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lynn duryea

Lynn Duryea: The Energy of Edges

by Glen R. Brown

"Yellow Cleft," 18 inches (46 centimeters) in height, slab-constructed terra cotta, fired in oxidation.

A common trait of sculpture since the early 1980s has been the deliberate reversal of the late-modernist tendency to reduce forms to a primary level of objectivity, to confine artistic production to what the minimalist Donald Judd succinctly described as "specific objects." Although the sharp angles, clean surfaces and overall air of precision that characterized the minimalist work of thirty years ago have retained an obvious visual appeal, the rhetoric of negation and pursuit of aesthetic purity that initially accompanied them has fallen conspicuously from favor.

No one today speaks with confidence about the prospect of achieving an absolutely autonomous art form, nor does anyone seem particularly nostalgic about the collapse of this dream. On the contrary, sculptors have with great enthusiasm either rejected the minimalist aesthetic outright—deliberately disrupting its simplicity and serenity by mixing media, combining disharmonious forms or breaking the object open and dispersing its parts across space—or they have taken the more subtle path of retaining its visual effect while imbuing it with the symbolic, even narrative, content that minimalists rejected.

In the work she has produced since 1999, Lynn Duryea has clearly exhibited the latter tendency. Her austere slab-constructed earthenware sculptures possess an undeniable concreteness. Their few visual components are logically ordered within clear contours. In terms of overall form, her sculptures can be sufficiently grasped from a single perspective—they hold, in other words, no surprises for the viewer who is intent upon experiencing them fully as sculptures in the round. They are gestalts.

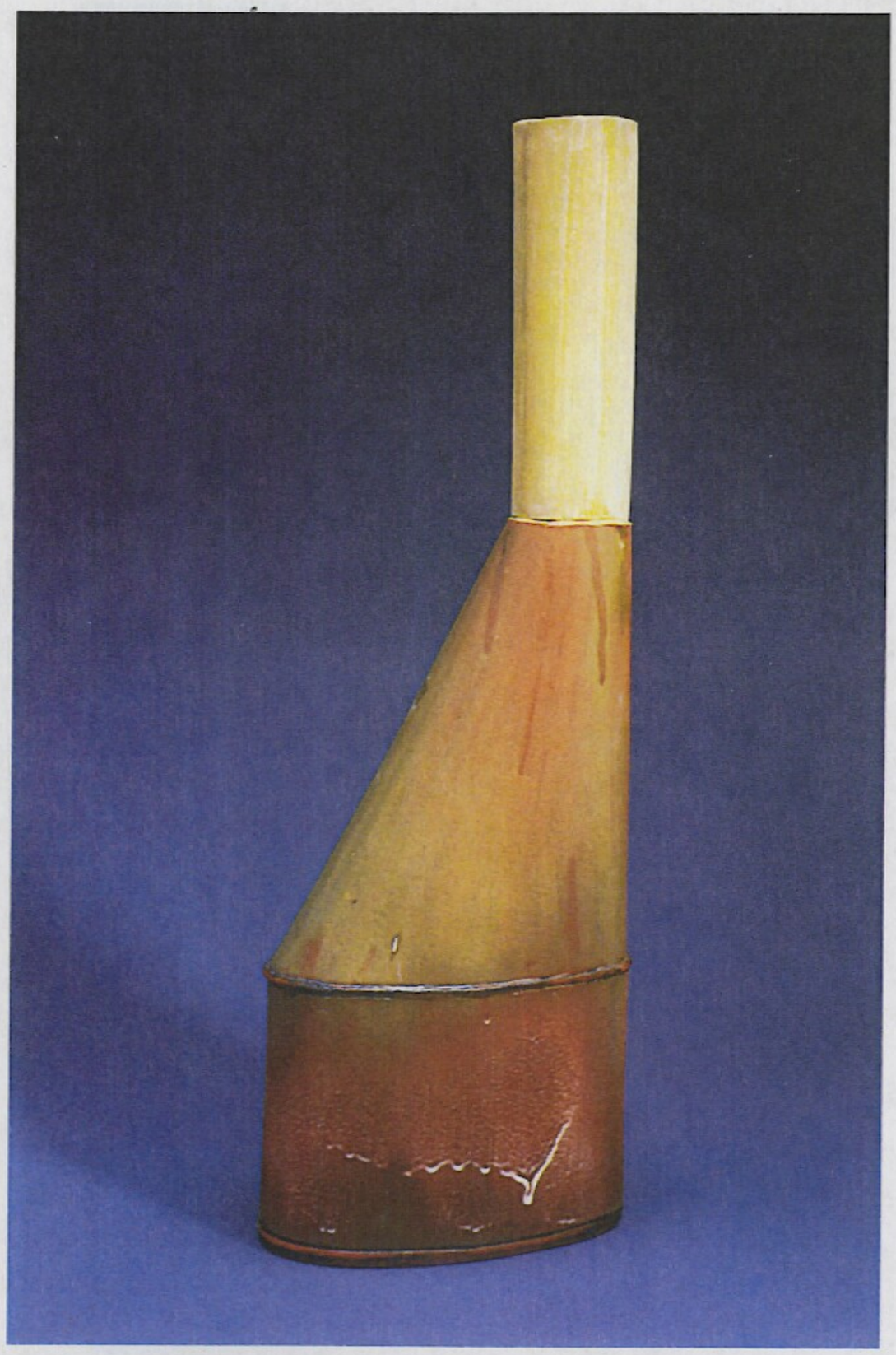
In this respect, they fulfill the primary minimalist concern for reduction to the simplest state of material being. At the same time, merely cataloging their physical properties does not exhaust their potential meaning. They ultimately break with minimalist concerns for the autonomy of the object. They may embrace minimalist form, but they also exceed it on at least three accounts: they are abstractions and, therefore, representations of something outside themselves; they engage external space and consequently cannot be described as materially self-referential; and they make no effort to sequester themselves from the medium of time, but, on the contrary, refer deliberately to processes of transformation.

