

Sally Michener  
DIANE C. & BARB G.

Sally Michener: *Diane C. and Barb G.*

BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Artist's Statement (2008)

SALLY MICHENER



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While Sally Michener's ceramic sculpture is distinctly her own, she has derived inspiration over the years from sculptural and architectural traditions of ancient and tribal cultures. Formal and thematic allusions have ranged from the pyramids and funerary art of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the royal portrait

Sally Michener  
*Diane C.*, 1981c., 175.1 x 16.5 x 26 cm (right)  
handbuilt terra cotta  
SAG 2003.05.01  
gift of the artist

*Barb G.*, 1981c., 169.9 x 18.5 x 21.7 cm (left)  
handbuilt terra cotta  
SAG 2003.05.02  
gift of the artist

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Sally Michener, *Diane C.*, 1981c., handbuilt terracotta (175.1 x 16.5 x 26 cm) SAG 2003.05.01 Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

art of Benin to the life-size terracotta warriors found in the tomb of the First Emperor of Qin in China. Her practice also has responded to the work of contemporary sculptors, assemblagists and installation artists, such as David Smith, Louise Nevelson and Nancy Graves. Based in Vancouver since 1973, Michener has consolidated an intuitive approach to art-making with careful study of historical precedents, creating individual sculptures and multi-component installations of clay. Much of her work of the past two decades has focused on the human face and figure, to which she brings keen observation and deep compassion.

Born in 1935 in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, Michener had an early interest in art but was equally drawn, by her Unitarian upbringing, to helping people. Having completed a Master of Social Work degree at Columbia University in New York City, she spent three exhausting years in the early 1960s as a social worker in St. Paul, Minnesota. At night, however, she studied pottery-making with Warren MacKenzie at the University of Minnesota. After some major moves and life changes, including leaving social work, becoming a mother, setting up her own pottery studio, and accompanying her then-husband, landscape painter Robert Michener, on university teaching assignments, sabbaticals and study tours in different parts of the United States, Great Britain and Europe, Michener returned to school to pursue her true vocation. In 1973, she earned an MFA in ceramic sculpture at the University of Cincinnati and that same year, moved with her family to Vancouver to take up a teaching position at the Vancouver School of Art (later Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and now Emily Carr University).

Over this period, Michener's production had gradually shifted from the wheel-thrown to the hand-built, and

from functional pottery to art for art's sake. She realized that she was more absorbed by hand-sculpting figures and landscape scenes that she mounted onto her ceramic vessels as handles or lids than she was in throwing the pots themselves. Eventually, this "embellishment" became her primary concern: she committed herself to producing ceramic sculpture that existed as fine art, independent of any applied art function.

In a 1977 interview with Mary Fox, Michener suggested that teaching satisfied her imperative to do good and be useful to others.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, she was able to dramatically expand her ceramic practice, producing and exhibiting sculpture which ranged from the organic to the architectonic. Her interest in the column as a form and symbol emerged, which she attributes to learning that the columns of the Parthenon were based on human proportions. In her own work, Michener produced maquettes of such architectural forms with three-dimensional, expressionistic figures balanced on top. She also created abstracted, vessel-like works with painted figures and other motifs applied to their surfaces. Again, her study of world ceramic traditions, ancient and tribal, informed her art.

Vancouver in the 1970s was a centre for experimental and counter-culture art. Performances, happenings, "be-ins", interdisciplinary projects, sound art, mail art and mixed-media installations (then termed "environments") were the focus of much creative, curatorial and critical interest, locally and internationally. Feminism, too, had emerged as an important aspect of postmodern cultural practice, and often allied itself with "domestic" and "craft" traditions such as pottery, quilting and embroidery. In 1979, American artist Judy Chicago opened her famous ceramic and fabric installation, *Dinner Party*,



Sally Michener, *Barb G.*, 1981c., handbuilt terracotta (169.9 x 18.5 x 21.7 cm) SAG 2003.05.02 Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The work toured internationally, drawing intense media coverage and huge audiences, and shifting attitudes about high art media and materials.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1970s, Michener was also producing environments – a garden, a colonnade – of ceramic sculpture. Through these works, she again used architectural forms, working in a larger scale to encourage her viewers to explore spatial relationships and to examine the ways in which the built environment shapes our experience of the places we inhabit. At the time, her Vancouver colleagues Gathie Falk and Glenn Lewis were also producing thematically linked groupings of ceramic sculpture. Michener, however, sees their production as related to the California-based Funk art movement; her own work of the 1970s, she feels, tended more towards the architectonic and the abstract.

Within a few years, realistic, life-sized figures and faces, in whole or in part, began to emerge from Michener's environments, again articulating her interest in the exploration of spatial dynamics in relation to the human form. In 1981, after exhibiting ceramic installations inside galleries and museums, Michener took on the challenge of creating an ambitious, site-specific, outdoor work. Her chosen material for the installation was terracotta, a low-fired, unglazed, reddish-coloured earthenware. Labouring through the summer with a couple of student assistants, she created *Hill Installation*, a multi-component artwork for a small, hilly park on Granville Island. The park is near Emily Carr University, where Michener had been granted temporary studio space.

