

THE ART OF DOUCET - SAITO

BY D. G. JONES

Once one could hold the art of Doucet-Saito in one's hand, discovering it from day to day as one automatically reached into the cupboard for one's favourite cup. Now one may have to spend time with a ton of granite to discover how it alters one's relationship to trees and grass, to house and lake and sky.

The outdoor sculpture recently commissioned for a residence in Oakville, Ontario is no tea cup. A single piece of granite, it is not diminished by Lake Ontario in the background. Though from one angle it appears to be two blocks, each askew, from another angle it is clearly a single piece, two-footed, curving towards the pyramidal only to be abruptly truncated and cleft. With another slight shift one might say it becomes a kind of fat tuning fork. Each face strikes one as straightforward and clean-cut. Yet the reverse face is unpredictable. The angle of shear has changed; the face itself may be curved, may also have acquired a dimple; the outline as well as the juxtaposition of planes has altered. It is not merely inert stone.

Certainly one of their most ambitious pieces, this sculpture strained the resources of the stonecutters of the Eastern Townships of Quebec and sent Satoshi Saito back to his native Japan to study the techniques that might be available to him there. Yet the dynamics of the large stone figure are those that the Doucet-Saito's have worked out in more modest forms in clay over a period of some twenty years, mostly in Ways Mills, Quebec. Their art is rooted and integral, though like their lives, not necessarily predictable.

When Satoshi Saito came to McGill as a graduate student in economics, he did not anticipate convincing a bank manager in the Townships that potters could be a sound investment. He did not anticipate rummaging slabs of clay out of a Nova Scotia quarry.

Nor as a student of sculpture in Montreal did Louise Doucet anticipate serving tea in a kimono to her new relatives in Japan — nor even the business of putting in a vegetable garden, feeding chickens, and raising three sons to split wood and play Bach on a farm near the Vermont border.

Since 1963, when they began working together, Louise and Satoshi have increasingly functioned as a two-headed, four-handed organism uniting two personalities and two cultures in a way that is difficult for most people to grasp — and that is sometimes a puzzle to themselves.

After their meeting, Satoshi found himself neglecting Keynesian economics and immersing himself in the chemistry of clay. And in 1965-1967 Louise found herself taking an immersion course in Japanese. During more than a year in Japan they explored something of its ancient and highly developed tradition of ceramic art. While preparing exhibitions of their work they were allowed to make use of the studio of Tatsuzo Shimaoka in Mashiko. They visited his neighbour, the late Shoji Hamada, whose own pottery and whose campaign to revive crafts have been celebrated by Bernard Leach. They met various younger artists and critics and became particular friends of the potters, Shimaoka, the Seimei and Kyo Tsuji as well as the late Shoji Kamoda. They returned to Canada with a new independence — baptized, so to speak, but also critical of some of the contemporary trends in Japan. More than anything, perhaps, Japan had confirmed them in their vocation, in the conviction that ceramics is a high art, bankable even.

For Louise and Satoshi, one does not discriminate between stone and clay. The slab pot may command the same kind of interest as a Picasso or a Michelangelo. A work is valued for its integrity and vitality, the currency of its vocabulary and its capacity to hold its own within a collection of Greek, Etruscan, Chinese, or pre-Columbian work.

The art of Doucet-Saito is palpably an art of balance. It would reconcile East and West, tradition and the individual talent. It would be attentive to the perennial rhythms of nature, of the Notre Dame Mountains, and to those of an international urban and technological society. Amid these tensions, how, it asks, does a body stand — intensely, and at rest?

The answers have been less a conceptual than a bodily projection of form : intuiting structures, cutting and modelling clay, brushing and firing the glazes. Amid tensions, they search for an overall visual, textural, and broadly kinetic satisfaction. And, while it may lead them to consider other materials and newer technologies, to flirt with metal and to translate to stone, the body itself, it seems to me, serves as a basic module and ensures the human appeal of their work.

Let me start again. Simply, one might say, Louise and Satoshi have spent twenty years exploring the slab pot. This may be more primitive in some ways than the piece turned on the potter's wheel, but (like humans?) it permits more freedom of invention.

