John Glick's
Journeys and Evolutions

Interview by Samantha Krukowski

This interview was conducted at John Glick's home and studio in Farmington Hills, Michigan, where he has established spaces in which to create, reflect and invent. His studio includes a number of auxiliary rooms such as the 'landscape lounge', a comfortable space with windows, chairs, books, easels and a drawing table. Here he displays his new work, specifically the wall pieces which are the primary subject of this article. Our discussion led us through his tool-making machine shop, his showroom, storeroom, photographic enclave and an attic where he has preserved his own history from the first pot he made as well as chronologically organised examples of dinnerware, covered boxes and experimental pieces. The interview began in the landscape lounge, where we discussed his studio environment and the origin of his recent work.

Triptych. *1991. 63 x 46 cm. Photo: John Glick.*
Previous page: ***Standing Diptych.*** *1992. 29 x 39 cm. Photo: John Glick*

When I first started to make my wall pieces, I realised that I didn't want to work in a crowded, complex environment surrounded by pots and commissions. I wanted to create a space for it. I also began to acquire sandblasting and other equipment. At first I did a few studies and as the environment progressed, the trickle of the work increased.

How do you relate the development of these wall pieces in the context of your functional work?

The wall pieces are totally uninvolved with function. My disposition towards drawing and painting has surfaced at other times in my career and there are certain familiar patterns in my work that originate elsewhere and show up in the wall panels, perhaps from approaches that develop with my functional pieces. There's a base of technical understanding and a familiar image vocabulary that developed in the context of roundness and which is expanding with the flat forms. On the wall panels I am interested in using the clay surface like any other painting or drawing surface. The forms simply provide me with a tablet. I think in terms of painting, considering the masses of colour, the various sombre or light areas, and then re-glazing or refiring. Add to that the masking and sandblasting processes which give eroded surfaces. I consider pieces for a long time; some of them never seem to be resolved.

The imagery on these panels is suggestive of landscapes or seascapes and you have moved away from the decorative quality of the functional surfaces,.

The imagery is more impressionistic. When I draw, I do quick, gestural sketches. I don't try to copy them in the work but the same approach is reflected in the landscapes. I am aiming for a feeling; for example, the suggestion of a turbulent sky, a storm that conveys the weight of the precipitation to come. I remember one impression vividly. It was late one afternoon, and the sky literally started to drop tendrils or lines of clouds. It wasn't a storm so much as an unusual weather phenomenon that caused the clouds to drop 'ropes' from dozens of different places. There was an incredibly eerie horizon. What I'm doing currently has been influenced by that one day.

Your sketchbooks also contain some figurative imagery. You mentioned that you sometimes depict yourself, your face, things that are familiar to you, such as your cats. You use these as source material.

It would be easy to become complacent with landscape thinking and rule out the use of the figure, so I irritate myself by keeping notes and drawings on the figure. About four years ago, I worked with a hypnotist who was sensitive to the creative process and had worked with artists who had experienced artist's block. She used a process of reinforcement through self-hypnosis. It is interesting that this work has emerged since then because before I was doing nothing literal with my functional pieces except the occasional reference to floral imagery. That, however, was influenced by *Oribe* ware and Japanese, Chinese, and Korean blue, tan, gold and brown decoration in general. That influence still feels important to me. After working with the hypnotist, I felt a freedom to trust my instincts and draw all sorts of things, to give myself suggestions that might be incorporated in the work. I am motivated to make something and that motivation feels right. I trust those feelings, even if they don't produce good work right away. Certainly everything isn't going to work based on instinct but it's all the power I need to launch certain ideas and I'm sure that it has kept a lively attitude in the studio. There are those little nuclear parts of each day filled with excitement, the desire to make new forms.

When you work on functional forms, do you feel the influence of the landscape imagery creeping in? Do you have the sense that the functional surfaces are changing or will do so?

People have suggested that I could incorporate landscape imagery on my functional pieces. So far I have disagreed. I'm not avoiding it but I haven't the least temptation to explore any of

these images on a plate. My approach is different. I rib the surfaces on wheel-thrown work to make them smooth for the calligraphy and colour fields. The throwing marks cause a ridged response to the tools, the brushes skip, there isn't a continuity of line, and after the firing, you observe the ridges as light reflections which I find to be contrary to the imagery. There is a conflict inherent in that choice because the throwing process naturally involves marks that I am aware of and enjoy. But I want the imagery to predominate and the type of form I'm working on at any given time always influences the placement of imagery. For example, when I'm glazing and decorating a dinner set, most of the imagery begins with the slip at the potter's wheel after the clay shaping is done. I'm working with 34 different slips and the imagery begins to develop right there, often in a non-symmetrical manner. In the glazing process a sense of mystery evolves; I have some sense of where the marks are on the surface of the clay but they are hidden as the layers begin to build up. Lately, since I've become so involved with glaze manipulation using wax resist and coloured waxes, I've counselled myself not to do anything significant with the slips. I may put on a solid background, but I try not to manipulate the slip at all, so I have this big, blank canvas with virtually no marks on it. That is a marked contrast to what I've been doing for years, when I've been presented with a strong impression just after the bisque firing. I work on these new pieces flat in the wet clay stage, with heavy slip application; anything beyond that is done with overlapping glazes, and in some cases, sand-blasting to cut back through the layers. I should say that I've never been a person who's had trouble with the relationship between making and glazing or painting. I love glazing, sometimes more than the making and that's been one reason that I've moved to image making that isn't only decorative.

