a step. I knew that something had to change but could not see what that meant or what form it would take.

While I was at Cranbrook I developed a chronic eye inflammation commonly known as blepharitis. Although the many physicians I saw were hesitant to point to a specific cause, one explanation was that twenty years of exposure to clay dust was an aggravating factor. Being forced to think about my eyes during this time was certainly fertile ground for a metaphor about perceiving the need for change.

Many years later, in my acupuncture work, I came across an essay titled "Self Discovery and Self Healing," by John Upledger, the founder of cranial-sacral therapy. This essay spoke directly to the importance of listening to symptoms and what they have to say:

*A friend and general surgeon with more than thirty years experience once con-*

*fided in me that, in retrospect, he felt the majority of surgical procedures he had performed might be classified as excisions of the "vocal apparatuses" of the inner selves of his patients. He meant that by removing certain organs or tissues, he was eliminating the bodily voices that were attempting to communicate the presence of deeper emotional and spiritual problems in need of attention.<sup>2</sup>*

During the late 1980s, I first heard a reading of "The Water of Life," a story collected by the Brothers Grimm and told by Michael Meade, a storyteller and mythologist. Many moments in the story and in Meade's commentary and analysis were revelations to me. The story begins with a king falling gravely ill. His three sons don't know what to do for him, and one day an old man appears and tells them that in order to live their father needs to drink from the Water of Life.

*The eldest prince sets out on the journey to find it and when he had gone on his way some time he came to a deep valley, overhung with rocks and woods; and as he looked around, he saw standing above him on one of the rocks a little ugly dwarf, with a sugarloaf cap and a scarlet cloak; and the dwarf called to him and said, "Prince, whither so fast?" "What is that to thee, you silly shrimp?" said the prince haughtily, and rode on. But the dwarf was enraged at his behavior, and laid a fairy spell of ill-luck upon him; so that as he rode on the mountain pass became narrower and narrower, and at last the way was so straitened that he could not go to step forward: and when he thought to have turned his horse round and go back the way he came, he heard a loud laugh ringing round him, and found that the path was closed behind him, so that he was shut in all round. He next tried to get off his horse and make his way on foot, but again the laugh rang in his ears, and he found himself unable to move a step, and thus he was forced to abide spellbound.*



When the first son fails to come home, the second prince sets out on the quest and in the same place meets the dwarf who asks,

*“Prince, prince, whither so fast?” “Mind your own affairs, busybody!” said the prince scornfully, and rode on. But the dwarf put the same spell upon him as he put on his elder brother, and he, too, was at last obliged to take up his abode in the heart of the mountains. Thus it is with proud silly people, who think themselves above everyone else, and are too proud to ask or take advice.*

When the second prince failed to return, the third prince sets out.

*The dwarf met him too at the same spot in the valley, among the mountains, and said, “Prince, whither so fast?” And the prince said, “I am going in search of the Water of Life, because my father is ill, and likely to die: can you help me? Pray be kind, and aid me if you can!” “Do you know where it is to be found?” asked the dwarf. Getting off his steed the prince said, “No! I do not. Pray tell me if you know.” “Then as you have spoken to me politely and not haughtily like thy false brothers and are wise enough to seek for advice, I will tell you how and where to go.”<sup>3</sup>*

The dwarf gives the third prince the guidance he needs, and the story continues with many trials, betrayals, and difficulties that lead ultimately to the saving of the king and the third prince inheriting the kingdom.

I stood in the doorway for many months, unable to move forward. One day something surprising came out of my mouth: “I want to be a doctor.” It felt like a first step through the doorway, but the disruptive implications of such a statement were enormous. I thought, “It’s impossible to become a doctor. What about my family? Cranbrook? My students? Money? My upcoming exhibitions? My resumé?”

What seems relevant to me from the story are the interactions between the three brothers and the dwarf. The dwarf can be seen as the manifestation of “the little voice,” or one could call it intuition. The first two brothers are not interested in listening; they choose to repress the voice. Because they speak to the dwarf with arrogance and disinterest, not acknowledging that his voice might have something important to say to them, they find themselves trapped in a canyon unable to move. It’s a good metaphor for what it’s like not to acknowledge that you are doing something you’re no longer passionate about. The interesting moment is when the third brother meets the dwarf. He asks for help and admits, “No, I don’t know where it is...” He gets off his horse (which could be fame, position, tenure, or self-image) and pays attention to what the dwarf has to say. Because he listens, the dwarf shares with him the vital information that leads him eventually to the Water of Life.

As soon as the words were spoken it seemed there was no going back. The choice before me was, which brother would I be? I think the impulse that was making itself known was an impulse to help people in a way I did not feel my ceramics work was capable of doing. I actually had no interest in being a doctor in the Western-medicine sense, and as fate would have it, one day my good friend George Mason put me on the phone with his wife, Susan Weiser, an acupuncturist in Maine. Many things started to fall into place. The natural forces that are so much a part of ceramics and that had recently come to the foreground of my work in such an insistent and active way were manifested in acupuncture, a system of healing that is based on the universal patterns of nature. What I have learned as a practitioner of this ancient art is that acupuncture involves a collaboration with these forces, not unlike the one in the studio. After visiting Susan in her office, meet-

ing her patients, and experiencing treatment myself, I knew that I had to listen to what my intuition was telling me.

At the time it seemed like a radical and abrupt shift. But it was one that I couldn't ignore and had to trust. In retrospect I can say that the shift really wasn't radical at all, but rather a direct evolution. My work needed to change; I just never imagined that the change meant that my studio and the objects I made would totally disincorporate, and reappear transformed as corporeal beings that are called patients.

One can certainly read the old fairy tales as interesting stories and cultural artifacts from a distant time. But they can also be read as internal road maps in which all characters are aspects of ourselves. The fate of the first two brothers was a kind of cautionary tale, suggesting

a potential road map for my own life, or even describing the road I was currently on, at least internally.

The reluctance to listen, being constrained by habit and the known, is how I would think of failure in the context of the path my life has taken. Failure then can be seen as the refusal to notice the unexpected. To let it in and take it seriously is, as Adrienne Rich tells us in the poem below, the first step through the door.

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#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Graham Marks, "A Glimpse into Pandora's Box," *THE STUDIO POTTER*, Vol 19, No 1, 1990, pp. 58-65.

<sup>2</sup>John Upledger, "Self Discovery and Self Healing," in *Healers on Healing*, Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield, eds. (New York: St. Martins, 1989), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>"The Water of Life." In *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1944).

<sup>4</sup>Adrienne Rich, "Prospective Immigrants Please Note," in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

## Prospective Immigrants Please Note

Either you will  
go through this door  
or you will not go through.

If you go through  
there is always the risk  
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly  
and you must look back  
and let them happen.

If you do not go through  
it is possible

to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes  
to hold your position  
to die bravely

but much will blind you,  
much will evade you,  
at what cost who knows?

The door itself  
makes no promises.  
It is only a door.<sup>4</sup>