A number of their earlier, now classic, pieces are vases distinguished by the asymmetrical balance and inevitably playful, because four-sided, allusions to the perfectly turned vase. As these grew larger they actually became rounder. With their smooth, sometimes distinctly pebbled, glazes, their high, almost cylindrical collars, like great turtlenecks, they suggested sensuous torsos — some with rainbow bands reminiscent of some Edwardian swim suit.

Occasionally one discovered something quite different : clearly rectangular urns on four feet, each face incised or sculpted in high relief with abstract organic forms, and richly glazed — an angular geometry invested with curves, an ancient ritual shape newly revived.

Then the slab reasserted itself in a series of vases that were angular and sharp-edged, the surfaces like sheared stone, striated, naked, or brushed with a thin glaze. Here, on a reduced scale, was a kind of basic architecture, the box nuanced by a slight tapering of the sides, by the occasional burn mark of straw, the delicate pinks and greys of the fired clay, which seemed designed to pick up the tints of the old pine table or armoires in the house in Ways Mills. Raised on footings, pierced or cleft at the top, they suggested some barbican, some primitive Egyptian or adobe house.

As the series developed the tensions increased; the sides became more irregular, edges flaring in a sharp curve, plates warping to keep the structure intact as it underwent a kind of pelvic rotation. Each work plays on the interface between nature and artifice, anatomy and architecture, as on the opposition between hollow and solid, open and closed, the raw and the refined. It is here that the dynamics of the larger stone sculpture first emerged, and it is a dynamics that continues to be the focus of their exploration.

Over the past several years, however, Doucet-Saito have investigated a couple of other possibilities. For example, the box could be flattened out into a series of slabs.

The first results were a number of "picture size" mosaics with abstract designs in low relief or glazed brush drawings. An unexpected patron, the provincial police, commissioned a large panel for their building in Sherbrooke. Glazed with a shimmering blue-gray motif, the whole wall becomes arborescent, hovering between winter and spring.

But the most startling development occurred when the Doucet-Saito's won a commission to work on the fireplace for the Governor General's residence in Quebec City. Here the richly sculpted slabs of the urn have been released into a freer, more plastic life, to flow and bend round the flanged opening of the great fireplace. It would be interesting to overhear the comments of the guest. For as the flat rectilinear wall of marble is broken by the ceramic arch, folding and unfolding in a series of pale organic forms, one looks into a kind of limestone cave — more symbolically, into some mouth or womb of fire. When the flames lend their flickering lights and shadows to this rather voluptuous frieze, it can only become more suggestively live, and erotic.

A more sober variation is explored in a few contemporary pieces in which individual slabs, glazed and unglazed, are simply stacked one on top of the other to form a laminated pillar. The occasional steel or aluminum plate may be sandwiched in. The resulting figure combines the solidity of an obelisk with the gaiety of a French pastry.

If the architectural frieze is an embodiment of the yin and the pillar of the yang, it is the complex figures growing out of the more extreme adventures with the slab pot that combine the two in the most intimate and dynamic interaction. Having suffered various degrees of distortion, having been punctured and slit, the basic box now undergoes a kind of cellular division, begins to turn itself inside out. Two boxes, or better, two stubby, forked torsos, are fitted one on top of the other, one mirroring the other, more or less. And as the series develops the inner core is more and more dramatically opened up, becomes an irregular zigzagging fissure. The inside is also the outside, multifaceted.

The variables have been compounded, the tensions increased. There is an ambiguous interplay between unity and duality, between positive and negative space, between the yang and the yin. Add the variations that may arise from glazing and firing, or from translation to stone or to bronze, and one can suggest that it may be a while before the form is exhausted.

In conclusion, one must insist on the temporal dimension of this obviously spatial art. It is inherent in the way the Doucet-Saito's live and work, in their patience in evolving forms, their attentiveness to a past tradition and to the immediate moment — the moment in March when the sun begins to flood the potting shed and Satoshi, scooping clay from the bin, scrapes the bottom, the moment when Louise stands divided between wishing for more winter and clay to devote to the sculpture or for more sun and fertilized earth to devote to the garden. But the sense of time is also inherent in the work.

In a photo of the granite sculpture in Oakville, the sun casts a triangular shadow over the cleft of the rock. It is an harmonious, if temporary, addition. And already the weather has stained the stone. The run-off marks the drain line, analyzes the geometry, tells how the form has been keyed to gravity. It will be revealed, slowly, judged, in the process of time.