

BARBARA HARNACK'S ARCHETYPAL TRIBE

by Hollis Walker

Barbara Harnack



Barbara Harnack feeds a reduction barrel with straw outside of her adobe home and studio. During Harnack's raku process, sculptures are rotated and barrels are refueled two to three times. Some barrels are left open to reoxidize to finish and control carbonization. *Photo by S.B. Khalsa.*

The view from the hilltop home and studio of Barbara Harnack and her husband, Michael Lancaster, just south of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is vast and colorful. Perpetually clear blue skies and evergreen-studded mountains stretch into the horizon. Below, the earth is incised by dusty arroyos and winding dirt roads, interrupted here and there by both modest and magnificent adobe homes, the occasional horse corral, the remains of a miner's shack.

Until Harnack and Lancaster moved to New Mexico in 1987, she made functional stoneware, earthy and sturdy decorated dinnerware and other objects that visitors to their Malden Bridge Pottery in upstate New York bought greedily. But the colors and scale of the New Mexico landscape fanned a flame in Harnack. Back in New York, she had begun to experiment with figurative ceramics, and once ensconced in the light and landscape of New Mexico, she felt

the need to create larger pieces in brighter colors, and to explore, in clay, her first love of drawing.

Since then, with Lancaster as her collaborator and manager, Harnack has left behind functional pottery and the commercial kiln, embraced American raku as her firing process, and turned entirely to drawing, sculpting and painting the figure in clay. Her colorful, upright, slab-built works stand witness to her intuitive drive to follow the figure: Male and female, human and animal, they evoke archetypes both mysterious and benevolent, unnamable but nonetheless recognizable.

For Harnack, now 48, returning to the figure was a symbolic return to a childhood rich with art experiences. A native of New York City who grew up in Westchester County, Harnack loved to draw as a child. She fell in love with the figure when, at about age

PRO-ACTIVE RAKU FIRING

by Barbara Harnack with Michael Lancaster

We began raku firing in 1977 at The Malden Bridge School of Art. This was one of several week-long workshops we led with guest teachers. Our technique was pretty standard: fire until red hot, remove ware from kiln (while experiencing searing pain) and toss into a barrel of newspaper/sawdust/pine needles as quickly as possible. Cover it up. Ten minutes later, open the barrel and reveal the results. Some were great, while others were tepid, boring or over reduced.

After many years of experimentation, the one part of raku firing that has changed for us the most is the reduction or smoking. Some of our ideas followed the observation of what happens to a long fire in a fireplace after it cools. There, we found a clean area where the carbon had re-

oxidized from red heat, a color layer where the smoke had entered the slight porosity of the bricks during the transition from red heat to no red heat, and a sooty area where there was smoke but no red heat. The important 'zone' (the middle area) is between 1200–900°F (649–482°C). All raku ware and its intended result will be up to the ceramist to determine. It does not matter whether or not one is working with fuming, metallic glazes or finishes, clear glazes and underglaze colors, or a matt or burnished raw clay. What is most important is that as an artist, one must make a conscious decision

to interact with what happens in those final smoking or fuming stages. There are a number of personal decisions to make: protective gear for hands and body, respiratory protection, factors of wind and fire hazards. In the end we always treat the smoke as if it's a paint or glaze and we interact with it.



"Way Round," 30½ in. (77 cm) in height, slab built, with underglazes, raku fired, 2006, by Barbara Harnack, Cerillos, New Mexico.

nine, she took classes with a Parisian-born puppet maker named Madam Sorell. The classes awakened her creative instinct. "It was just the whole machinery of making little theatrical creatures that really turned me on as a child," Harnack recalls. After high school, she studied art at several institutes, including the Art Students League in New York and California College of Arts and Crafts. Ultimately, she would major in illustration at Parsons School of Design, focusing on drawing but also learning ceramics. She delighted in the works of Marc Chagall, Beatrice Wood and William Steig, and privately studied antique toys, folk art and children's art for inspiration.

"In art school I drew all kinds of people and loved it; I loved creating character through observation," she says. Without being consciously aware of it, she began to create a personal mythology and a cast of characters; "...a whole notion of a faraway place where all of these 'beings' live. It's kind of a dreamland, but it's also very much a day-to-day, ordinary place," she explains. Harnack's experience of this place and its people isn't hallucinatory or weird. "It's something very natural," the artist says.

The individuals in Harnack's mental "tribe" appear and reappear in her sculptures, and the process of making them, though requiring consummate technical skill, is also an intuitive one. She doesn't sketch her figures in advance; instead, she lets the clay speak to her of what it should become.

