

Raymon Elozua: How to Make a Teapot

Raymon Elozua came to the broad range of his work as an artist fired by a curiosity concerning process and driven by the avidity and range of his remarkable intelligence. Absorbed in the history of post-industrial America on the downhill side of the twentieth century, he discovered and reclaimed a part of that history by expressing it in clay. And while he says that at the beginning he had no commitment to being a potter – which he is not, really, anyway – he built a landscape and made it out of clay. From a vernacular landscape of railroads and water tanks, steel mills and billboards, he has invested his own built landscape with the beauty he finds in the process of its decay. It is a claim to his attention that seems to him a reasonable focus for an aesthetic that remains at the heart of his work today.¹

Elozua's interests have included model railroading – a vital sect of the hobbyist and home crafts communities with their shared links to popular culture – as well as photography, the Pop Art phenomenon, and one of its mutant offspring, Photorealism. He values the history of modern warfare, the dignity of labor, and the decline of the foundations of blue collar America. Carrying these interests forward, he has gravitated to things made in series, objects of a kind, and to that end produced bowls containing vestigial landscapes, then water tanks, domes, and billboards, and later, drive-in theaters, fractured teapots and reconstructed bottles. With what now seems a logical consequence of the direction of his work, he began to serially deconstruct the vessel and the human form. In more recent years, articulate in the expression of computer programs and at play in the fields of contemporary art, he began to separate “found” abstract paintings into their constituent planes of form and color, combining that

¹ This essay is based on a series of interviews with Raymon Elozua conducted on Elizabeth Street in New York City May 7, 13 and 20 2002.

² The cliff dwelling microcosms of Charles Simonds dating from this same period similarly suggest an

information and altering its re-assembly from two-dimensional objects to sculpture in the round.

Raymon Elozua was born in Germany in 1947. He was the only son of Giselle Baubonne, a French war bride from an agricultural town near the German border, and Raymond Keesler, a Cuban-American G.I. of Spanish extraction christened Raimundo y Elozua de Castillo, but surnamed for his sponsor at the time of his immigration to the United States. Elozua's father worked as an administrator for U.S. Steel and then in real estate, and the family settled in South Chicago, walking distance from U.S. Steel, Wisconsin Steel, Inland Steel. His mother, a seamstress and dressmaker, had a fine eye and a sense of design and proportion, qualities that would surface in Elozua's own work. He began to learn the language of dissent from his father, who, aware of the corruption and inequities of Fulgencio Batista's U.S.-friendly regime, took the part of Castro when revolution came.

If there was no art instruction to be had in the Catholic boy's school he attended, his mother took the boy and his younger sister to the Art Institute of Chicago. She told them what she knew of the artists of France and the glories of their accomplishments before the war. If he was not encouraged for his drawing, and remembers a childhood with no crayons or paints of any kind, his father did give him an HO-gauge model train set, on which Elozua constructed a scratch-built tabletop layout of plaster hills and mountains and structures made of balsa wood. While he read *Model Railroader* and *Railroad Model Craftsman* magazines, the rolling stock of his imaginary Conifer and Western company flourished in the basement, an illusory world on a four by eight-foot table. He developed a signature color scheme for the cars, the transit bills and bills of lading, and constructed a town with its own narrative. Absorbed with the perspective of a Lilliputian world, the hobbyist obsession lasted four or five years, and when he came to work at Inland Steel the summer after his first year in college he was astonished by the scale and the power of what he saw. From a buddy's father, a communist and labor organizer, he learned about the American labor movement on the eve of its virtual collapse.

Elozua read Army manuals and his parents' books on World War II. Proud to be an American, he set out to further acculturate himself through the markers of the time: rock and roll and hot rod cars, slicked back hair, pegged pants. In 1965 he enrolled in the University of Chicago, and the following year registered for an introductory course in art, a studio survey offering two weeks in printmaking, two in ceramics, and two in sculpture. There was a sense of esprit de corps, the classes were intimate, and he liked working with his hands. There were dedicated graduate students, and among good teachers were the highly regarded Italian sculptor Virginio Ferrari, in residence at the time, and the noted master ceramist Ruth Duckworth who had fled Germany during Hitler's rise to study art. He saw and admired the work of Henry Moore and Giacometti, and worked briefly as a gallery attendant. As he became involved with the fabrication of theater sets he met designer Virgil Burnett and the architect Louis Natenshon.

