

Ceramics

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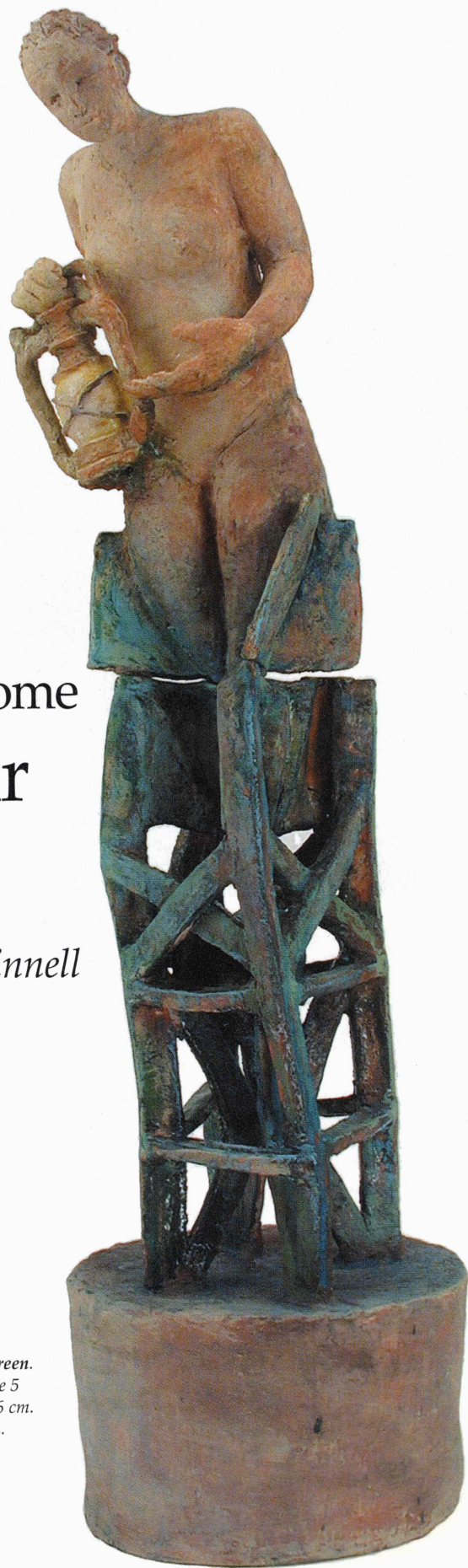
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Allison Newsome Plein Air

Article by
Nancy Whipple Grinnell

Bell Buoy Figures Red and Green.
2007. Ceramic stoneware, cone 5
glaze and stains. 182.5 x 76 x 76 cm.
Photography Carl Blomgren.



Picket Fence Apple Blossom Skirt. 2005. Stoneware, cone 5, glaze and stains. 91.5 x 45.5 x 45.5 cm. Photography Scott Sylvia.

ALLISON NEWSOME IS A PLEIN AIR PAINTER – IN CLAY. She ventures out into the fields or the bay and brings her clay slip, which she applies to the natural forms of rocks or trees or other environmental elements. She calls her technique “wet clay sketching,” because, in a sketch-like manner she is able to work quickly and spontaneously, creating a study for a ceramic or bronze sculpture to make back in her studio. She often incorporates natural found-objects in her sketches; shells, sticks, rocks, flowers or fruits adorn lichen-covered rocks, craggy trees and beaches strewn with seaweed and shells. Her manner of working came about serendipitously. In 1983 she had received her MFA in ceramics at the Rhode Island School of Design following which she went to the Nantucket Island School of Design and the Arts, to teach students in an environmental art program. They were in the woods and Newsome took three huge five-pound gallons of slip and



Apple Pants. 2004. Stoneware, cone 5, glaze and stains. 152.5 x 76 x 71 cm. Photography Allison Newsome.

sketched on the trees and boulders with it. Over the past 20 years she evolved this preparatory method, which has its antecedents in the artists who painted outdoors, *in situ*.

In the 19th century artists began to go outdoors to sketch and paint the natural world, to paint ‘plein air.’ The French Barbizon painters, in particular, wanted to paint nature more spontaneously and freely than their academic predecessors, relying on their sensations and responses to the verdant green landscape or the dark forests dappled with light. Like these artists, Newsome finds an almost elemental connection with nature when she can build a clay form while sitting on a beach, letting the water rush over them both, or fashion a collage on a rock, with clay, shells, branches or berries. Newsome records her sketches with a camera and takes them back to the studio to use as inspiration. The original sketches are left on site, to be returned to their natural state.

