

ARTS IN AMERICA

Ruth Lopez

At 82, a Sculptor Remains True to Form (and to Energy)

CHICAGO, Jan. 2 — While the trend in ceramic sculpture has been toward the use of colorful glazes and busy detail, Ruth Duckworth has remained true to form. "Form is so much more important to me than color," she said recently at her studio, a former pickle factory here. Size is important, too. The petite Ms. Duckworth, 82, is perhaps best known for her large murals of often unglazed porcelain slabs as well as her abstract vessels.

Her accomplishments and influence in the world of clay arts are widely recognized. In 1997 she received a gold medal from the American Craft Council for her lifetime achievement. This year the James Renwick Alliance, a nonprofit organization that helps support the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, awarded Ms. Duckworth its Masters of the Medium Award for her work in ceramics.

Lately she has been working on several big commissions, she said, and has been involved in discussions for a major retrospective.

Ms. Duckworth, born in Germany in 1919, moved to England in 1936. "My father was Jewish, and I would not have been allowed to attend art school" in Germany, she said.

She had chosen her career early, she said; as a sickly child she would sit in bed and draw. At school she was good at art, physical education and biology: the essentials for handling clay the way Ms. Duckworth does. She worked for years before she had studio assistants to mix the clay and load and unload the kilns.

She recalled that when she applied to the Liverpool School of Art, she wanted to study drawing, painting and sculpture, but a school administrator insisted she must choose one medium.

"Michelangelo did all three," she said, recalling her argument. "They thought I was crazy." She left without a certificate. Eventually Ms. Duckworth would define herself as a sculptor, first in wood and stone, later in metal and clay. She also worked for a puppet maker for two years, giving puppet shows at schools.

"At the end I carved him two heads," she said. "They were a little bit on the heavy side."

She also carved roses and ivy leaves for tombstones, she said, and later worked in a munitions factory. "I decided because I was a refugee, I ought to beat Hitler," she said.



Steve Kagan for The New York Times

Ruth Duckworth at work in her Chicago studio. She has been involved in discussions about a retrospective.

She was drawn to the work of Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi and Diego Rivera, as well as primitive work and ancient carvings. She also became acquainted with maverick potters and fellow refugees, Hans Coper, from Germany, and Lucie Rie, from Austria. Like them Ms. Duckworth set out to make ceramic art that was not practical in the least.

In 1964 she accepted a one-year teaching appointment at the University of Chicago that stretched to 13 years. "I could have gone back to England, but working here is more challenging," she said. "You can do larger things."

"In England you can work this high," she said, raising her hand a couple of feet over a table. "That's large. Here you have no limit."

Her first mural commission tested that belief. When she learned that the university was about to commission work from a Canadian muralist, she asked to be considered, noting that she was already on campus.

"Well, I had never made a mural," she said. "Then I got really nervous."

The piece, "Earth, Water and Sky," completed in 1969, covers four walls of a room in the Geophysical Sciences Building, with porcelain clouds suspended from the ceiling.

Before designing the clouds, she studied slides lent her by a meteorologist. "These were shapes and forms that influenced me," she said. "You would not think that it is a suitable subject for ceramics, but to me it is."

It would be seven years before Ms. Duckworth would have another commission. She has since completed 24, including a 15-foot bronze for Lewis and Clark College in Illinois.

Although she hopes to see an exhibition of her life's work, "it will have to be called a retrospective of the last 40 years," she said. "I have nothing physically to show of the early years. Ceramics are hard to move, expensive to pack and ship."

Looking over photographs of her early pieces, she talked about them as if they were old friends. One photograph showed a row of cylindrical forms not typical of her work. "It was a design exercise I gave myself," she said.

Ms. Duckworth walks with a slight limp, the result of a broken femur during a trip two years ago to the Antarctic, where she went to see the color of the ice. She also suffers from arthritis in her knees from years of kneeling on the concrete floors of her early studios. "I always tell students, don't do that," she said.

The wall of her studio's glaze room bears recipes written in pencil. "You experiment with glazes the rest of your life," she said.

Countless tubs and bags hold raw materials: kaolin, flint, feldspar, whiting. "It's ridiculous what you need," she said.

When it comes to materials she has no particular favorites, but "there is something very seductive about porcelain," she said. "There is a different seduction with stoneware. It can be massive. It can be big. It has a totally different character."

"I like change," she said. "If I did all porcelain, like some people say I should, then I would get bored. The whole point of what I do is to do what is interesting. That's why I am still working."