

# BILL ABRIGHT

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MINING MEANING



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M I N I N G   M E A N I N G



By Nancy M. Servis



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Cover Image:

**Sailor**, 2011. Ceramic, under-glazes and acrylic paint, 12 x 18 x 8 in. Photo: Bill Abright.

Title page image:

**Bird Watcher**, 2009. Ceramic, 32 x 26 x 9 in. Photo: Bill Abright.



Self-portrait of the artist in his Marin studio, 2013



Teapot—thrown and altered, 1991 | Stoneware, 6 x 6 x 10 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey

# INTRODUCTION

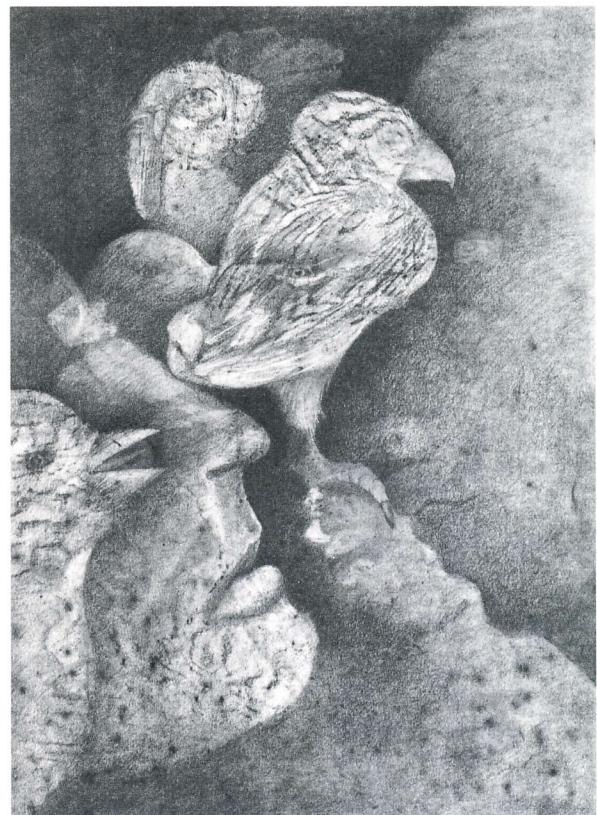
Bay Area artist Bill Abright explores the complexities of the human condition through both clay figures (the most recent result of this inquiry) and large-format surrealistic graphite and charcoal drawing. This artist began making graphite rubbings from his wood-grained studio floor as open-ended creative inquiry. The resulting amorphous shapes with their curious edging served as a point of departure for detailed free association drawings, tapping subconscious thoughts that unveiled intense, mysterious and delicately rendered dramas.

Artists seeking creative recalibration undertake this kind of alternation so as to approach each medium anew. Abright focused on one art material at a time, enabling him to build a rich body of work in each realm. His iconography includes masks, figures, and animal forms that address the shifting interplay between surface and interior realities, both psychologically and structurally. The totality of Abright's work mines the challenges of the human condition, rendering works that embody psychological vulnerability coupled with artistic resolve.

A native of Central California, Bill Abright has been working in the Bay Area arts community for nearly forty years as both practicing artist and teacher at College of Marin in Kentfield. While an undergraduate at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton during the late 1960s, his teacher, Bruce Duke introduced him to ceramics, which Abright considered secondary to his primary interest in painting, particularly inspired by the Armenian-America surrealist, Arshile Gorky. Abright later received his graduate degree in 1974 from San Francisco State University, where he studied with Stephen De Staebler, Joe Hawley, David Kuroaka, and Bud McKee.