But he liked working with clay, a natural material, for its simplicity and directness. In Duckworth's studio he tried coil building: making vessels with piled ropes of rolled clay. Attempting abstract sculpture, he used automotive transmission covers as molds, put two molds together to make a shell, and glazed them. Not much interested in the life of the mind, in 1968 he left for California, joining the migration of a generation of enthusiastic, disaffected young people in motion. He landed in radicalized Berkeley where he worked in a dune buggy shop and hung out nights at the University's open studio for ceramics known as the Pot Shop, where he attempted to learn how to throw clay on a potter's wheel. But he was unfocused and unsettled as the machinery of the military draft threatened to compromise his future, and because he had a low number in the draft lottery he was called to service. Opposed to the war in Vietnam, he showed up for his physical in Chicago, and a few hours later, walked free.

In the six months that followed, he built large-scale P.A. systems for rock bands, and in the summer of 1969, he and a girlfriend moved to New York where they settled in a long and narrow storefront in Little Italy blocks from where he lives today. He took on

odd jobs and some contracting, and during a carpenters' union strike at the Juilliard School uptown, he wound up as a prop man for dance and theater productions. The temporarily understaffed department needed someone who could build a functional Bugatti on the chassis of a Volkswagen for an opera prop. It was an opportunity of sorts, and he took it, working nights in the hope that no one would discover he was acquiring the skills he needed on the job. He figured out the Bugatti's curves, building the structures, kerfing the wood and bending the plywood, sanding and painting, finally mounting the shell on the chassis. It took him three months. By the time the union workers came back, he had learned a lot, and he stayed on the job for the next three years, but the demands of the work were less than fulfilling.

The American Landscape

In 1972 Elozua visited the annual wholesale and retail show of the American Craft Council at the Dutchess County Fairground near Rhinebeck, up the Hudson River from Manhattan. It was an eye-opener. There were upwards of 400 booths, their proprietors the embodiment of the craft ethos of the time, advocates of the return to a simpler life, free expression and self-sufficiency. In the fall of 1973 his father died and he broke up with his girlfriend. Relieved of the pressure to earn a living sufficient for them both, he thought about Rhinebeck, and recalled Ruth Duckworth's success with sidewalk shows in Chicago where the money seemed to flow.

He bought an electric kiln and some porcelain clay, and then he bought a wheel, the principal technical tool in pottery, and thought, erroneously, that he could master it. One day he threw the interior of a form, depositing a large chunk of clay on the outside, and then flipped the mass upside down, tooling away the excess clay to make a perfect form, which would not stand. He drilled two holes near the bowl's edge, drove two posts of rolled clay through the bowl near its edge, and fired up the kiln. The fired bowl stood, balanced on its foot and the stilts of clay that were an element of its design. A reductive universe, *Bowl with Posts* (1973) is effective as reductive

sculpture. The posts resemble pylons on the shore of a pond with no dock, and give impart a sense of landscape to the interior of the bowl.

Because they were difficult to throw, and consequently expensive, large platters and bowls were not the stock and trade of the Rhinebeck fair. He bought some press molds of bowls and platters and pressed slabs of clay into the molds in lieu of throwing, providing him with a means of creating wanted objects without depending on mastery of the wheel. Following Duckworth's example, he fired his porcelain and stoneware in oxidation, drawing colors out of the clay, and wound up with a soft palette of pastels and turquoise that gathered in pleasing pools. The finish was like sand on a beach, which became his style and market niche, and nearly every major bowl had its own glaze. He made a bowl with wings and others with posts and piers and bollards and telephone poles and tiny billboards in a series. Ladders appeared, resting on the rims of bowls, and there was one bowl with a diminutive car of clay, *Bowl with Abandoned Car* (1975). In a whimsical meditation on massiveness and scale, he fired a bowl with a post and lintel Stonehenge. His work was large and relatively cheap, and it was interesting. He began showing his bowls at Rhinebeck in 1974, and he did very well.

His rent for a new storefront on Elizabeth Street ran \$125 a month, which allowed him to invest in tools. He bought a Grumman-made Thomas' bread truck to cart his work to Rhinebeck, where, following fair protocol, he sold wholesale to shopkeepers and then retail to the public. He stamped his work with the improvised potters' mark of a catfish, with a rubber stamp for the date and his name, and later replaced the fish with the familiar profile of the Native American from the hood ornament of the Pontiac automobile. He sold every bowl he made as well as a number of sculptures including some abstracted heads, and little domes of clay. With no shipping, there was little breakage. His success in sales provided him with the time to experiment in other areas.

