

FOURTH EDITION



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**THE
CRAFT
AND ART
OF CLAY**

LARGE SLAB CONSTRUCTIONS



NAN SMITH'S "WISHES," WORK IN PROGRESS:

1 Plaster molds for arms of figure. Clay is pressed into the mold to form the arms



2 A slab of clay is rolled into the latex mold using cloth backing for extra support



3 Clay slabs are placed inside the walls for additional support



4 The bisque-fired figure, birds, and fitted arms are set up prior to selecting the glaze

Artists who build large pieces develop their own techniques. Slab building seems natural for monumental forms; coil building takes more time, but it can give more control.

Slab works should be handled little and carefully at all stages, to prevent strains that develop later into warps or cracks. All large clay pieces, but especially wide or tall ones, should be constructed on beds of whole newspapers, burlap, or terry toweling, to allow the clay to move and shrink easily during drying. Try to construct large works in one place, and move them only once, into the kiln. Place them on a layer of grog, sand, or powdered clay that will shift as the piece shrinks more in firing. Alternatives: build on $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (2 cm) thick plywood and let it burn out in the kiln, or build a loose-brick kiln over a piece and dismantle the kiln after firing.



5 The entire work, airbrushed, underglazed and glazed earthenware and mixed media, 84 ins. (213 cm) high

Armature construction. Jerry Rothman was one of the first clay artists to work large slabs against wooden cores that were wrapped with paper or cloth and pulled out before the clay shrank. He was also one of the first to develop a non-shrink clay body which could be laid over stainless steel mesh armatures, fired in the structure to cone 5.

Adding fibers to clay. Marilyn Levine was one of the first to use short nylon fibers, which when wedged into plastic clay give extra workability and strength, causing less stress in the forming stage of very large works. Fiberglass cloth soaked in clay slurry and allowed to stiffen is another method that can be used to build large forms, which hold up during construction and fire stronger due to the integral fibers. Slabs with nylon screen embedded will stand up tall during fabrication and can be folded into unusual shapes. Adding nut shells or animal fodder to plastic clay will absorb moisture and gives a strength that is different from adding fired grog for temper.

Molded and altered construction. Nan Smith is well known for her very large trompe l'oeil figurative environments, which are constructed from draped slabs altered from plaster press-molds. The complicated clay structures are assembled from the individual parts into the whole and eventually added to the rest of the installation after firing and glazing.



Airbrush: vinyl stencils are applied to jacket on clay torso to create the pattern

Nan Smith: *Beyond Illusions*, installation, earthenware, airbrushed and glazed, steel and wood, 92 x 66 x 60 ins. (234 x 168 x 152 cm)



Airbrush: skirt lifted out of dismantled kiln after firing (kiln rings have been removed), 38 x 29 x 21 ins. (96.5 x 74 x 53 cm)