Working in ceramics, he explored figuration, developing an abstracted figurative style, coupled with periodic and extended development of the vessel, especially raku.<sup>1</sup> Abright's ability as a figurative artist was strengthened by his production of assured vessels having forms that tended toward the biomorphic.<sup>2</sup> This duality is seen in his most recent sculptures, in which several characteristics typifying Abright's work coalesce. Structural layering, use of voids, severed or sliced pottery to build figuration, and surface detail through sensitive drawing and delicate coloration unify his approach as draughtsman, potter, and sculptor. Abright's drawings and ceramic sculptures are distinct, though related, bodies of work that serve crucial roles for the artist. "I work with graphite on paper for the directness of process," he says, "while I love working with clay for its skin-like plasticity and pyromanic-produced permanence."<sup>3</sup>

Abright's stream-of-consciousness approach to portraying the human condition coincides with his preference for artists whose monstrous imagery encouraged his work. The late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo's inventive conglomerate portraits, like *L'acqua*, 1563-64; Francisco Goya's bold *Los Caprichos* aquatint etchings from the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially *The Sleep of Reason*; and the abstracted portraiture of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish-born British painter Francis Bacon contributed to Abright's development as a psychologically probing artist whose subtle work integrates thought-provoking meaning. Like his early inspiration, Arshile Gorky, Abright boldly employs familial memories as narrative within a surrealist approach, attaining intriguingly strange imagery.



Pluck, 1990 | Charcoal on paper, 50 x 38 in.,

from *Internal Landscape Series 1*

Photo: Craig Engle



Surgery, 2013 | Ceramic, 25 x 11 x 10 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey

# DRAWINGS

*The graphite stick and paper become the conduit for my need to express and my necessity to extract.* Bill Abright

For nearly twenty years, Bill Abright has thematically intertwined ceramic sculpture with surrealistic drawing. Two drawing series, titled *Masks* and *Internal Landscapes*, emerged in 1990 and 2005, when the artist exclusively concentrated on two-dimensional work. As distinct works of art rich in mysterious, dream-like narrative, they served as fertile ground for related ceramic sculpture. Each drawing begins as an open-ended exploration into the subconscious derived from the wood-grained rubbings of his studio floor. The artist stretches large paper sheets over an approximately 3 x 5 feet section of floor. He then begins his graphite rubbings of the worn, grained wood, developing any basic images that present themselves and accepting the images as they emerge.<sup>4</sup> No sketches or compositional studies guide the artist's work. His finished, detailed drawings, some of which are selectively colored, depict fantastic and often autobiographical imagery, in which he explores the junction of internal and external worlds.

This contemplative and experimental approach guides Abright's process. "I am experimenting with my tendencies to see imagery in random patterns while exploring the depth of my own imagination," he explains. Once he has satisfactorily achieved a general rubbing, he then places the sheet of paper on his easel to develop any images that present themselves, citing the *frottage* technique of German artist, Max Ernst, as an example.<sup>5</sup> Complex figurations emerge, with a subtle unveiling of micro-images imbedded within the finished work, as seen in the mask-shaped drawing *What the Dog Saw*, 2005, from the *Mask Series*. This work illustrates the essence of Abright's hallmark style of artistically rendering layers of meaning, as the mask itself can be seen here from the point of view of the wearer, not the observer.