He asked questions and learned. He knew about process and how an interest in process could carry an investigation from one form to the next. Although Elozua dissembles when he says he knew next to nothing about the physics of ceramics, his work was a reflection of his emotional state at the time. If at first he failed to consider the interiors of his press mold bowls as landscape passages, they were, or soon became so, integral to a kind of figurative program. As telephone poles and miniature billboards came to give voice to the contained landscape, by 1975 he made further use of that narrative quality. He built a gas kiln in his basement that could fire a 24-inch square slab of clay, and elaborated tabletop landscapes using the kiln's dimensions as a module. From his experience with model railroads, the composed sense of layout, the occupied landscape reappeared.

He kept a bucket of water in his studio, and when a press-molded bowl broke in the course of its making, he placed it in the bucket. As the bowls settled in the water leather-hard and upside down, they began to resemble a dome. He controlled the process of their collapse. Working wet on wet, he introduced the inverted, decaying bowls onto slabs of clay framed with a metal tray, filled the tray with water and let the domes continue to decay. When they reached a satisfactory point of moist collapse, he lifted one side of the metal tray and dumped the water from the slabs, moving quickly with a hair dryer to arrest the process and prevent the domes from collapsing entirely. In the end he elaborated realist landscapes on top of the slabs and around the domes. Central in the experience of his landscapes, the dome suggested structures as diverse as models for science fiction movies, geodesic domes, the preColumbian mounds of the Adena and cliff dwellings of the Anasazi, something almost pure and Edenic, a memory of paradise lost, reconstructed.² Elozua built fifty or more decayed domes in a variety of configurations, and for him, each maintained a sense of optimism and of loss.

² The cliff dwelling microcosms of Charles Simonds dating from this same period similarly suggest an engagement with the historicized landscape.

A dome introduced into the landscape like some fallen meteorite conveys an awesome sense of decay and loss in *Landscape: Melancholy of History* (1976). A mountainous rim of clay like a palisade rises up beyond tiny figures gazing towards the broken dome as though towards some alien airship plunged to rest. In his words, “the ceramic landscapes are initial, exploratory steps in the representation of the relationships of nature and man.” They focus on the ability to deal responsibly with the environment through the juxtaposition of elements symbolic of nature (the dome) and of man (abandoned structures). The landscapes convey a sense of the passage of time, he reasoned. Their existence is linked directly to the ability of clay as craft and as artistic medium to explore – and perhaps bridge – the gap between craft and art.

There is a philosophical point concerning history and change that informs Elozua’s fascination with the process of decay that distinguishes *American Landscape #3* (1975) and *Dome Landscape* (1974). He considers that the great empires of Europe have been destroyed, and that if the American empire is still ascendant, as a country we understand little of aging empires. The story of the loss of empire writ small, his landscapes are not about the new. They are landscapes broken but not quite abandoned, and they focus on a period in time that is other than contemporary, that invites nostalgia, inflected with ruined sheds and HO tracks of clay and scenarios with the tiny figures that sometimes people them.

In the course of elaborating these landscapes, he met Allan Chasanoff, a polymath with interests in real estate and photography who had attended film school and pursued a legion of intellectual and artistic endeavors. Chasanoff took an interest in Elozua’s dome landscapes, and in 1974 or 1975, bought several. He introduced Elozua to photography, and they began to drive around New Jersey, taking pictures of the signs, forms and colors of the vernacular landscape. In the studio, they photographed the domes, railroad beds, shacks and telegraph poles of the *American Landscape* and *Dome Landscape* series with macro lenses and special lighting, with the strategic inclusion of model railroader objects in the field of view. Elozua recalls how deeply affected he had been by an exhibition of the photographers associated with the

Works Progress and Farm Securities Administrations. That history had come to life, reality in all its splendor and squalor, not unlike his own experience of the American landscape rooted in Chicago, where there were rail yards and water tanks, space and distant, open views, factories and billboards. And while he did photograph urban areas like the Bowery, he found more satisfaction in New Jersey, which reminded him of Chicago with its built-in sense of space and scale.

Elozua bought a 50 mm lens and shot in color, free to explore vivid color beyond the muted palette of his work in clay, inspired by an exhibition of the color photography of William Eggleston at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Like Eggleston's *Plains, Georgia* (1976), his photographs located the extraordinary in the banal: they were as close as Elozua thought he would ever come to painting. Among his photographs from this period, there are bright, formally composed and picaresque slides such as *Jersey City, NJ* (1977) for example, that he categorizes as art photography. There are also carefully framed photographs of weathered structures, among them *New York, NY* (1978), a transfer slip of weathered wood on the Hudson River on the West Side of Manhattan, as well as water tanks and piers. As study photographs, they spoke to him of the passage of time and decay. They also led to the next stage of his work in clay.