You use an extruder to create these tablets. Do you then soften or distort the edges or follow certain marks made by the extruder?

I'm not trying to say much about tools in these pieces. I use the extruder for purposes of expediency. The subject matter and imagery seem to feel a bit more at home with a softened tablet than with a rigid perfect four square environment. The pieces in the steel frames are probably more comforting to the viewer or even the maker, in this case. Once you set things into a frame they become a universal symbol for 'picture'. I want to keep experimenting with both forms, exploring ideas about containing or not containing.

In some of your pieces, you have played with this notion of framing. In one diptych you have incorporated a dark painted frame within and as a part of the piece. In some others you have created only partial frames, and in a number of others you have interrupted the borders with pieces of wood. Can you expand on these varied approaches?

Framed Study. *1990. 37 x 26 cm. Photo: John Glick*

Diptych. *1991. 25 x 21 cm. Photo: John Glick*

Standing Triptych. *1992. Stoneware. 36 x 97 cm. Photo: John Glick*

Many of the pieces that you are referring to are for my eyes only, as constant irritants. The one with the partial frame is here because I have an inkling that there is something important in that idea that should be pushed further. I think what I'm drawn to, more and more, are framed pieces with increasingly complex elements. Perhaps stepped edges, more elaborate frames, or frames that encourage some sense of environment. Right now the simple steel frames seem the least obtrusive, but they form a definition around the piece that is quite different from a piece where the free edge of the clay floats on the wall. I am aware of the frame as an issue for some painters and the notion of containment continues to be an issue for me. Before I made wall pieces, I made rectangles and squares, especially in tray forms. There is always a question as to what containment lends to a piece and what breaking away from it does. One of my instinctive responses is to refuse to allow an edge to dominate the movement within a piece. The lines in plates often flow to and beyond the edge and border and on the wall panels they rarely respect the edge. The steel-framed ones that define containment the most for me seem finite, but even with those, the motion seems to flow past the frame; it doesn't block a continuation of the imagery.

Are you thinking of movement out of the frame too? You have made some drawings of free-standing stacked pieces.

I have drawn ten years worth of ideas and haven't approached many of them yet because of the newness of this phase of work. My sketchbooks are valuable as places to save ideas, to capture them for future use. I'm not sure what's going to happen when the pieces become free-standing but you will be able to walk up to and around them. Some of the drawings you saw indicated that the pieces would be staged so that you saw them in perspective.

Might the idea of a series of free-standing pieces also involve more narrative intent and also take you back to the three dimensional pot or towards sculpture?

Different views could incorporate different concepts or senses: a night/day opposition, a passing of time from one side to another. I've thought about such ideas when making pots, but not questions as to whether or not these pieces will be emotionally evocative or how they will affect people as they move around the work. I've also begun to make clay panels that have a flat central portion and side wings which swing into the viewer's space. The frame will thus cast shadows back on the piece. Altar pieces have probably been a subconscious influence for these pieces. Even though the subject matter is radically different, the fact that altar pieces can close, or in some cases be portable, is fascinating to me. I was influenced early on by reliquary boxes and bronze vessels from China and it is not surprising that other religious artefacts would be influential.

Some of the wooden inclusions on the wall pieces act as question marks and I'm wondering how you make the decisions about their placement, shape and material.

I like the idea of extra elements projecting away from these pieces and when I think of what those elements might be, almost inevitably they occur to me in wood. I want to convey a sense of natural forces in these pieces and the wood seems to be a part of that. If you're out in a storm, you feel it, you smell it, you hear it, you see it, you're a part of it – but I didn't want to literally draw trees bending in the wind. I treat the wood by burning it, then wire brush it and apply linseed oil which I rub in until the whole piece feels warm. As you say, it is a kind of weathering process.

Diptych. *1991. 16 x 42 cm. Photo: John Glick.*

You have expressed interest in using not only wood but gold leaf or acrylics as well. Do you feel constrained by ceramic traditions to remain true to the purity or consistency of your materials?

