

## 2. ARTICLE BY LINDA HILLMAN

BEING IN A SPACE WITH CRISTINA CORDOVA'S figurative sculptures is a mesmerising and mystical experience. At first encounter, the space is full of figures rendered and fixed in time. All is quiet. The viewer recognises these low-fired clay beings as human and imagines that each has been living a gritty, or even intellectual or privileged, but melancholy life. Cordova has caught them – frozen them – in a singular position with their odd limbs striking limp yet fixed poses to accentuate thin and delicate hands. These figures' hands are expressive and delicate, almost as if they had been injured and laid, always palms down, on an invisible pillow to rest. They radiate a mixture of calm serenity and poise.

If Cordova's figures' hands are one focal point, the eyes are another. Glassy shiny eyeballs, like those of excavated Roman busts, stare straight ahead to a spot or landscape the viewer can only imagine. We are not part of these figures' lives, past or present. What history they have we can't know for sure. They recline stiffly, sit oddly in boats, dangle from the wall or sit astride animals. Some recline on pillows. Their mouths are slightly slack showing porcelain teeth. Some carry or are accompanied by smaller creatures. These are men. The women whose strong but bloated and sagging bodies are far from Cordova's own lithe frame, and they are much older too. She is not yet 30. The figures wear large headdresses suggesting ancient and melancholy stories that Cordova has sought to unravel and understand for herself. "Through these objects I investigate and begin to grasp the indeterminate and ever-changing aspects that make us human," she said.

Puerto Rican-born Cristina Cordova arrived in Alfred, New York, in 1999 to attend New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Having received her MFA in 2002, she moved to Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina where she has completed her three-year artist's residency (September 2005). During this time, her growth and the demand for her work has become strong and many of her pieces are sold before a show opens. At SOFA Chicago 2005, her sculptures in Ann Nathan's gallery space were sold in a day.

Tiny in stature and build, yet passionate and determined – even driven – Cordova, handles this state of affairs with thoughtful maturity. (When she moved to Penland, her monetary situation caused her to have to pick and choose what to buy at the grocery store.) With the success of her first exhibition in Puerto Rico at Galleria Pamil, Guaymabo, in 2003, and with the new security of being collected, Cordova has no small plans. Her commitment to her contemporaries and to the artist community is strong. She lives her values, which include structured and dedicated studio work

and being accessible to others. "Perhaps my position in the world of crafts and my community is to be mellow, down to earth and to share what I know with others. We are a community of artists, and we're all struggling and trying to make ends meet. We're all trying to do our best and we work hard."

Transforming an amorphous and entirely pliable material into something permanent and eternal is the most powerful draw for Cordova to continue working. She likes being the creator; she feeds on the back and forth in her mind as she makes her work. Going from her intuitive agenda to the questions the process of making raises challenges the distinct and clear gender roles from her upbringing in terms of politics, what one does, how one earns a living, and how one lives her life. She finds other people's choices on these matters irresistible material to contemplate and grapple with in her work. "It is not an elegant process," she says, but what finally resonates as truth in her sculptures will be given permanence. A piece is finished when it strikes this cord.

"Making can be painful and frustrating," Cordova explains, "especially at times when I feel confined to the context of my medium. I am often cast as a ceramic artist or as a craft person rather than a sculptor. One day, when I have more knowledge of other media – wood or metal casting – clay might not be so important. Right now it is a tool."

Cordova's figures are not only the result of working through her Puerto Rican Catholic female heritage, but also from her research – a constant looking at other's work – both contemporary and historical. "An attraction to the scale, colour and materials that another artist has used can become the lettering in your language – new ways to bring forth your own work. We are all taking from a collective creativity." She notices, for example, the inspiration that has come from artists as varied as Doug Jeck, Judy Fox, Jaime Suarez and Susana Espinosa.

Though she does not want to make indigenous African or Roman art, Cordova is drawn to 12th century African terracottas from the Ife culture. Early Roman busts have been powerful influences as well. Their black patinas and the bright marble eyes appear in Cordova's work. "I find that if I do this research there are subtleties in my visual language that suddenly come alive and speak at different levels. The language is often more important than the figure itself. In this way the figure stops being a figure as an end – it becomes an interface for something further, like a narrative – one where boundaries between the sensorial and psychological become obscured and where a language rooted in intuition and archived experience dictates paradigms."