While he did well at the fair, he soon reached a turning point. He had been supplementing his income by selling directly to shopkeeper clients at other times of the year, and taking odd jobs as needed to cover his expenses. In 1977, he produced a series of water tower cups, the form of coffee cups mounted on the top of realistically constructed water towers with timbers made of clay, one of which appeared in the 1977 National Cup Invitational at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He thought they were kitsch, perhaps the hardest, the most pejorative judgment to deal with critically in the medium. At his last fair in Rhinebeck, he showed model railroad landscapes, reintroducing the juxtaposition of the ground of the landscape and the structure of the terrain. He thought they were a breakthrough, that there was nothing like them anywhere, but there was no response. None sold, and they were later destroyed.

Water Tanks and Billboard: Serial Imagery

Elozua's work at the time, as today, offers evidence of an obsession with the defining, modernist preoccupation of serial imagery, a system of production popularly associated with the soup cans of Andy Warhol and the black and white photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, such as the Bechers' Cooling Towers (1963-1993).³ Informed by his expeditions in the New York region and referring to his slides, in 1978 Elozua first constructed work in series, producing small scale, realistic stoneware billboards and water tanks that appeared in his first exhibition, *Souvenir*, at Ivan Karp's O.K. Harris gallery in SoHo the following year.⁴ The billboards and water tanks existed in a continuum that could be added to at will: each was similar to the others, and each was of equal importance, one of a kind and part of the whole.⁵ Like the structures that attracted the Bechers in their work, Elozua's water tanks have distinct identities, and conceived in color, are linked by warm, rich, earthen hues. The O.K. Harris exhibition also included a radical structure based on his photographs of West Side ruins, *Transfer Slip* (1978), a sweeping shell of girders and timbers replicated in stoneware, two feet wide and four long by eighteen inches high. While the mise en scene is not based on a specific model, it does follow and refer to Elozua's original photograph. Like an Erector Set's aluminum framing system, the elaborate construction bristled with possible extensions and redundant elements that only

³Bernd Becher first essayed these photographic records as studies for drawing and painting. See Ulf Erdmann Ziegler in "The Bechers' Industrial Lexicon," *Art in America* June 2002: 97.

⁴ The gallery, still in existence, was founded by Karp, a former associate of the don of New York dealers, Leo Castelli. It was oriented to the exhibition of kind of Americana that included the artists of the Photorealist movement. In that context, Elozua became identified with the group. Examples of the water tanks were acquired from the gallery the following year by arts patron and collector Vera List, by Karp and by Karp's father, among others.

⁵ For the formative discussion of modern and contemporary art conceived in series, see John Coplans, *Serial Imagery*. Pasadena Art Museum and The New York Graphic Society. 1968. Coplans writes (p. 18): "There are sufficient indications in the emergence of Serial Imagery over the past decade in the United States that the rhythms attendant upon the Serial style ritually celebrate, if only obliquely or subliminally, overtones of American life."

heightened the appearance of its fidelity to nature. He turned to model railroad magazines in search of further inspiration, but not for models.

The piece that launched the billboard series, *Billboard: ArtForum* (1978), was made in response to curatorial invitation for the exhibition *Message is the Medium, Art Forum and Artists*, at P.S. 1, the contemporary art center in Long Island City. Elozua's billboard was put to service promoting the sale of advertising pages in the journal, *Art Forum*. Its clay facade replicated the magazine's familiar plain-wrap brown paper mailing cover in use at the time, with Elozua's mailing label added for verisimilitude. Its message read simply: "This Space Available," followed by a phone number and then a line of graffiti: "Your art here." Conceived frontally but existing in the round, the billboards in the several series that followed the piece at first had no advertising on their ghostly fields, which appealed to Elozua's sense of finish, of patina. Their blank faces were composed of a patchwork of individual clay tiles fired and painted in oil with the sort of *arte povera* palette he associated with the tactile surfaces of the sculpture of Jackie Windsor, and with ceramic art's millenia-long history of tessellation.