If anybody was ever blinded to other options by what they thought was a traditional approach I was. I was even reluctant to refire pieces when they would have benefited from refiring. It's as if I was waiting for someone to give me permission. I have the gold leaf but my menu of approaches seems to be overloaded right now. It is an option and I will use it if I feel I can do it with an honourable acknowledgment of its role in the overall piece and not just an excuse to have gold leaf. That wouldn't be adequate, any more than the attempts to include wood could be good enough just because it's a new material and therefore has merit. My suspicion is that I won't treat it in a predictable way. Adding another material like acrylic probably isn't as surprising or as unlikely to me now as it might once have been because the doors seem to be much wider. Looking back on my schooling, I realise that I've always wanted to combine materials. There was a period where I did electroforming on clay and worked with a plating tank to make some elaborate funky sculptural vessel forms with fussy deposits of copper. I set up a blacksmithing forge which I haven't used much over the years but at the time I made some steel and wood handle additions for some pots.

Do you have a clear sense of how your interest in the landscape has evolved?

The functional pot has been a vehicle to explore decoration and people have often found images of their own in my surfaces which were never intentional on my part. I wonder whether comments like that reinforced my interest in landscape painting. I have looked increasingly at painters and printmakers who deal with the natural environment – artists such as Alfred Leslie, Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Mallord William Turner and Japanese and Chinese scroll paintings. I have found Ukio-E Japanese woodblock prints particularly inspiring because they often refer to only a segment of the landscape. It seems ironic that we are discussing my work in the context of drawings and paintings. I was gratefully absorbed into the bosom of the craft classes and it was 15 years after graduate school when several former teachers said, "You're a painter." I feel that I've been practising drawing all these years without knowing it. I realise that I am looking at these painters' works in order to be moved by them and feel renewed permission to be a player, meaning a player of unwritten music, of untried ideas, of unforeseen explorations.

Kiefer seems to be an important influence because of the scale of his work and also because his surfaces and the aggressive nature of his imagery. It is interesting that you are sandblasting your wall pieces, because such surface destruction is a divergent approach compared with most of your previous work where building up glazes was of primary concern.

I like the unexpected ability to remove colour through the sandblasting. Preparing for the reductive side of the process is as exciting as the glazing has been. Mostly, though, I think it relates to the fact that I've never held back trying whatever occurred to me. I don't mean something really extreme, like in the middle of glazing throwing ten hands full of felspar on the glaze surface just to see what it would do. I haven't been that impulsive. But I have been rather impulsive about trying combinations of things that observation and practice would show to be unlikely to produce any good result such as combining three black glazes over each other with wax resist realising that there's nothing in that that says contrast, one of the essential elements in building something visual. But what's wrong with three different blacks? Perhaps there's something undiscovered and rich. I suspect the sandblasting is another version of risk-taking because many of the surfaces on the landscape pieces are quite pretty when they come out of the kiln – why would you want to disturb them? I

Diptych. *1991. Stoneware. 56 x 122 cm. Photo: Dirk Bakker*

have some pieces here that show what happens when you just keep going down deeper and deeper and repositioning the masks – through the glazes, the slips underlying those, and then through the clay. There's so much information there and I haven't gone back to some of the really rich veins yet and asked more.

Have you dealt with this imagery in other media?

In the past few years I've made prints and I've used the print materials as glaze and slip. To some extent, it was interesting and if more efforts were made I would feel more at home with those results. But mostly they have given me new ideas in the working of the clay and glaze. These clay forms could be considered prints of a kind. In June, 1990, I spent five weeks at Watershed in Maine. It was a period of intense work. I was alone and without teaching or demonstrating responsibilities. I did a series of slab pieces which were impressions of the landscape. They were elemental, little bits of the Maine coast that I felt could be interpreted in clay. There were single panels, diptychs and triptychs that went together, some skyscapes, quick studies with land, sky and earth themes, some even incorporated the barn symbol which pushed them over to the trite side; they were too literal. Yet I felt that the landscape was so influential that I should treat it as directly as I could. There were enormous rock formations and I responded to the feeling of movement and massiveness. I was enjoying using earthenware but the Watershed work should not be considered as anything more than a study.

Did any of your teachers or mentors influence you in particular ways that would help you arrive at your current body of work?

I think we are all standing on the shoulders of our teachers. The experiences that I went through were coloured with all of the tentativeness that any student experiences. In undergraduate school with Bill Pitney, I had the ability to reconnect with all of the things that had to do with the craft. I had done clay at high school, and I enjoyed it. Pitney was willing to have me as an assistant and let me run the department technically, an obvious training for having your own studio. At Cranbrook, in an environment with ten other students, all hot shots from their own schools, we had a potent group, trading ideas and thoughts. Maija Grotell, who did not teach in any way that I understood teaching to be, managed to instil in us a fear of not performing to her expectations. She didn't want us to stagnate as graduate students, to be self-satisfied, thinking we had arrived because we could make something that would be admired. She helped us realise that being an artist was a constantly evolving journey. She showed pictures of animals, leaves, books on nature, photography, things that had to do with the natural world. I remember I was forever reaching, not so much to please her, though probably at times I felt like that, but to please myself. Every time I go on an adventure, the one thing I have probably learned is that I won't drown. I'm sure that the suddenness of this latest work isn't sudden at all and I'm willing to think of it as a small step. I can't imagine where it will lead me in the next 10 years.

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