"Wedge," 17½ inches (44 centimeters) in height, slab-constructed terra cotta, fired in oxidation, with wood base.

Duryea is not alone in her particular modification of the minimalist aesthetic. Sculptors in a variety of media have employed precisely the same kinds of revisionist strategies. What makes her work especially interesting, however, is her motivation not in terms of identifying herself with a postmodern art discourse—a deconstruction of minimalist assumptions regarding the objective nature of art—but rather in acting upon a potter's feeling for the utilitarian potential of forms.

Although she began her current work in sculpture while a graduate student in ceramics at the University of Florida (where she received her M.F.A. in 2002), her prior 20-year career as a successful studio potter has exerted a fundamental influence over the conceptual aspects of her new work. "Having made functional work for so many years, I feel that the same kinds of concerns are a part of my work in sculpture," she explains. "It relates to function but in a different way, an abstract way. I like things that have a purpose, and I think that comes through in all my work."

Though Duryea's representation is not specific, many of her works are clearly suggestive of industrial structures, such as smokestacks, steam pipes, boilers or cooling vats. Others bear a closer resemblance to tools. In either case, their vague utilitarian air is not incidental. "I've always been very interested in industrial forms," she admits. "They are most intriguing to me when they evoke certain associations but are not exact representations of anything. I want to suggest tools or mechanical elements while not referring to any object too specifically."



"Angle Iron," 23½ inches (60 centimeters) in height, slab-constructed terra cotta, fired in oxidation.

Her intent, in other words, is to produce abstractions of machine or tool traits, and this can best be accomplished through forms that are precise and simple, as though designed expressly for efficient use. Despite the fact that they are not actually destined to be employed, they convey a sense of readiness for use—a potential that suggests resistance to the autonomous state to which late-modern sculpture aspired. Representation, even in the form of extreme abstraction, involves a displacement of meaning away from the present object toward that to which it refers.

Perhaps a natural extension of the reliance on tar paper and linoleum in the production phase of her sculptures (see "Tar-Paper Molds, page 36) was Duryea's decision to combine some of her ceramic pieces with cylindrical, pedestal-like bases fabricated from sheet steel. Standing as tall as 7½ feet, these earthenware-and-metal constructions employ scale to establish a more assertive, even aggressive, presence. Some viewers, in fact, have been inclined to interpret the pieces as representations of missiles, a reading that Duryea did not intend but has not dismissed either. Power is as much an attribute of heavy machinery as of weaponry, and a certain streamlined efficiency equally characterizes both.