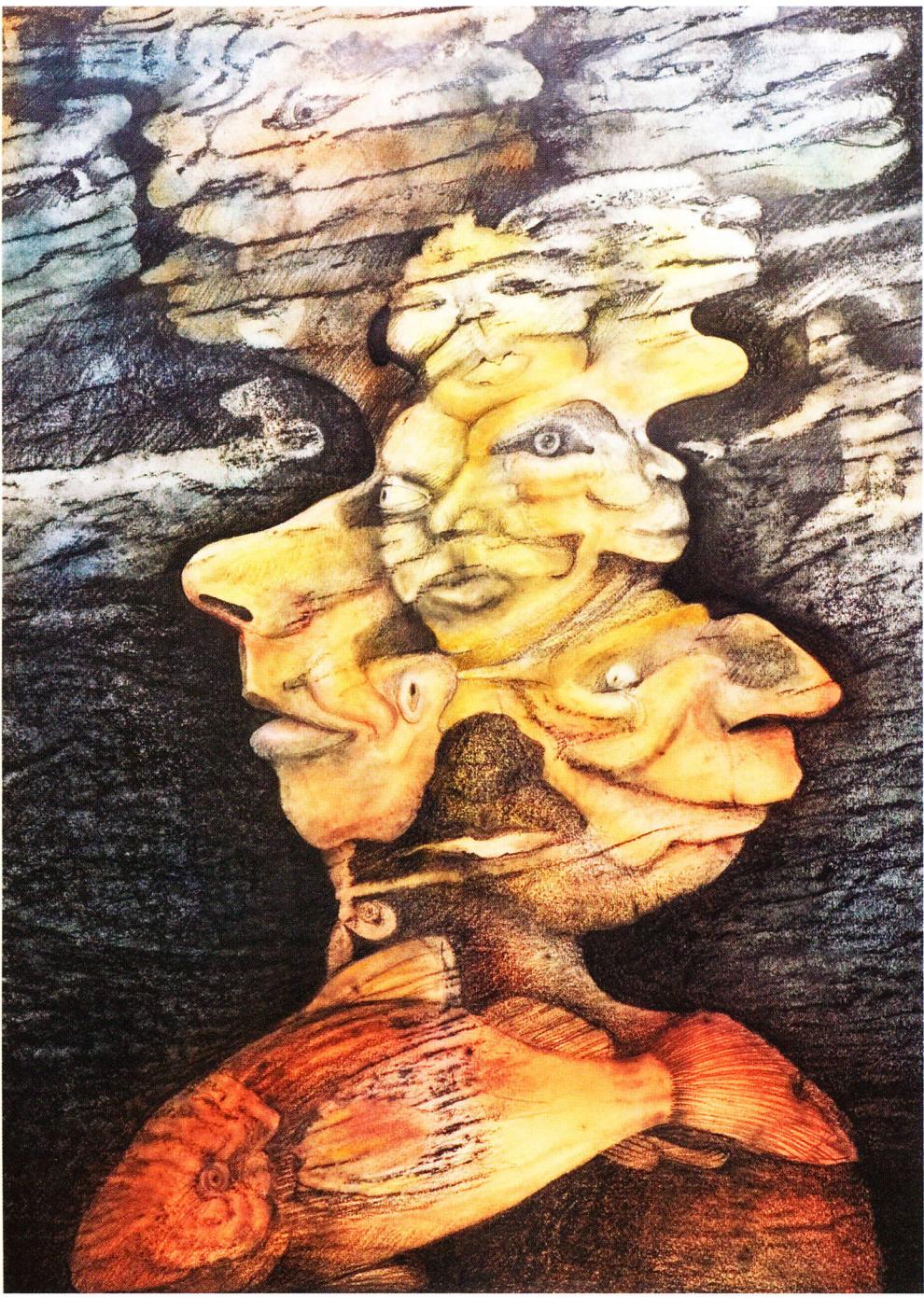
Additionally, the artist manipulates perceived space, pushing and pulling with light and dark, sharp edge, color, and diffusion. Visual disorientation is reined in by micro-imagery, conveying narrative. Disparate detailed elements assert an eerie visual whole, replete with subliminal suggestion. Works like *Full Moon*, 1990, feature Abright's further inquiry into dreamscapes, offering a narrative scene that includes familial, social, or antiwar commentary. This compositional interlacing of imagery and ideas fosters unfolding meaning that is offered to the viewer to assess. While some of Abright's works may appear ghoulish, any discomfort is superseded by the artist's sensitive rendering of universal thoughts and fears that align with the genre of dream imagery.