Responding to Karp's suggestion that he make objects that could hang on the wall of a New York apartment, Elozua returned to his research, and found several books on railroads with images of the defunct river piers built in Jersey City and Manhattan. While studying detailed renderings of their cross sections, he remembered Claes Oldenburg's unconventional, hybrid print of the 1937 Chrysler Airflow, *Profile Airflow* (1968), a polyurethane relief mounted over a lithograph. The suspension of a relief over the blueprint seemed important, the representation of a three-dimensional object floating above the print. Subsequently, blueprints of a New Jersey warehouse served the development of his *Freight Warehouse, Jersey City, NJ: Blueprint* (1980), conceived in an edition of three. He enlarged the warehouse blueprints, and modeling the lumber according to their scale, raised his stoneware timbers above the blueprint surfaces, then inscribed a written history of the warehouse on the print itself. For his attempt to follow the advice of his dealer, one sold. But he'd completed a cycle of representation, from the origin to the architect's vision, how it would look as built, to the reality of

today, broken down, abandoned. In any case, if the blueprint was a way of transforming the work from the pedestal to the wall, it was also a way of learning how to paint. The evolution of this work was away from the realistic, and more towards painting.

He returned to the representation of barren landscapes and to the dome, and addressed billboards in a new way. Employing an inventory of typefaces drawn from popular signage, in 1981 he produced billboards with messages or codes, reminiscent of the paintings of Edward Ruscha. One read DINER and another, POP. Their surfaces included photographic collages of work in the studio, featuring objects available for sale. In an ultimate billboard series, also dating 1981, he demonstrated increasing savvy about the process and effects of painting. As the iconography of the billboards became more readable and more figurative, he essayed a bowling pin and ball with the text, Free TV, and in others, a coffee cup, a martini glass, games of chance and the lure of Vegas.

The success of the work enabled him to finance the making of larger pieces, new dome structures and figurative landscapes, some of which he showed in the exhibition *Fictif* at O.K. Harris in 1981. They incorporated ceramic timber scaffolding and often as not, the dome: the dome elevated, the dome surrounded, the dome suspended, and the dome pierced. Intending to close out his association with the Photorealist movement, he considered a next move to truly demanding works of relatively large dimensions. It took him a year to complete the two huge model railroad pieces based on actual structures that followed. As built, # 17 Western Sawmill and #18 Amusement Park (both 1982) measure four feet by eight by more than three feet high.⁶ With some affection, Elozua refers to the time and labor invested in their production as his blue-collar factory period.

⁶ The sawmill was donated to World Forestry Center Museum, Portland, Oregon, and the amusement park was sold to collector Martin Margulies, Coconut Grove, Florida.

He acquired astonishingly thorough blueprints of a famous California sawmill, the Pino Grande, from a devoted model railroader who had measured the site in the 1950s and assembled a book of photographs documenting the sawmill's physical plant. In order to mitigate the labor intensive nature of the project, he bought a task-built power extruder that allowed him to push clay through dies at the end of a barrel and in effect shape and mass produce his lumber. He constructed the principal buildings, a boathouse, sheds, the pond where logs were dumped and warehoused, and a hoist to snake the logs up and into the mill. He painted the sawmill a faded blood red and added blue to suggest the water of the pond, incorporating his signature domes as mysterious elements of the challenging scene.

The amusement park is based on Rockaways' Playland in Queens, New York, and on Riverview in Chicago. Allan Chasanoff introduced him to Rockaways' owner, who provided access to blueprints that helped him in the construction of the roller coaster, the Comet. He added the parachute jump from Riverside Park, a Ferris wheel and funhouse and surrounded the park with dilapidated corrugated fencing, all painted with exacting care. In a gesture intended as a farewell to model railroading, he then produced a remarkable series based on an elaborate blueprint for an old-fashioned caboose painstakingly finished in watercolor, oil, alklyd, or colored pencil. The accompanying series of ceramic cabooses were not only portraits of the car at the end of the train, but a gesture of impending farewell to the quiet tyranny of the railroader aesthetic.

Collaborations

With every confidence in his ability to build structures, Elozua moved on to a series of drive-in theaters built in collaboration with his companion, the artist Micheline Gingras. In the process of moving away from high fire ceramics and glazes, he had produced a surface that welcomed paint. He researched, designed and built the elaborate structures, and Gingras painted the screens with black and white cinematic close-ups.

The scaffolding supporting the drive-in screens was assembled from strips of extruded clay, and using actual nails rather than clay slip to join two elements, he was able to produce stronger works of greater dimensions. At the same time, his interests turned increasingly toward three-dimensional imagery and an iconography expressed in large reliefs based on military history and the decline of the steel mill as the quintessentially American industry, a tribute to his father and to his American dream.

