

*cupping loss: Linda Sormin*

What might it mean to drink from cups about loss? In my conversation with Linda Sormin, she described a pivotal moment as a Sheridan student twelve years ago, when she proposed making cups that somehow expressed the experience of loss. Her professor wisely countered: who would want to drink from cups about loss? Indeed. What kind of a cup would that be?

A year ago, Linda Sormin began working in the position of Head of Ceramics at the Sheridan School of Craft and Design.<sup>1</sup> Not being an alumnus, I was interested to learn more about her ceramic history. Having seen a few images of her works, I was curious about how she came to make those works, the ceramic interests that led her there.

Linda's work in ceramics began as an undergraduate at Andrews University in Michigan where she majored in English and minored in Fine Art. After graduation, with an English degree in hand, she worked in Laos and Thailand as an international community development worker and a freelance writer. She focused on primary health care and infrastructure building, as well as women's issues. She became particularly interested in the empowering impact of non-formal education and helped to facilitate informal educational practices in the areas of clean water supply, income generation and mother-child health practices.

After three and a half years of working with agencies and businesses, and not wanting to spend the rest of her life in front of a computer, she began to look for other options for work. In contrast to her high-tech office job, she felt strongly drawn to local craftspeople making textiles, furniture and pottery in the villages. Inspired by this creative independence, Linda wanted to work with her hands and engage in meaningful (physical) labor, using one's hands to form things of beauty and utility. She saw the life of a potter as a reflection of values that embodied process and integrity. It was another way to "affirm life and the connections between people." Taking a geographical leap, she returned to Ontario and applied to Sheridan's ceramics program.

Linda started Sheridan with the intention of learning to become a functional potter. Encouraged by her professors and classmates, she started exploring form and ideas about containment and volume. Before long, her experiments began to take her out of the realm of functionality. She started breaking up the space of the vessel, throwing familiar bowl and cylinder forms, then cutting them apart and reassembling them. Not coincidentally, it was also at this time that she was experiencing loss in her personal life and wanted to explore that issue further in her work. "Who wants to drink from a cup about loss?" The new thrown and altered forms were anything but the "healthy, wholesome, honest pot"; these ceramic objects bore the marks of trauma and lurched through space. They were containers, but not of any drinkable or edible substance. Although she thought she would return back to function eventually, and may perhaps do that someday, Linda's explorations, both formally and

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<sup>1</sup> For more information check out [www.lindasormin.com](http://www.lindasormin.com) and [www.sheridanceramics.com](http://www.sheridanceramics.com).

conceptually, continued to lead her work in a different direction during her graduate school period at Alfred University.

At a recent panel discussion at the Gardiner Museum, "Engaging with Ceramic Practices in Contemporary Art," Rachel Gottlieb succinctly categorized current works in ceramics as falling into three major areas of interest: vessels, figurines, and environmental/installations.<sup>2</sup> Linda's works are ceramic installations. Exhibiting internationally since 2005, her most recent work, *My Voice Changes When I Speak Your Language*, funded by a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, was shown at the Jane Hartsook Gallery last year in New York City.<sup>3</sup> The title suggests her continued interest in narrative and language, and how language is not neutral. As anyone who speaks two languages can attest, language shapes the speaker with its cultural nuances. Linda titled this work to reflect the fact that her voice, and perhaps even her temperament, alters when she speaks her mother's language, Thai. She notices that she 'performs' her role as a woman and a daughter with a different inflection in these cross-cultural situations.

Using clay coils and hand-pinching techniques, Linda builds structures that express fragility, vulnerability and delicacy. The structures in the exhibition are a combination of hand-built ceramic forms, found objects, and discarded objects intricately woven or laced together. The precariously balanced nature of these architectural installations are meant to evoke the sense of threat, of potential collapse and quite literally, physical harm. She likes to leave her edges "sharp." The cluster of pieces may be "skewered" together by a metal rod. Aggression is central to many of Linda's works.

Linda engages in a very physical process when making her pieces, from the very haptic engagement with clay to the "sweat-fueled" labor required in scavenging materials from garbage dumps. The scale of the works invite the viewer into this staged dramatic encounter with the material and objects. Described by Glenn Adamson as "controlled fury,"<sup>4</sup> Linda's installation works clearly and viscerally are not meant to evoke contemplative calm. Her work in New York City is not a meditation on serenity, but on survival, in its physical, cultural and psychological sense. A recurring theme in her work, Linda noted how the experiences in Laos and Thailand informed her interest in the issues of survival. Of particular interest to me as I walked around each piece was discovering (and then looking for), figurines of old Chinese men and pagoda statues, delightfully situated amidst this mass fury. It was as if these old men were, in one instance, trying to hold back or fight back a tsunami (Yoda-style), or in another, had found a way to ride the wave and go with the flow. Becoming fixated on these figurines, I started to read the works from their epicenter, and the works became about their adaptation, survival, vulnerability, and of course, loss. Things had become uprooted and tangled together with debris.

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<sup>2</sup> "Engaging with Ceramic Processes in Contemporary Art," a panel discussion at the Gardiner Museum, January 14, 2013. Panelists were Linda Sormin, Clint Neufeld, and Rachel Gottlieb, moderated by Mona Filip. Rachel Gottlieb is Senior Curator at the Gardiner Museum. Under the category of vessels, the works are about containment; she listed the works of Ken Eastman and Edmund de Waal as examples. Justin Novak and Shary Boyle fit into the figurine category, which she described as currently being "the opulent but savage and subversive." Clare Twomey and Neil Forrest's works represent the interest in installations.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Hartsook Gallery, Greenwich House Pottery, 16 Jones Street, New York City. October 26-November 21, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn Adamson, opening statement for the catalogue of *My Voice Changes When I Speak Your Language*.

As one of the other three panelists in "Engaging with Ceramic Processes in Contemporary Art," Linda talked about her interest in "debris" and "garbage," questioning what is precious. Using these found objects, she imagines their histories, as once having been valuable to someone, a personal object. She weaves them, using pinched clay like strings binding them together. Through her hand-work, Linda is collecting and salvaging discarded and discordant pieces, subverting conventional social norms of what is of value, or who is of value, as well as referencing cultural upheaval. Linda told me that she grew up as a "preacher's kid." In her recent essay on a 2011 exhibition, *Are You Land or Water? Love Notes to Buddhas*, she writes about childhood memories of time spent cleaning the pews and playing tag with her brother in her father's church, and about the "seeds of doubt and dissent" that took hold early on.<sup>5</sup> Though she did not follow in her father's professional footsteps, in her net of clay, I am nevertheless glimpsing a salvation of a sort. As she gathers and weaves the objects, I am seeing a compassionate impulse to save.

In weaving the discarded and discordant objects together, the objects are also contained. Adamson noted that in preparing for the exhibition, Linda "described the pleasure of reconnecting with the 'old school details like volume, gesture and containment.'"<sup>6</sup> These architectural structures are simultaneously vessels of containment. It is an installation of vessels. I think these are her cups about loss.

*Linda thanks the Canada Council for the Arts for their financial support of the exhibition, My Voice Changes When I Speak Your Language.*



*Chiho Tokita is a Toronto-based studio potter.*

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Sormin, *Are You Land Or Water? Love Notes to Buddhas*, an essay for "Ceramics in the Expanded Field." ([www.ceramics-in-the-field.com](http://www.ceramics-in-the-field.com))

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Adamson, opening statement for the catalogue of *My Voice Changes When I Speak Your Language*.