The original plein air painters were often making a statement about nature, as well as interpreting it in paint. Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875), the consummate painter of sturdy peasants at work in the rural landscape, actually lived among them in the Forest of Fontainebleau, near Paris, keeping the Industrial Revolution at bay. Newsome's sculptures also address issues of environment and human interaction in a powerful manner.

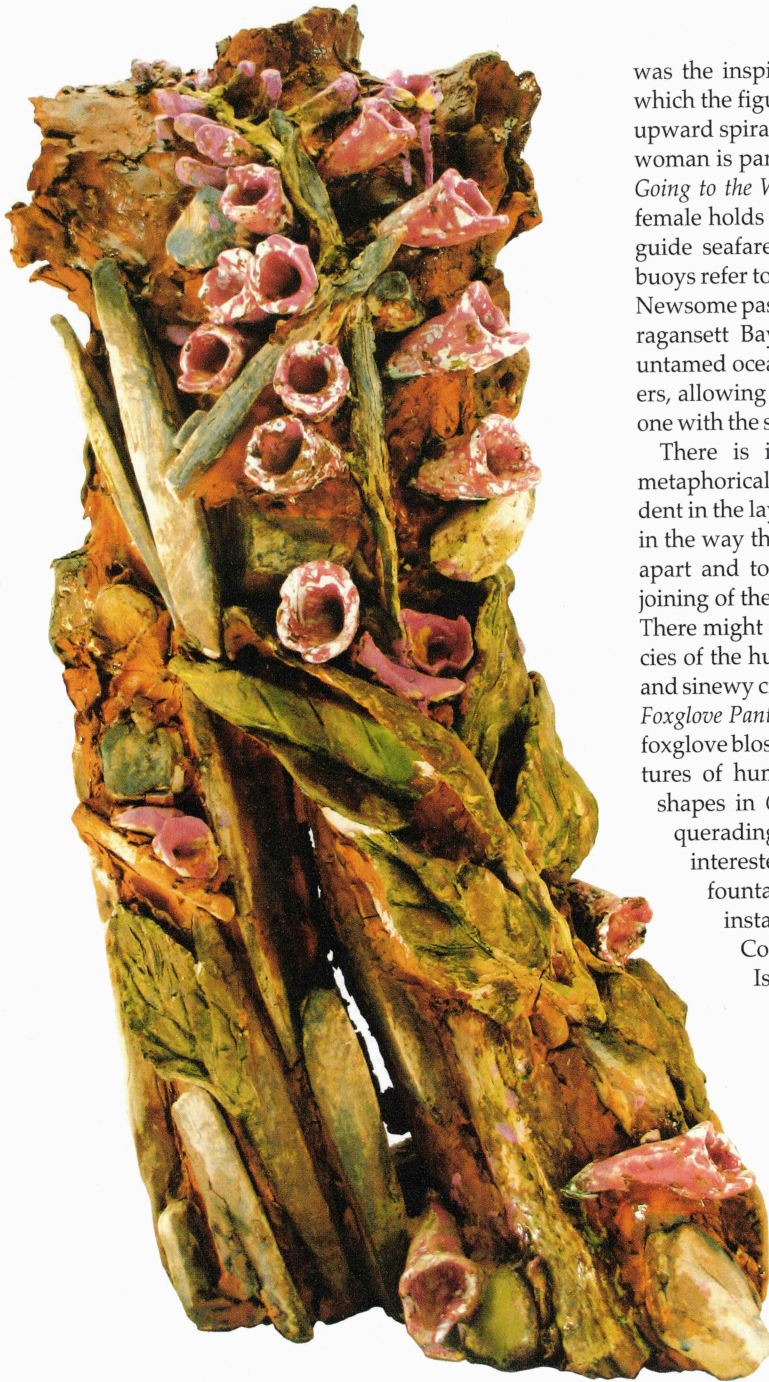
Originally inspired by the redwood forests of her native northern California, Newsome has since created sculpture in response to her extended time in Mexico as well as to the land and seascape of her adopted state of Rhode Island. She and her family have a summer cottage on the remote Prudence Island in Narragansett Bay, and in her 2003 exhibition at the Newport Art Museum, *On Island*, she merged her agrarian concerns with those of water. In her hand-built, multi-layered, glazed and textured sculptures she juxtaposed forms that referred to both the natural and the industrial: branches, bricks, stonewalls and wood. She was interested in the transition from the wilderness, to an agrarian, industrial and then post-industrial landscape as well as human connection with these shifts.

