

The Many Voices of Clay

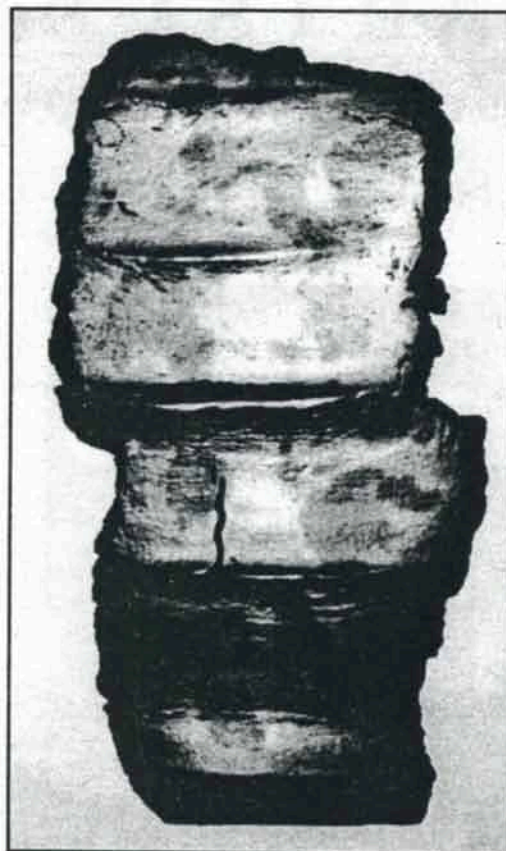
—CARL HERTEL

When Bill Gilbert graduated from Pitzer College in 1973, his senior exhibition was distinguished by many things, including the fact that it was held outside and not in a gallery. Over the 25 years since then, Gilbert's work has attempted to remain "outside" the connotations and conventionalisms galleries impose, and his exhibitions at Conlon Siegal and Plan B Evolving Arts in Santa Fe this summer are no exception. I hasten to add that the spaces at these galleries are both inside and elegant, and the work resides handsomely "at home" in each.

What marks Gilbert's work—in addition to a life-long love affair with clay—is his fierce integrity with reference to materials, be they clay, earth, aspen and juniper branches, or video. His is a difficult trail in that the contradiction between "making art" and allowing mediums to be what they are places the artist in the position of affecting invisibility. Gilbert has become an expert in what we in the sixties called Zen or "letting things be." This current work manifests a deep maturity around issues of being present with the pieces and respecting the "natural" elegance of form, induced by the hand of the artist in concert with the medium. I am reminded of a colleague who had a restaurant in Santa Monica. He once hired a cook in a hurry and was surprised when all the meals came out "uncooked"! The new employee carefully explained that she was a naturalist and only cooked "raw." In some ways Gilbert puts us in the position of that restaurateur, although everything he puts before us is eminently palatable.

Reviewers are fond of assigning Gilbert easy labels like "earth artist," which is appropriate enough, but in addition it should be noted that underlying the yang of Gilbert's thoroughly American materialism and dynamic thrustings with earthy materials is the yin of a very Asian sensibility about the integration of the artist, the medium, art, and life that animates the forms emanating as quasi-liminal objects from Gilbert's hands. At Conlon Siegal we see this quality nicely exemplified in his *PACIFICOPUSHWAVEMANCHA*, with the sea-like coloration and inferred aerial viewpoint vested in blue-black, matte, and iridescent clay candidly created by "pushing" with hands and embriated with the effects of fire. As in viewing an ancient Japanese tea bowl, these works require careful attention and waiting, so that the voice of the material—skillfully orchestrated by the artist—can speak to you about important life matters on this earth.

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PACIFICOPUSHWAVEMANCHA,
clay sculpture, by Bill Gilbert

Lineage, the installation at Play B Evolving Arts, represents a kind of midlife summation of the artist's oeuvre from his early work as a student at Pitzer College through a richly textured journey across the Americas until the present. As the artist says in his notes for the exhibition: "lineage represents a new level of acceptance...it springs directly from my life as it is: being a father and a son, having a partner and children, living in Ecuador and Mexico, spending time in Spanish, being a 'Westerner.' Living in a very dry place, seeing the rates of change in the flow of relationships, geologic motion, white water, evolution of plants and culture.... It is about those days when clouds line up with space between them from horizon to horizon...."

As a professor of art at UNM, Gilbert has established himself as an innovator and at the same time as a conservator of archaic traditions pertaining to clay that are exemplified by indigenous arts in the greater Southwest, Mexico, and South America, where he has lived and taught. His own work resonates with those energies, but retains a strong stamp of the artist's individuality and avoids being derivative at any level. Gilbert's work is deeply personal and addresses issues of the spirit that engage us all through his ability to let his mediums sing to us. Go have a look at "Lineage"... and listen.

Conlon Siegal, 702-1/2 Canyon Road, Santa Fe. The show runs through August 4, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., closed Mondays; 505-820-7744.

Plan B Evolving Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail, Santa Fe. The show runs through September 6, noon to 7:00 p.m. daily; 505-982-1338. ▲