Duryea's abstraction of mechanical attributes does not distinguish between the constructive and destructive applications of actual objects, and she is more intrigued than dismayed by the capacity to see in her works a resemblance to ballistic devices. More surprising has been the tendency of some viewers to associate the mixed-media sculptures with the human figure. The quality of verticality is clearly a factor in this interpretation, but another, subtler, aspect of the works in general may also be at work in evoking the viewer's tendency to anthropomorphize.

In keeping with, and following from, her skills as a potter, Duryea has constructed her sculptures essentially as large vessels, some of which are sealed. Unlike the open-box forms of Donald Judd—which were designed to assert their absolute emptiness, their inability to harbor any content, material or otherwise—Duryea's forms are implicitly containers.

Although some of her pieces might indeed be compelled to serve as utilitarian vessels, their presentation as sculpture makes clear that their implicit content is of a conceptual nature. They serve, in other words, as containers in a rhetorical rather than literal sense. Their content, consequently, is understood to be immaterial. The fact that they have been read alternately as references to machines and human beings suggests that this content is generally perceived by viewers as energy rather than object, a potential for action rather than something material.

Energy is indeed a focus of Duryea's attention as she designs her work. One of the recurring features of her forms is a rectangular concavity, a notch or gap that creates a marked interaction of positive and negative space. The first of these came about fortu-

itously when she was stalled by a particularly frustrating piece. Flipping it upside down and finding it greatly improved, she decided to modify it further by removing a section. The resulting notch produced a tension between solid form and empty space that appealed to her immediately.

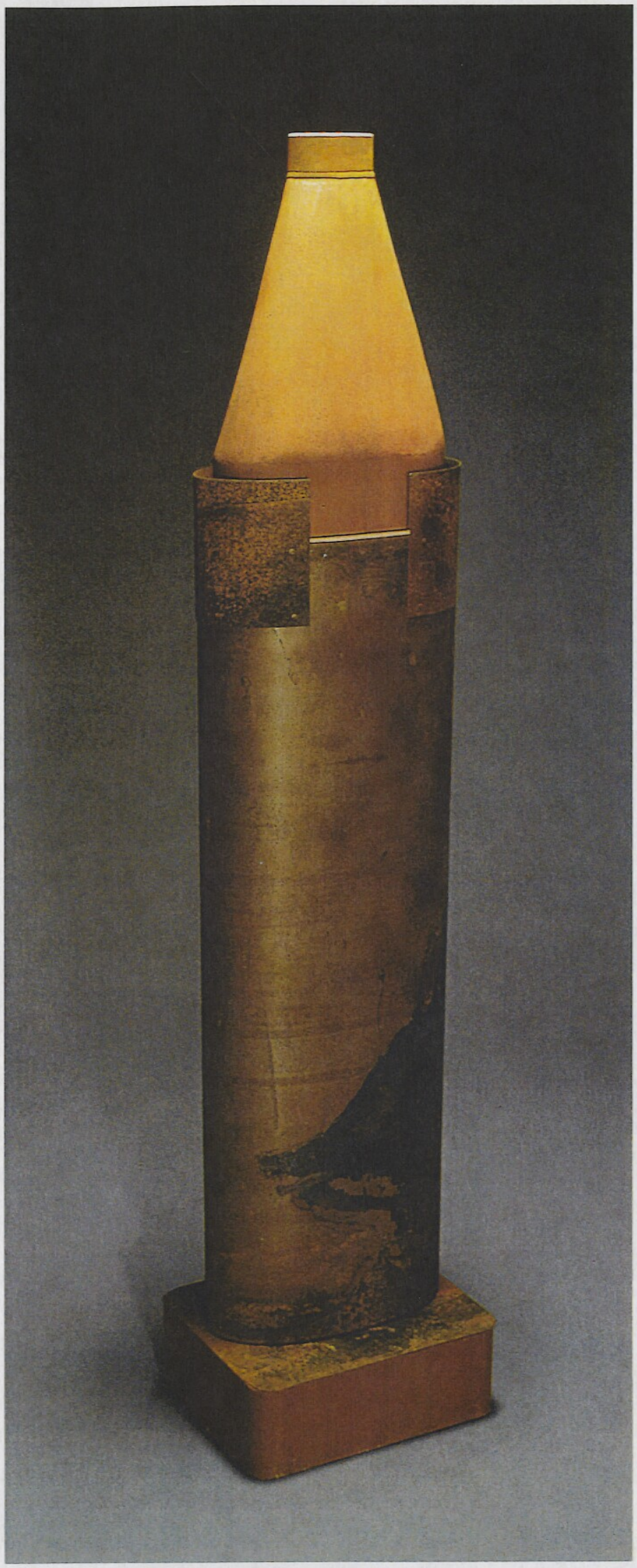
Describing it as an "energy of edges," she has traced her sensitivity to this kind of tension to the experiences of a childhood spent on Long Island. "I was constantly aware of the long stretches of beach along the water, places where one thing shifted to another," she recalls. "I've spent most of my life on the coast, so I'm very aware of the energy that is generated along perimeters. When things come together in nature, there is a kind of vibration between them. I don't know if this kind of connection to the landscape is apparent in my work, but it is a source of real inspiration for me."