Harnack works from large slabs of commercial clay laid flat on a table. She cuts out a figure—usually head and torso—determining in the process its sex, size and shape. She sometimes rips the edges of the clay to create rough edges. Lifting the slab figure—usually between two and three feet tall—she gently shapes it into a semicircle so that it will stand alone, briefly allowing it to rest and stabilize. Using her hands, she may add remnants of the clay slab like patches and otherwise manipulate the clay to create a subtle three-dimensional surface, adding a nose, chin, breasts or arms. Using a pin tool, comb and a brush cleaner as scratching tools, she draws freehand on and into the surface, both for figurative detail, such as eyes, and for texture and depth. Raw spots and broken edges are treated as naturally occurring phenomena; she doesn't try to repair or perfect them. When she is satisfied with the essential features of her figure, Harnack bisques the piece in an electric kiln.

After the initial firing, the artist cleans the figure's surface of any irregularities and glazes it, again using a spontaneous process to choose colors and where to apply them, as well as what areas to leave bare so they will carbonize and turn black during the firing sequence. Incorporating nearly forty colors into her glaze palette, Harnack applies color like a wash, in several thin layers, sometimes adding glaze, then scrubbing it away, then adding more. She eschews metal glazes, as she finds those without metal have a more painterly feel.

When she is satisfied with the glazing process, she and Lancaster fire the pieces in their outdoor raku kiln. During the smoking, Harnack and Lancaster may add more straw or move the pieces around in the barrels to facilitate the process. "The smoking element is what I consider really critical," Harnack explains. "It distinguishes the expression of each artwork. It gives it soul, quite frankly."

Firing fifteen to twenty times a year, the couple has developed a keen sense of what works. Still, Harnack routinely reglazes and refires her figures, sometimes three times, before she is satisfied with the way they look and feel, how the raku crazing interacts with her drawing marks and the painted areas. Once fired, the figures have a human sensibility they didn't have as greenware shapes.

In her early years in New Mexico, Harnack was exposed for the first time to the simple, hand-carved wooden saints (*santos*) of the Spanish Colonial folk art tradition. Made as devotional items and often displayed in churches and homes, the figures had historically been dressed in fabric clothing and sometimes had decorative elements. But the antique *santos* Harnack saw typically had lost their clothing, crowns or other accessories over the years; sometimes a limb had fallen off, the wood had discolored or split, or other calamities had befallen them. To the artist, the wooden dolls revealed more in their nakedness and damaged condition than if they had been pristine; they embodied the emotional suffering all humans suffer as a natural consequence of living. Her ceramic figures, once fired, evoke the same response: their "scars," intentional and otherwise, imbue them with humanity and compassion. Harnack says she hopes their owners feel them as benevolent, empathetic presences in their lives. Often, patrons buy two or more figures and display them together, in relationship. That pleases Harnack, who, after all, sees them as part of a "family" of sorts. She plans to make some of her new, full figurative works for installation in pairs or groupings.

Some of the characters she creates appear and reappear in slightly different forms. "I have an elderly woman who keeps showing up, who's very kindly; maybe she's an unconscious tribute to Madam Sorrell," Harnack muses. Originally, the ceramist created mostly female figures she felt were heroic, but these days, she is creating nearly as many male figures, which she feels offer her more license to fully explore the human condition.

In addition to her large figurative works, Harnack also makes smaller, similar pieces—busts, in effect—and draws and paints her unique faces on clay vases Lancaster throws for her. This year, Harnack plans to construct life-sized full figures, larger than any she has previously made, to be mounted on a wall.

While the engineering process of making the larger figures will be a new challenge, for now, Harnack remains gratified by her creative method. "Drawing in the raku is a wonderful discipline for me, because it's all the things I delight in: the drawing, the immediacy and the richness that's possible with both of the disciplines incorporated with each other. Glazing and firing offer more layers for expressing myself."



"Farm State," 26 in. (66 cm) in height, slab built, with underglazes, raku fired, 2006. This piece will be on display March 13–June 23 as part of the "NCECA 2007 Clay National Biennial Exhibition" at the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft in Louisville, Kentucky.

And, though with time and experience she has learned to control the formation of the figures and their ornamentation, the last step always holds a promise to surprise. "That's the real delight of the process—not knowing the outcome until after the firing."

Barbara Harnack is represented by Mary Lou Zeek Gallery (www.zeekgallery.com) in Salem, Oregon; Hanson Gallery (www.hansongallery.com) in Knoxville, Tennessee; A New Leaf Gallery (www.anewleafgallery.com) in Sonoma, California.

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