

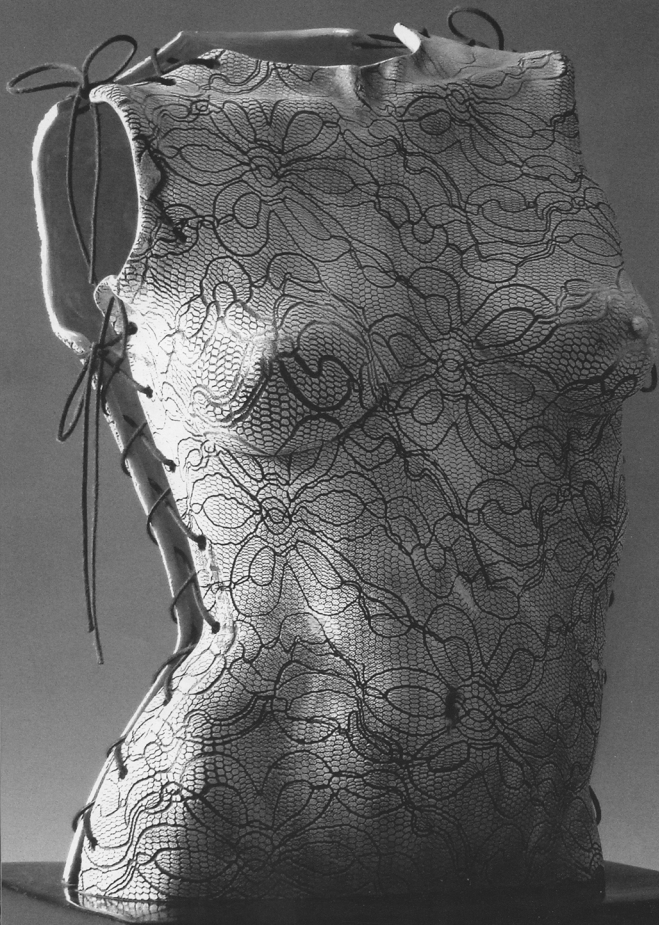
SCULPTURE REVIEW

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*FROM CLAY
TO CERAMIC
AND BEYOND*



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more affordable rate than ones offered by fine-art foundries. These masks, with their idealized form and incised ornament conjoin Venetian elegance and tribal scarification. The next step—placing the mask on one of the busts—seemed almost inevitable. In *A Convenient Face* (2010), the effect of the rich blue-green bronze mask with its arabesque ornament and the gleaming white head cocked at its meditative angle is entrancing. Rogers describes the effect perfectly as “a modern face with a primitive psychology.”⁶

Tanya Ragir

When asked what about clay seems perfectly suited to sculpting the figure, Tanya Ragir (born 1955) says, “There is nothing else! It gives and takes...In terms of its responsiveness, there is nothing like it. Human beings...are of the earth. We are malleable. We come from the same place.”

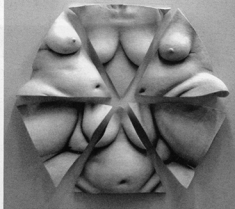
Ragir’s work has a strong affinity to ceramic sculpture practice on the West Coast where she received her B.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is outspoken in her admiration for teachers, including Gardon Woods (1915–2007), and sculptors like Manuel Neri (born 1930) and Viola Frey (1933–2004). While her subject is the female figure, her focus on the fragment is driven by a number of forces. “For a long time,” Ragir says, “I did not sculpt life size because people assumed I took body casts.” Her comment recalls the suspicion accorded Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) for his *Age of Bronze* when he submitted it to the Salon of 1876. Ragir’s fascination with detail, however, stems from a profound sense of the unity of life.

Ragir’s subject and approach are grounded in both a feminist sensibility and an exploration of self. The *Pedestal pieces* include a series called *Armor* (began around 2000), which are glazed or painted torsos that resemble classical armor and evoke the corsets of past centuries. The form is both beautiful and ironic, suggesting the equipment of the warrior and the foundations of feminine fashion. Ragir described the genesis of the series:


I was taking a run one morning. On every doorstep there were newspapers with a department store ad for Intimate Apparel. I saw these women wearing lingerie that, although beautiful, struck me as the antithesis of intimacy. The corsets reminded me of Roman armament... The enhanced anatomy [expressed] the sense of falseness and decorativeness but in a much more real and passionate sense it protected and hid what was the most alive and vital and ultimately sexual.

The process of producing *Armors* is complex. First Ragir sculpts a life-sized torso. From this she makes a plaster mold.

Rolled slabs of clay are pressed into the molds and holes for the laces punched along the sides. The molded forms are fired and glazed according to her vision for the completed work. In *Black Lace*,



for instance, patterns from *pieces* of lace were impressed into the rolled clay before the clay was shaped by the mold. Small distortions—expansions and compressions—emphasize contours and undulations. Dark glaze applied to the patterns was later enhanced with painstaking tracings of pigment.

Sacred Geometry (2010) was created for an exhibition at the Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, “Woman in the 21st Century: Margaret Fuller and the Sacred Marriage.”⁷ Six fragments from different torsos are fit into a hexagon. A wall piece that initially appears to represent a single torso quickly metamorphoses into an oda, a crowd of female nudes bending, turning, reaching. The hexagon is derived from the hexagram, locked inverted triangles, symbolic of unity in duality. 

Ellen B. Cutler is an adjunct professor of art history at the Maryland Institute College of Art and a regular contributor to *Sculpture Review*.

NOTES:

1. “ceramic.” In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. Oxford Art Online. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t4e393> (accessed July 15, 2010).
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from questionnaires e-mailed by the author on July 8, 2010.
3. Richard V. West, “A Woman’s Touch,” *American Art Collector* 20 (June 2007): p. 216.
4. Telephone conversation with the author, July 17, 2010.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Telephone conversation with the author, July 16, 2010.
7. Press release, “Woman in the 21st Century: Margaret Fuller and the Sacred Marriage,” Dina Dalby, and telephone conversation with the author, July 19, 2010.

Opposite page: Pedestal Pieces, Armor Series: Black Lace (2000), glazed and painted ceramic on glazed ceramic.

On this page: Sacred Geometry (2010), glazed ceramic.