What the Dog Saw, 2005 | Graphite and acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 in., from the *Mask Series* | Photo: Jay Graham



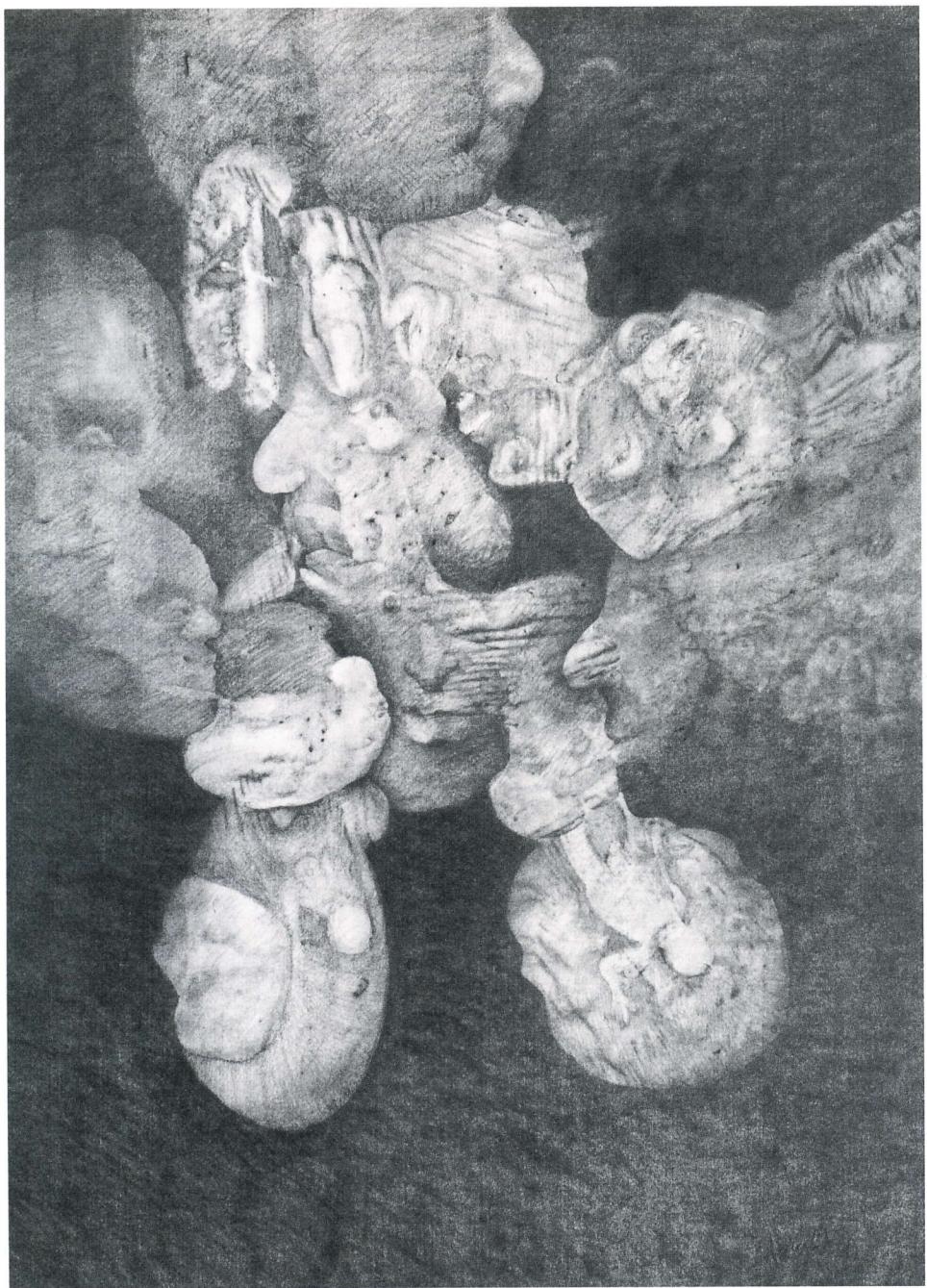
Full Moon, 1990 | Charcoal and graphite on paper, 50 x 38 in., from *Internal Landscape Series I* | Photo: Craig Engle