There is, in fact, little in Duryea's silent, monumental sculptures that immediately calls to mind breakers crashing on a rocky coastline, the angry scar where choppy water and slick swells collide in a rip tide, or the stirring of dust along the sharp contour of a wind-swept ridge. At the same time, there is no denying that the most dynamic visual elements of her work are the lines—sometimes crisp and sometimes blurred—created by intersecting planes, especially those where conical forms meet cylinders. These are the highly refined distillations of a sensibility attuned to tensions developing along borders.

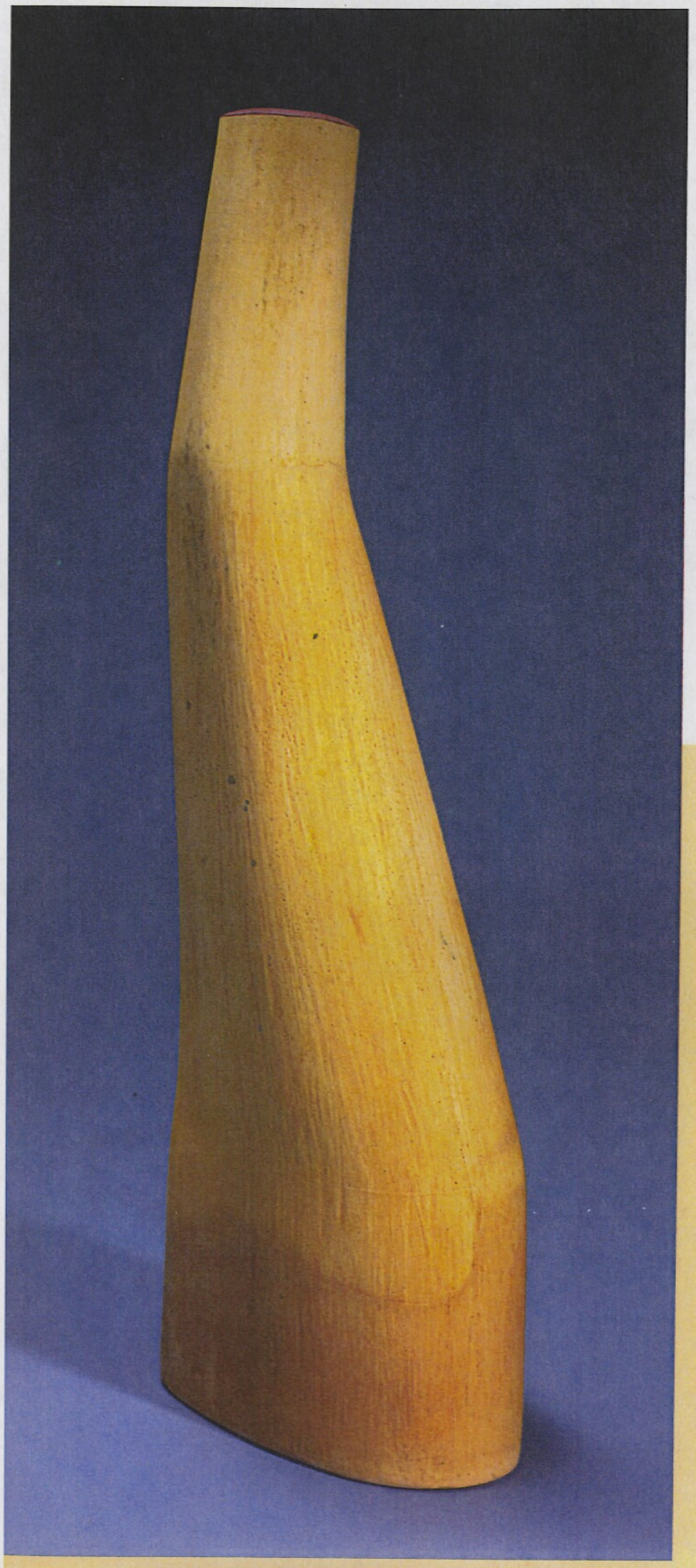
The stacking of elements that characterizes Duryea's compositions is thus more than a matter of material construction. It is a process that instills in her work some of its principal metaphorical value. The lines produced by merging the surfaces of geometric forms are the evidence of transition, a shift between angles but also from one powerful sphere of influence to another. For Duryea, this reorientation is sufficient to conjure in her work a sense of forces perpetually exerting themselves against one another, an abrasive motion, a lateral slippage, a long, slow friction.