Cordova strives for access to a new mental state through her work. Use of colour and scale, gesture and proportion, allow her to think about what these formal



aspects can emit about a person's internal nature. For example: "What colour embodies aggression, or fear?" Cordova says she works hard not to locate her work in any specific historical time or cultural space but "I am Puerto Rican and Catholic. I have this specific context, so I think it's inevitable that those things are ingrained in my aesthetic. I've been conditioned to gravitate to certain things. My use of colouring is related to culture, and in an abstract way I carry that sense of colour in my work." She is drawn to colour that is bold and that shows a relic-like patina of age.

When Cordova chose to live as a sculptor, she had a clear agenda: she wanted to work from the female side. Feeling an incompleteness, she realised that she needed to work more with the complexity of what Latin-American women (on the basis of her experience in Puerto Rico) were experiencing – a combination of the basic feminine urgencies and preoccupations around motherhood and romantic issues and the issues of asserting their ground, being matriarchal, being empowered enough to pursue careers and interact with a strong and overwhelming male presence. "What would that kind of woman look like?" Cordova came to make what we see in her

figures – women who are not slender and beautifully stylised but imposing and somewhat androgynous. "I stopped trying to make a figure and project things on to it. Instead, I let the figure itself become the whole reality. I tried to make the figure abstract in that sense. However, it is figurative so the viewer can read it literally and stay there, but what I'm hoping is that every decision that has to do with that figure is tied to a concept that carries its own weight. And yes, these women are definitely tied to women I know. I am exploring my 'Mitomemoria', my own memory myths."

Cordova's male figures seem less intense than the females; they embody narratives about her perception of males in her Puerto Rican reality: stereotypical Latin-American men – tall, elevated with the presence of a pastiche. Like the men in her life, they are educated, privileged and powerful, but they are not emotionally accessible. They're not multi-tasking. Their role is clearly defined and it doesn't require them to overextend their psycho-emotional boundaries. In *La Aparicion* (The Apparition) or *La Caída del Barquero Amarillo* (The Fall of the Yellow Boatman), the boatmen being carried with these little creatures don't

seem to be in control. The male presence coming forth from water with ghosts and muses and erections in *Temporal (Storm)* seen for the first time at the 2005 Chicago SOFA exhibit, may be Cordova's imagining of a male's demons.

Cordova grew up surrounded by her parents' large art collection of contemporary art and antique religious Santos. She has also spent time looking at paintings and sculpture in the spaces old European churches create, so she always considers how a piece might live in a gallery space and eventually in a home where one would encounter it everyday. Other considerations too must push the boundaries of her comfort zones.

Testing surfaces by combining different materials and reinventing genres in the studio feed her inquisitive and inventive side. "If I have it too smoothly, I have a hard time appreciating the work I've made. I want to make something that engages me in a more challenging manner. If I can excite myself with hard work, hopefully someone else will respond to it too." That response is Cordova's answer to what gives art its usefulness, its *raison d'être*. But art is more than that.

Everyone needs to know if his or her life's work has meaning. Cordova's parents were doctors, people whose reason for being was clear: helping people. Becoming an artist was one of the hardest decisions she ever had to make. Living from one's art means that you make it for others – it goes from your studio to a space where it is shown briefly and then to someone's home. Cordova hopes that her works will transcend this context and be a record of something complex and rooted in a specific time and place.

"Essentially my work is a record of an existence that might influence how things will be seen in the future or, at some level, even purely subjective, it just might provide a vehicle for the viewer to understand himself or herself – to bring something amorphous and random in that viewer to a context that can actually help her become whole. Several times in my life I've seen somebody's work and I have understood myself through that work. I think that kind of understanding is essentially what art is for." Cristina Cordova's sculptures will draw many differing responses from their viewers – they will leave an indelible mark.



*Temporal (Storm)*

Katey Schultz is a freelance writer living in Celo, North Carolina, US. Her current projects include a memoir about adolescence and critical essays featuring female artists.

Linda Hillman is a freelance writer and studio potter living in Oak Park, Illinois, US.