Monkey Mind, 2005 | Graphite and acrylic on paper, 50 x 38 in., from *Internal Landscape Series II* | Photo: Bill Abright



Conscience, 2005 | Acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 x 17 in., from *Internal Landscape Series II* | Photo: Bill Abright



Who's Watching the Children?, 1990 | Charcoal on paper, 50 x 38 in., from *Internal Landscape Series I*  
Photo: Craig Engle.

# MASKS

*A mask can be a covering to protect or conceal or reveal. It can be the façade one shows to the world, while the person behind it may be very different . . . I am exploring the junction and interface of internal and external worlds.* Bill Abright

Bill Abright's surrealist drawing concepts transfer to his large-scale masks, representing the face as the most expressive part of a person's identity. While there is an important psychological exploration with each mask, Abright's building approach is nevertheless practical. He says that he likes the challenge of rendering features in large scale, working a slab of clay and solving technical challenges through his skill as toolmaker. The origins of the larger-than-life clay faces derive from the large mask drawings from 2005.

With their capacity to assert meaning, masks and mask imagery are elemental to Abright's metaphorical visual quest. He equates the slab of clay to a sheet of earth, as well as its similarity to a layer of flat skin that can be transformed into a face by stretching its thickness to the limit. Breaking through the "skin" surface fosters structural and psychological challenges for Abright, and guides his excavation of sculptural surface to reveal the deep meaning of his figures, as seen in the wall piece *Two Old Crows*, 2012. Here, Abright celebrates the steadiness in life achieved through an enduring relationship. It also is a synthesis of his layered construction technique that signifies the depth and complexities of such a rich partnership. This work is an autobiographical homage, sensitively defined with gentle carving and coloration. Once these large ovoids are bisque fired, Abright uses acrylic paint and graphite pencils, and some under-glaze, to define the color, deepening the mask's content. This work fully realizes the artist's aesthetic and structural considerations, which directly link to his sculptures of birds.



Two Old Crows, 2012 | Stoneware clay with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 25 x 14 x 9 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey

# CROWS and BIRDS

*Birds have become the new dominant animal species in my neighborhood and everyday I watch their interactions. From crows, woodpeckers, owls and songbirds, these sculptures express my interest in the parallels of animal and human behavior in pecking order, predation, protection, and prey.* Bill Abright



Sailor, 2011 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 12 x 18 x 8 in. | Photo: Bill Abright

For many years, Bill Abright has equated the realities of the natural animal world with those of humanity. Troubling social dynamics that plague human societies emerge in his metaphorical animal forms, including insects, fish, and, most recently, birds. “I merge the morphology of nature into my figurative work to communicate parallels with man’s existence,” he says, “and I insert contradictions among animal species to emphasize the link between their fate and ours.” A very successful component of this inquiry is Abright’s depiction of crows, owls, and ducks.

Unlike the surrealistic approach to his drawings, Bill Abright’s sculptural process is intentional. He integrates materials like steel, paint, pencil, and sometimes glaze to achieve defined forms, resulting in his development of a post-fired constructed technique incorporating related elements.<sup>6</sup> This construction and deconstruction method balances a work between structural organization and potential chaos and is the preferred creative milieu of the artist.

