

# The head is thinking the body



Edith Garcia

Above: *Absence + Presence, Loss of Love*. 2010. Ceramic sculptures. 426 cm.  
Below: *Excruciating Pain of Seduction I*. 2011. Pencil, wax and ink on paper. 37 x 30 cm.

## *A Review by David Jones*

*Nature seems to have endowed man alone with this organ, (the hand) so that he is enabled to form a concept of a body by touching it on all sides.<sup>1</sup>*

**E**DITH GARCIA LEAVES DELIBERATE OMISSIONS, OR 'gaps' in her work; these are points of incompleteness where the viewer has to finish the piece themselves. Marcel Duchamp, when talking about the nature of creativity, draws attention to the 'art coefficient' which refers to:

the subjective mechanism which produces art in a raw state . . . in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the difference between what he intended to realise and what he did realise, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work . . . It is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally

expressed . . . the spectator adds his contribution to the creative act.<sup>2</sup>

Garcia is well known for a highly polished range of post-modern ceramics that deals with implied answers to confrontational personal questions that are suggested rather than clearly articulated. She describes these autobiographical objects in terms that appear on the surface to be an antimony (a contradiction in terms) 'happy, ugly scars'. They are statements in ceramics of earlier pains and complexes.

Born in Los Angeles she moved around the American Southwest with her parents and then to study; her practice has developed as both local and nomadic and within a tradition as well as outside and opposed to it. There has developed a strong flavour of Mexico in her sculptures. The wall piece, *Happy, ugly, scars* which I saw most recently installed in the Museum of Modern Art in Tampa, Florida, where it had been selected for the NCECA





Above: *Absence + Presence (Installation View)*, 2010. Ceramic sculptures. 426 cm.  
 Below: *Excruciating Pain of Seduction II*, 2011. Pencil and ink on paper. 37 x 30 cm.

(National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) exhibition was strangely reminiscent of the Day of the Dead manifestations in its half-entertaining/half-frightening elements that seem to add up to a narrative, suggesting both humour and fear in equal measure. Characters from the narrative of her past appear as actors in her theatre of dreams and, while she was not actually raised as a Catholic, the incense of mythic ritual hangs around the work in an insubstantial cloud.

She wanted to move away from what she refers to as this “quite stiff narrative work” and move towards a more expressive language – this is the new story (of the journey of her Master of Philosophy degree in ceramics at the Royal College of Arts in London, where she has been living for the past seven years).

Thus, suddenly, she has presented a group of pieces that seem not to relate at all to the previous work; but we can read them as another sort of Duchampian ‘gap’: this time a kind of incompleteness in the making and fashioning process

of the form. It is a re-examination of the materiality and the traditions of process-oriented making and forming. In the MK Gallery in Milton Keynes, UK (alongside a solo retrospective of Andrew Lord, the English ceramics artist who, incidentally, has moved in the opposite direction and who has been resident in the US for most of his life) she is showing work that appears to be a complete discontinuity. The objects suddenly reference the muddy materiality of clay. They are recognizable as heads but only tangentially. They are as much about the soft mal-

leability of the medium; a contrary turn to the direction that she has exploited in clay for so long, through its ability to take precise form. This new work is another reverie made manifest. They emanate from a ‘dream time’ of Olmec heads, the dry, harsh world of Pre-Columbian South America re-memorized within the green leafiness of England’s capital city.

They are profoundly tactile objects; Merleau-Ponty underlines the importance of ‘the felt’, signalling its complementary association with the visual:







*Above: Absence + Presence (Installation View). 2010. Ceramic sculptures. 426 cm.*

*Below: Absence + Presence (Installation View). 2010.*

*Drawings, ceramic sculptures, cast glass and custom vinyl graphics. 426 cm.*





*Happy Ugly Scars (Installation View)*. 2011. Drawings, sculptures and custom vinyl. 426 cm.  
Photo by Northern Clay Center, US.

There are tactile phenomena, alleged tactile qualities, like roughness and smoothness, which disappear completely if the exploratory movement is eliminated. Movement and time are not only an objective condition of knowing touch, but a phenomenal component of tactile data. They bring about the patterning of tactile phenomena, just as light shows up the configuration of a visible surface.<sup>3</sup>

The Olmec heads stand in the exhibition as mythical constructs that inhabit a liminal world between here and there – a strange past re-imagined for today. These giant heads appear as from an extinct civilization; they remind us also (indeed almost anagrammatically) of the Golem (the great figure fashioned of clay in the ghettos of ‘Mitteleurope’) who was to rescue the Jewish people from successive waves of pogroms. Garcia’s heads are half-formed/half-suggested, waiting to be re-animated for some unspecified trial or purpose. Despite her intentional referencing of the colossal pre-Hispanic objects, the actual pieces in the exhibition are but just a few orders greater than life-size. Yet they are nonetheless uncomfortably large and clearly wishing to assert a sculptural intent rather than the strange (almost domestic) scale of the elements within the previous

installations. It is rather in the unfinished appearance of the work that they attempt to assert themselves and here that they also appear for what they are (Garcia herself talks about them as “a work in process”) suggesting a new beginning and intentionally unresolved as a result. It represents her evolution of a new visual and haptic language that, through the new-found tactility, is stretching out to new conversations through a deliberate eschewing of skill in the creation of these inchoate forms. It is pushing into new, yet uncharted, territories towards what Edith Garcia refers to as “The absence and presence of the human form in sculpture”.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Kant, I. quoted in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, Stanford University Press, 2005. p42.
2. Duchamp, M. (ed. Sanouillet, M. and Peterson, E.), 1973, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Da Capo Press. p139.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970. p. 315.

---

David Jones is a potter and writer. He is an academic, teaching at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. He is the author of *Raku – Investigations into Fire and Firing - Philosophies within contemporary ceramic practice*.