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On making Three Vases for Sea Water, a triptych

One stormy day, I came through the Banksia grove and across the grassy Midden to enter a dramatic scene.

Winged by headlands north and south, the rocky shore was strewn with sea sponges of many different shapes and swathes of kelp, studded with large blue barnacles, woody kelp holdfasts, turban and abalone shells. Displaced spherical boulders lent a disruptive formality to this chaotic vista, while between the strand of shell grit and the rough sea, the rock platform gleamed, abundant with littoral marine life. The air was heady with scents of iodine, ozone and salt. Tympani sounds of crashing waves echoed across the insouciant blue backdrop of the sky.

My returning gaze merged the stormy disarray of coastal elements with my delight in the tactile, mimetic properties of clay to suddenly propel my imagination into a curious reverie of dynamic assemblage. In a flash, before my eyes, nest like sponge forms alighted on spherical boulders, abalone shells, kelp holdfasts, a bunch of seaweed and a blue barnacle or two lodged under boulders to keep them steady. Clusters of tiny blue periwinkles and shiny black button snails grazed across surfaces while drapes of green golden kelp formed arched handles in this apparition of vase like forms.

The inventive form language of ceramic vessels is a lifelong study for me and devising processes to serve the realization of new work imbues my practice. The vision for the vases had manifested a clear formal anatomy of neck, belly, and foot. I recalled marine motifs painted on Middle period Minoan pots and sculptural trompe l'oeil natural history motifs in ceramic works of Bernard Palissy, and French Rococo.

Essentially though, when making *Three Vases for Sea water*, it was that perceptual jolt into the tantalizing realm of the uncanny that I experienced on the sea shore that stayed in my mind's eye. A desire to sustain strangeness as a form of noticing led me to create these works

To me, a ceramic vase is a quintessential participatory container. Made of clay from the earth, filled with life sustaining water, a vase receives offerings of sacrificed living plants, holds decorative arrangements of flowers and foliage. We use vases to transport outside elements of nature to interior spaces, both literally and metaphorically.

The sculptures of actual size sponge skeletons that form the necks of the three vases are a sort of marine floral allusion. However, sea sponges are in fact single celled animals known as *Porifera*, that when alive, can be brightly colored. The hollow, spherical belly forms reference actual boulders formed over millions of years by a process of concretion and also allude to stromatolites, formed from fossilized blue green algae. They balance on the ebb and flow of life cradled on the rock platform: tide buffeted abalones, barnacles, kelp holdfasts and Neptune's Necklace seaweed (*Hormosira banksii*).

My process of working with clay is sculptural. I hand model forms, thinking about textures, anticipating slips and glazes and whether surfaces should be textured or smooth, shiny or matt like the heat of the sun and the splash of waves on rocks. Coiling is like drawing in space and that is how the hollow boulder forms were made.

As each piece was paddled into shape, I reflected on the uses of vases in rituals and rites of passage and understood that these vases that I was making were not intended for cut flowers in fresh water.

Their emptiness resonates with echoes that whisper the sound in a sea shell. My anxiety about Anthropocene pollution and ecological threats to our oceans and all forms of marine life is articulated in this triptych by symbolically honoring sea water as a sacred, life giving substance.