Newsome's recent work is more focused on the 'Contact Period' between the Native Americans and the colonial settlers; she makes reference to the New England region's indigenous materials, food and processes that were so integral to the survival of both groups. Corn, apples, water, wood, stone, grass, wattle and daub, hunting and gathering: Newsome creates powerful ceramics sculptures that convey the interdependence of humans, the land and the water, but at the same time finds a joyful exuberance in this existence. In *Picket Fence Apple Blossom Skirt*, a riotous garden of luscious pink apple blossoms is encased in a grid of upright pickets in the form of a woman's skirt. In Newsome's work the women wear the skirts, the men wear the pants, as in *Apple Pants*, a standing tree trunk torso clad in a woven vest. Newsome emulates the texture of Native basketry in the upper body covering, while the lower portion captures the sinewy wood grain of bark. There is certainly an underlying allusion to the differing roles of men and women, both among the Native Americans and the white settlers.

Newsome's studio in Warren, Rhode Island, sits on the site of the Massasoit Spring, historically recognised with a plaque in 1902, as the summer home of Sachem Massasoit Ousamequin. In his recent book *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War*, author Nathaniel Philbrick describes the 100,000



Woman Going To The Well. 2006. Stoneware, cone 5, once-fired technique, glaze and stains. 213.5 x 91.5 x 91.5 cm. Photography Carl Blomgren.



Foxglove Pants. 2005. Stoneware once-fired technique, cone 3, glaze and stains. Permanent collection of the RISD Museum. Photography Carl Blomgren.

acres of corn originally planted on this site. After reading the book, Newsome, with her characteristic energy, planted a field of corn, not in Warren, but on Prudence Island, also a site of Native and colonial history. She used the Native Americans' technique of growing corn in five-foot diameter circles with under-plantings of squash and beans. This formation

was the inspiration for *Woman Going to the Well* in which the figure of a woman seems to grow from the upward spiraling circles of corn. Like a mermaid, the woman is part human, part earth. Related to *Woman Going to the Well* is *Green Bell Buoy Figure II*. Here a female holds a lantern, acting as a beacon of light to guide seafarers in their ocean journeys. These bell buoys refer to the red and green channel markers that Newsome passes to and from Prudence Island in Narragansett Bay. Again, a seeming paradox: a once untamed ocean is now strewn with buoys and markers, allowing humans safe passage, so they can be at one with the sea.

There is interconnectedness both literally and metaphorically in Allison Newsome's work. It is evident in the layering, weaving, lifting of her clay, even in the way the separate parts of each sculpture come apart and together again. It is implied in the conjoining of the human figure with the land and water. There might even be an analogy between the intricacies of the human body and the torsos with crevices and sinewy cracks lined with glistening little nodules. *Foxglove Pants* is an upright torso with startling pink foxglove blossoms which relate to the colours and textures of human orifices. Perhaps the mussel shell shapes in *Grotto Shell Figure in Seascape* are masquerading as kidneys. Newsome has always been interested in art and healing, and her ceramic fountain commission, *The Cove*, was recently installed in the Courtyard Entrance of the Comprehensive Cancer Centre at Rhode Island Hospital.

And yet these painted surfaces attract, rather than repel us. Like a plein air painter, Newsome is enchanted with nature's colours and light. Opulent glazes are her paint of choice as she manipulates matt and shine, emulates 'the wet look' or the dappled light on surfaces of vines and rocks. There is nothing delicate or pretty or diminutive about a gallery of Newsome's creations; it is instead a bold celebration of the colours, textures and shapes from which we are nourished. Newsome has always admired the glazes

of Beatrice Wood, and in 2008 she was invited as an artist-in-residence and to exhibit at the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts in Ojai, California. In a way it is a coming home for Allison Newsome.

Nancy Whipple Grinnell is the Curator of Newport Art Museum, Newport, Rhode Island, USA. Allison Newsome is exhibiting her work at the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts until 28 June, 2008, www.beatricewood.com.