Elozua initiated a new series in relief format, laminated to wood, with patriotic images, the eagle, the G.I, the Statue of Liberty. He envisioned a show that would incorporate what America was fighting for, in vignettes. It would embrace the family, the worker returning from war, and the virtual annihilation of the steel industry as a meaningful factor in the history and economic growth of the country. The vertiginous viewpoint of *Tarawa* (1984) offers an aerial perspective of a bombing run over the Marine Corps' battle for the mid-Pacific atoll Tarawa, in 1943. He incorporated a B-17 bomber flying above the ruined landscape with a portrait of the pilot to the right. The work's overall field, at five by nine feet, is composed of a grid of relatively small terra cotta tiles, reminiscent of the tile fields of the earlier billboards. But the work collapsed the boundaries of the Photorealist movement and his gallery's aesthetic of commercially viable Americana, and Karp cancelled the exhibition. In the months to come, Elozua traveled the country with his cameras, documenting the decline of the steel industry as a force in the country's economic and cultural landscape.

In his studio, he returned full circle to the vessel in an increasingly painterly way. In 1985, Chasanoff decided to try his hand in clay, beginning with a concept of deformation expressed in the collapsed structure of the teapot, and proposed to collaborate with Elozua on a project that was not about exhibition or sales. As Elozua puts it, he was into decay, and Chasanoff was into breaking things. They hired a potter to slip cast some commercial teapots and deliver them to Elozua's studio, where they worked several hours a week on the destruction and resurrection of the teapots. Elozua fired some of the wet vessels, broke them, and then took the fractured elements and pinned them to the intact wet teapots. For *R.E.A.C.: #2* (1985), for

example, they added a cup, and in other examples a cup and creamer, forcing those elements into the wet pot which Elozua then glazed and fired, juxtaposing areas of vibrant color along the newly joined edges.

There was something cubistic, even futuristic about the work that appealed to Elozua. At the end of fourteen weeks of collaboration, he continued working the series on his own. When they collaborated again a year later, they joined fired pieces of extruded clay with hot glue and assembled an abstraction, conceived volumetrically as a kind of drawing made in space that resolved from any angle into the form of a head. *Head with Still Life* (1986) juxtaposes the disparate images of a head and a pot of flowers, the petals made from shards of a broken pot and pitcher. The last work of the series, *Bridge + Tunnel Head* (1986), referred to Chasanoff's commute to and from a development project in Long Island that occupied his working days.

The finished work recalls the contemporaneous sculptures of Nancy Graves which represented a breakthrough in terms of process, with individual elements cast in bronze that were welded together into a single, brightly hued composition.⁷ [repro? Graves' *Dallaleve* (1984) Collection Albright Knox Art Museum, Buffalo, New York or LACMA courtyard piece] In their approach, Elozua and Chasanoff turned to the lost wax process to create a mold of an entire work, then cast the entire piece in bronze as a single unit. It was a difficult and laborious task, with inherent problems that arose in warm weather when the wax began to lose its original shape and mutate into other forms, but what they achieved in the first pours was made to last. In the months to come, Elozua explored the pot and the glaze from new perspectives, and accomplished what he considers another breakthrough with the production of two pieces, *Reconstructed Bottle #4* and *Reconstructed Teapot #3* (both 1986). With a skeletal structure of angle iron as the armature of the pot, he reassembled broken shards around the core. By his next series he deformed pieces of slip-cast wet clay and glazed and fired the results. The studio-generated shards of teapots and cups, a

⁷ Elozua similarly admires the work of the sculptors Deborah Butterfield and Judy Pfaff.

pitcher, a tankard, with their bright, seductive palette, became elements of increasingly abstract compositions.⁸

On the road, carried forward by his American dream, Elozua photographed the decay and collapse of the steel mill as a way of life in the rust belt cities, among them Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Gary, Johnstown, Homestead, Youngstown, Sharon, Cleveland, and Chicago. In color and then in black and white, sometimes more or less simultaneously, he photographed scenes of industrial devastation, wastelands of materials once vital to the mills' operations that had become corroded, bent and twisted scrap. The images served as the basis for a series of the reliefs that followed, formally composed, gritty, real, expressed in gouache on rusted steel, terra cotta, rock, concrete, and other detritus.

With the introduction of photographic portraits of mill workers, he began to think of the series as an educational project rather than a solely aesthetic one. The social activist resources of Hull House in Chicago provided him with the words of unemployed steelworkers, which he added to the portraits. With frames of welded steel, the photographs, statistics and texts were shown along with industrial reliefs and abstracted portraits of complex, fractured planes assembled from casts of diamond plate, wrenches, gears, and nuts and bolts. To these he added logo panels representing the mills, creating a wholly believable palette that seemed worn with the passage of time. The exhibition *Home Scrap, Post-Industrial Landscapes, Paintings, Photographs and Sculptures 1985-1987* appeared in January 1988 at the 57th Street gallery of Carlo Lamagna, former director of O.K.Harris. In her catalogue essay, "Shutdown," critic Lucy Lippard discussed the reception of socially responsive art and the artists involved in its production, potential audiences and the unwillingness of the gallery system to support such projects. The exhibition vindicated his sense of mission, combining his regard for history and his love for making art, and the show traveled.