Abright depicts complex meaning through structurally revealing interiority, first undertaken in his drawings. His arrangement of positive and negative space opens forms to levels of interpretation. The conceptual idea of meaning below the surface is reinforced by the artist’s defacing the sculptural surface. Sanding and cutting away the form’s exterior posit the idea that little is what it seems. The free standing piece *Sailor*, 2011, shows a solitary bird composed of hand-formed or mold-pressed clay sticks and small, thrown pots that are scuffed or torn. Volumetric figuration is skewed, as voids interlace with surface enhancement and profile. Abright’s painterly treatment contributes to the piece’s alluring presence. While the alarming implication of these quiet forms persist, the work possesses hopefulness in its subtle coloration and structural elegance, alluding to a balance in life. Abright aptly creates a duality between interior and exterior form as a metaphor for introspection. His use of conglomerated shapes successfully conveys disquieting meaning beneath the appealing surface. The artist’s rendered birds of prey, like *Owl II*, allegorically allude to societal human predation.



Owl II, 2012 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 22 x 7 x 6 in. | Photo: Bill Abright

In *Six Songbirds*, 2011, Bill Abright's humanitarian concerns come to the fore in an accessible visual language. He renders the common birds to illustrate universal ideas of greed and vulnerability. His depiction of survival in the animal kingdom offers a commentary regarding humanity, stating a vital interrelatedness. This wall-mounted work illustrates his premise. "How many songbirds does it take to feed a crow? Maybe six?" he queries, illustrating how animals will eat one another as part of the flow of life from predator to prey. For Abright, this is an inescapable metaphor for humanity.



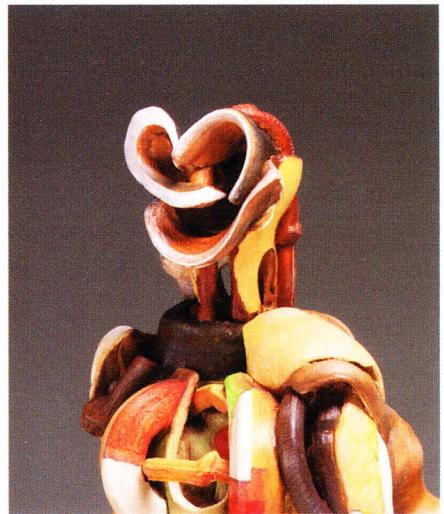
*Six Songbirds*, 2011 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 15 x 18 x 8 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey



Homegrown Hero and Intravenous, 2013 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 14 x 5 1/2 x 6 in. and 16 x 6 x 7 in.

Photo: Michael Fahey

*These sculptures are constructed from wheel thrown and extruded clay shapes that are assembled in the form of human figures. The initial composition is refined by thoughtful addition and deconstruction to create a dynamic relationship between structure and form. The content and title of each figure develops through insights that present themselves to me throughout the process.* Bill Abright