The suggestion of this kind of action constitutes another instance in which Duryea subtly subverts the minimalist aesthetic, which might have emphasized an internal dynamic between the parts of an object but never to the point of connecting it to the passage of time. Duryea is, however, conspicuously concerned with the temporal situation of her sculptures, which are far from static entities. Again, the surfaces are key. In addition to intersecting one another as planes, they serve as the sites of a process of layering, a building up of slips and glazes.

Duryea has even applied wood stain, paint and metal to the surfaces, exploiting the inconsistencies between these substances to create an obvious record of her successive approaches to a piece. Generally, this cumulative process is partially reversed as well. Duryea relies extensively on sandblasting to erode the very surfaces that she has carefully raised. "The surfaces are never static," she explains. "Like any surfaces anywhere, those of my pieces are always evolving or devolving, manifesting themselves or being worn away. Sometimes that happens quickly and sometimes slowly, but it is an inevitable consequence of time."



"Wrap," 91½ inches (232 centimeters) in height, terra cotta, fired in oxidation and sandblasted, with steel base.



"Lever," 20½ inches (52 centimeters) in height, slab-constructed terra cotta, fired in oxidation, by Lynn Duryea, Boone, North Carolina.

The result of Duryea's modification of the minimalist aesthetic is not simply an assertion of presence but a monumental sense of abstraction as well. As sculptures, in other words, her works both serve as signs and exist as things. They reflect her personal memories of places in addition to providing experiences of material reality for the viewer.

By connecting her work metaphorically to use through allusions to tools and machinery, she relates it to utilitarian pottery and thus acknowledges a history of ceramics as a medium with a particular kind of application. She is not interested in clay merely as a material any more than she is interested in sculpture as a purely autonomous entity.

Allusions to time and process connect her work to narratives, giving it an implicitly infinite contextuality. In part, these characteristics are the result of her cognizance of important general transformations in contemporary sculpture; in part, they are the more specific consequences of her background as a ceramist. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of her work is its negotiation between these influences; its ability, in other words, to exploit an energy of edges.

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Tar-Paper Molds

The precision necessary to evoke mechanical form is a characteristic that Duryea achieves in her earthenware sculptures with the aid of tar paper. Possessing a level of ductability comparable to that of a clay slab, tar paper is an excellent material for testing potential compositions. It can be bent and stapled to produce cylinders or cones in a rapid approximation of the structures of a finished piece. Her tar-paper configurations serve as three-dimensional substitutes for sketches.

Moreover, the tar-paper forms can be disassembled and laid flat as templates for cutting slabs to the desired shapes. They can then be reassembled and used as hump molds to aid in bending the slabs to precise curves. When Duryea is producing especially heavy forms, she generally reinforces the molds by gluing their bases to boards and stuffing them with crumpled newspaper.

"It's a trick that I learned from Bill Daley," she says. "The tar paper works fine as a mold for pieces up to about a foot in height. With anything bigger, it's necessary to give it extra strength." For even heavier work, she sometimes creates plaster press molds from positive forms produced by bending linoleum. She has even invented an apparatus called a "slabsling," a framework in which large slabs of clay can be suspended on hammocklike sheets of tar paper until drying has fixed the curves of their surfaces.