⁸ They were shown by Garth Clark Gallery, and they sold. Date tk

For the next year or so he produced paintings in plaster, some of them abstractions based on industrial landscapes. Others, including *Lord, why not everyone?* (1989) recall the movie screens of the drive-in series incorporating collage and faces, a Gingras collaboration with texts that included admonitory quotes from American presidents and lyrics from gospel songs, laid directly letter by letter into the plaster. In another collaborative expression developed during a residency at the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Maine, they essayed a series of figurative sculptures using the traditional support of wire and steel as armature but substituting terra cotta for plaster and paint for glaze. They based the series on the theme of demons and sirens, the male and the female figures as threat or danger, imparting works such as *The Origin of the Vessel* and *The Zealot* (both 1989) with a directness and simplicity that suggest the authenticity of much folk art. The solidity of welded rebar and the flexibility of finer wire allowed him to sketch muscular and skeletal shapes in space. Adding clay to the object as it grew was in itself liberating. By pushing these materials in ways they seemed to want to go, it would be possible to join clay to steel on a scale greater than he'd previously thought possible.

In a handsome and very different series that followed, he again pushed the envelope of what can be achieved in clay in works that refer to the muscular steel sculpture of Mark di Suvero as well as to the language of the deconstructed teapot. Di Suvero's often figurative abstractions of massive I-beams and other industrial materials often take shape as weight-distributing tripods joined at the intersection of the principal members. [reproduce Di Suvero, *Flower Power* (1967)?] Elozua extruded I-beam segments in clay and joined them together in a play on di Suvero's industrial materials and their gathering, with a tension implying motion expressed in steel wire, strung like guy wires or gut on an archer's bow. He composed these elements of extruded clay, holding them together with nails and the steel wire by way of hardware and riggings, and shaped them into gracefully composed sculptures of real mass and scale. These works, among them *RTP Teapot* (1990), maintain the abstracted form of a brightly glazed teapot while alluding to the industrial sources of the sculpture by painting the I-beams and other elements to resemble rusted steel. At the farthest reach of each

extremity Elozua added an element of a broken teapot – a handle, a spout – manipulating his materials and ideas in fresh and interesting ways.

An early advocate of computers, Chasanoff introduced Elozua to the PC as a tool for research. Following an investigative road trip with Gingras, Elozua produced a series of computer-manipulated prints concerning the dangers of toxic waste that seems an intellectual and pictorial extension of their collaborative Heads. The digital collage, *Factory AD2* (1992) includes location photographs, text in a variety of typestyles, statistics from the Environmental Protection Agency's list of toxic pollution emissions list, color photo of residents at the targeted location, and appropriated advertisements.

Dealing more with expressed volume than with implied mass, in 1991 he essayed a series of complex wire frame vessels, abstracted bottles and pitchers that are delicate in form. Among these works, *Party over: Pitcher with empty goblet/ WF-3* (1993), offers the outline of a Hellenistic pitcher containing an overturned goblet expressed in steel wire and rod, terra cotta and whiteware. When Chasanoff directed his interest in setup photographic subjects to the serial paintings of Giorgio Morandi, they hired a model maker to take the bottle shapes of a Morandi painting and translate them into three-dimensional vessels that could be easily replicated by casting from molds. Regarding the same object in different ways, Chasanoff photographed the bottles and Elozua experimented with their shapes and composition in still life forms, breaking them up and adding to them. He projected color slides onto the surfaces of several, and approximated the effect of the projected color with paint.

Although the Morandi pieces were never shown, through the process of their making Elozua achieved a kind of liberation from what he refers to as the tyranny of the solid form. Recalling the Erector sets that gave him pleasure as a child, he made a series of teapots and vases out of wet clay sticks, nailed together and then glazed and fired. Complex with a kind of redundant internal mass made visible by the total conflation of interior and exterior, *Erector Teapot #2* (1995) and others in the series recall the TRP teapots and the wire vessels that preceded them, viewed from the ingenuous eye of a

cargo cultist. They offer provisional form without concern for the aesthetic or function of their original referent, the teapot.