Intended to reflect both place and community, the installed work looked out over the city and took some of its formal cues from the Vancouver skyline. Dominating the installation, however, were

some 60 terracotta columns, 20 of them forming a kind of colonnade. Forty of the columns, ranging in height from four to seven feet, were set in sociable groupings throughout the small park; each bore an inset face – a realistic likeness to a student, friend, or colleague. The individuals thus depicted were members of the Granville Island and art school community Michener wanted to honour. As she recounts, the faces were cast from people who were “in and out” of her studio throughout the summer and therefore also reflect a particular time as well as a given place and community. They also suggested a kind of timelessness, like the terracotta retinue of an ancient Chinese emperor, accompanying his soul into eternity.

Michener and her assistants set up *Hill Installation* over the 1981 Labour Day weekend. The outdoor setting, although essential to the mood and meaning of the site-specific work, proved to be both optimistic and problematic. Almost immediately, two heads were stolen, and near the end of October, the entire piece was knocked over by vandals. Saddened and discouraged, Michener chose not to remount the installation. Still, its components remained mostly intact and eventually made their way, individually or in groups, into public and private collections across Canada.

Although they now exist as independent sculptures, *Diane C.* and *Barb G.* originated as parts of – and now express much that was significant about – *Hill Installation*. Each terracotta work consists of a realistic face set near the top of a human-height tubular form, again speaking to Michener's ongoing interest in columns as they relate to the proportions of the human figure. (Here, the columns function not so much as mounts as they do body surrogates.) As with more than three dozen similar works from

the original installation, each face is individual, taken from a plaster cast. *Diane C.* was based on a Granville Island colleague and *Barb G.*, on a former student of Michener's.

Each column is individual, too, constructed by Michener and her assistants using the coil method, an ancient, labour-intensive technique that involves building ceramic forms from pliable, hand-rolled ropes of raw clay. Traditionally, the coils, once shaped into the desired shape (usually a vessel), would be patted

flat and burnished smooth before firing. Michener, however, chose to preserve their rough, ropy and varied appearance in her columns. Process rather than finish and individuality rather than uniformity are articulated in these unglazed works. "The coil," Michener says, "is the most elemental and simple of ceramic techniques."<sup>3</sup> She was attracted to its ancient roots, its simplicity and its repetition. In her own hands, the repetitive movements and gestures of coil work translated into meditative activity.



Sally Michener, *Diane C.* (right) and *Barb G.* (left), detail

Derived from plaster casts, the faces of both works are realistic, but they are also scored with deep, straight lines, seeming to divide them into rectilinear parts or interlocking plates. As Surrey Art Gallery curator Jane Young pointed out in a 1985 exhibition catalogue, these lines “resembled the facial scarification practiced by certain tribal groups of the African continent and the islands of the south Pacific.”<sup>4</sup> More specifically, they evoke the extraordinarily beautiful terracotta busts of Benin, in ancient Nigeria. Again, the determined everydayness of Michener’s community seems to transcend time and mortality.

The artist has pursued the human face and form to the present day, in some instances fragmenting and juxtaposing body parts or facial features in what look like surreal ways. The displacements and disjunctions don’t strike Michener as surreal, however. Rather, she says, they reflect our busy, fragmented, contemporary lives. They also correspond with “the way our brains work, bouncing back and forth between different tasks and ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

The persistence and immediacy of the human forms Michener has worked with, from *Hill Installation* forward, seem to be entirely in keeping with her first career as a social worker and her early impulse to do good and help others. They signal her abiding interest in and compassion for her fellow beings, feelings that have long survived translation into the sturdy and fragile medium of clay.

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Notes:

1. Fox, Mary. “Sculpture in Clay: The Work of Sally Michener,” *Western Living*, October 1977, page 6.
2. Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art 1945 - 2000*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pages 184-186.
3. Sally Michener in an interview with the author, August 8, 2008.
4. Young, Jane. *Sally Michener: Inside Out*, Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1985.
5. Michener interview.

Sources:

- Davison, Liane and Carol E. Mayer. *Hot Clay: Sixteen West Coast Ceramic Artists*. Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 2004.
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## Artist's Statement

August 2008

*Diane C.* and *Barb G.* are two figurative columns which were part of a large installation of about 60 life height columns and two arches in 1981. The title of the piece was *Hill Installation*, Granville Island, Vancouver. The piece was built at Emily Carr and students helped make many parts of the piece. Some were hired and some volunteered. I used face masks of students and friends and these faces became the focal points for all the components. Most columns were made with the coil process, a very ancient and basic practice in ceramics and all pieces were of unglazed terra cotta. My impetus to create this piece was to make my work process accessible to my students and to share the results with the Granville Island community. I have been involved with public spaces for people to enter and walk about, such as the Garden Installation at Presentation House, the Colonnades at VAG, or Inside/Outside Gardens at SAG, for example, both before and after the *Hill Installation*.



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