Elozua and Gingras then developed a series of massive, grotesque heads fitted with gas masks, an image that first surfaced in the series of demons and sirens. The clay played a minor role in the assembly of materials which included electrical conduit, barbed wire, broken mirror, scrap metal, circuit board and other media equipment. Elozua has observed that the three sculptures in the series *A Head in the Game* (1996) – *Speak the Truth, Say the Truth, and See the Truth* – physically daunting at nearly four feet high, are an attempt to explore the darker side of technology on individuals caught up in its grip. Each contains an internal dreamscape of smaller, white-glazed figures attempting to break out, to escape, and were intended to include a collage of recorded sound, traditional songs such as *Amazing Grace* altered by computer programming to include plaintive and emotional loops and repetitions developed from their familiar source.⁹

Absorbed in another project, Chasanoff hired a 3-D animator to realize a project that would allow the viewer to enter and move through a Jackson Pollock painting after it had been divided into its constituent planes of color. With an understanding of the process from his own investigations, it occurred to Elozua that it would be possible to scan and separate color forms from a selected painting, and then mix the separations with those similarly extracted from other paintings, even paintings by other artists. The result might incorporate a distinct passage from Pollock, for example, and others from the work of Motherwell, Krassner, Gorky, Hofmann, Still, and so on, in some empirically and aesthetically resolved manner. Using Photoshop, he selected areas by form and color from these paintings, then cut and pasted them to create an entirely different composition, the elements of which could be manipulated and then digitally printed.

⁹ *Head*, from *A Head in the Game: Hear, See and Speak the Truth* (1997) figured prominently in the traveling exhibition *Confrontational Clay, The Artist as Social Critic*, organized by Judith S. Schwartz for Exhibits USA.

Elozua identifies the resulting digital prints by the first letters of the last names of the artists sampled for his compositions. For example, the coded title S/DP: DeSt/ Gor3/ Hof3/ Gus2>2: Im (1997) indicates that the print contains elements of specific areas of paintings by Willem de Kooning, Clifford Still, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann and Philip Guston. He scanned and digitized nearly 100 different paintings by various Abstract Expressionists, and from these, he and Gingras produced a series of small-scale paintings, two feet to a side, based on the digital prints. To whatever extent the paintings seem to photorealistically duplicate the digital prints that are at their source, replication was not part of their intention. They realized that the formal information of their collaborative Still/Tob/ Kra2/New3 /Klin8>2:Pt (1998), for example, with its source in abstract gesture and color, could clearly read as figurative, through forms that were themselves sculptural. The large yard-long sculpture that proceeds from it, Still/Tob/Kra2/ New3/ Klin8>2 (1998), bristles with wit and charm. Terra cotta and glaze on wire become the caricature of a goat, with yellow head and horns, the torso and four legs in black, as the figure intersects planes or bars of red that suggest the zips of the Barnett Newman painting included at the source.

As an artist in residence at Louisiana State University in 1999, Elozua produced twelve or so small sculptures based on digital prints he'd made the previous winter. The prints were frontal, layered abstract forms built in flat planes, and the sculpture based on the drawings was also frontal, neither conceived nor executed in the round. He was trying to create volume from a flat image and he was failing. In an attempt to effect a translation from his PC-generated two-dimensional work into three dimensions, which he believed his sculpture could be, he learned 3-D Studio Max, tutored by a young wizard associated with the school who understood his interests and direction. By translating abstract compositions into the three-dimensional capabilities of the program, Elozua could create the appearance of shape and volume, view it from all sides and angles, and print out the resulting images. He felt he was in space.

Elozua used the formal information of signs and the history of art itself in new and different ways, and in the process formed a language old as hieroglyphs. He

transcends the language of his references, the abstract painters, no longer keeping track of their presence in the process. Instead he gives his attention to the assembly of color as abstracted forms, stacked or intertwined as information to be read.

Assembled in linear fashion, each color seems to speak, and letter follows letter to form a word that can be viewed, finally, in the round. Their titles reflect the process. The logical choreography of the digital prints suggests dancers as they drift apart and then inward, finally condensing as though turned by some complex clockwork on Elozua's invisible axis. They attain the formal, gestural grace of expressive painting, where the figure returns to the abstraction as a word expressed in space, or setting sail at the vanguard of armadas made of clay and steel.

He'll go back to the computer again, he says, with a new set of ideas and new things to build. The clay is not important anymore. He loves the texture, but the weight and the issues of firing it are always problematic. This time it could be resin, or lingerie scraped across a wire frame and painted, some kind of direct sculpture, where he finds himself stretching material across a welded frame, or papier-mâché. The ideas are everywhere.

Edward Leffingwell

[Raymon Elozua is represented by Ferrin Contemporary.](#)