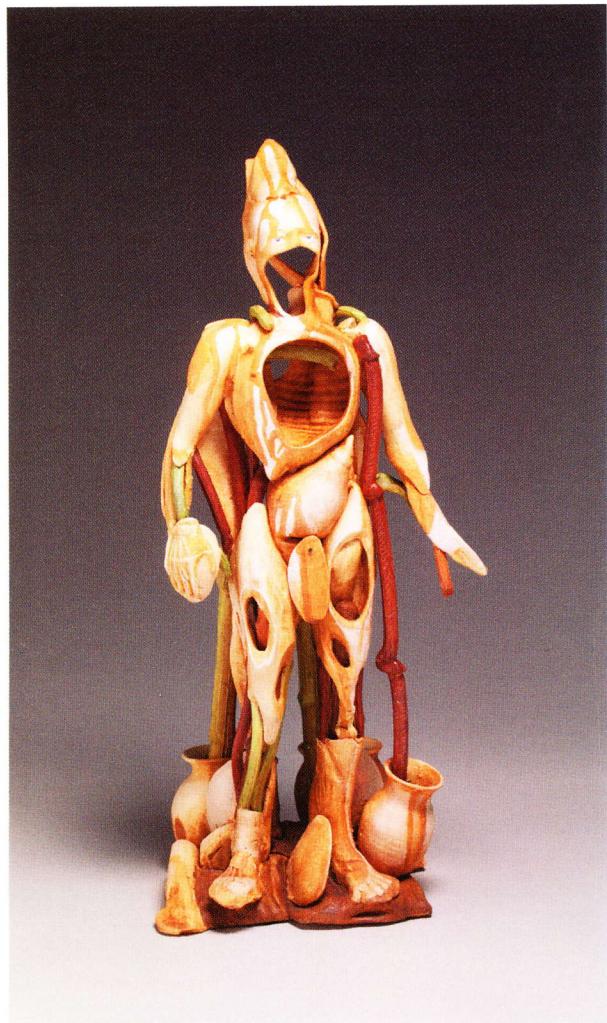


## FROM FACE to FIGURE

The artist's most recent group of figures, made from wheel-thrown and extruded clay shapes, explore interiority. "The initial composition," Abright explains, "is refined by thoughtful addition and deconstruction to create a dynamic relationship between structure and form." As is characteristic of his subliminal practice, the content and title of each figure expands through the building process. Whereas most of his ceramic sculptures are solitary forms, like the figure *Saving Face*, 2013, Abright prefers to couple his small works to create a unique dialogue. *Homegrown Hero* and *Intravenous*, 2013, for example, provide a narrative that is sibling to the content of the dream imagery found in his drawings. While specific meaning might be inferred, explicit explanation is illusive. Abright's current figurative works are built from gestural use of clay that also echoes the artist's earlier drawings. Though he pursues his sculptural work alone in the studio, his consistent message, emerging first as autobiographical, is the necessary condition of interconnectedness—to one-another and the world.



**Saving Face**, 2013 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 24 x 8 x 9 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey



Left: Spirit Link, 2013 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 24 x 5 x 3 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey.

Right: Tidal, 2013 | Ceramic with under-glazes and acrylic paint, 23 x 4 x 3 in. | Photo: Michael Fahey.



# CONCLUSION

Bill Abright's current figurative ceramic sculpture and periodic graphite drawings illustrate a rich body of focused and enduring work. He explores themes of vulnerability and fear through consistent psychological means. His two- or three-dimensional iconography explores universal themes spawned from personal history, creating dream-like narrative. While these discussed pieces provide insight into his current body of work, they also offer a reassessment of concepts first explored by the artist in the 1970s. In this respect, Bill Abright's focus has come full circle, as he merges two strengths of Bay Area ceramics. Where he originally pursued ceramic figuration as a way of breaking free from the vessel, he now builds form from reconstructed shards, achieving a structural whole that equates to his own state of personal completeness.



In the studio, 2014 | Photo: Bill Abright

# ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Born: 1950, Stockton, CA

## EDUCATION

- |      |    |   |
|------|----|---|
| 1974 | MA | San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA |
| 1973 | BA | San Francisco State College, San Francisco, CA    |
| 1970 | AA | San Joaquin Delta College, Stockton, CA           |

## SOLO SHOWS

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 2013 | <i>Rubbings: Drawing on the Past</i> , Fine Arts Gallery, College of Marin, Kentfield, CA |
| 2007 | <i>Bill Abright: Drawings and Ceramics</i> , Artworks Downtown, San Rafael, CA            |
| 2006 | <i>Mask: Drawings and Ceramics</i> , College of Marin Art Gallery, Kentfield, CA          |
| 2005 | <i>Drawings from Within</i> , John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA                           |
| 2002 | <i>Ceramic Sculpture</i> , GR Martin Gallery, San Anselmo, CA                             |
| 2001 | <i>The Nature of Things</i> , John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA                           |
| 1997 | Fine Arts Gallery, College of Marin, Kentfield, CA  |
| 1988 | Esther Saks Gallery, Chicago, IL<br>Susan Cummins Gallery, Mill Valley, CA                |
| 1987 | Natsoulas/Novelozo Gallery, Davis, CA   |
| 1985 | Bruce Velick Gallery, San Francisco, CA<br>Schakelford and Sears Gallery, Davis, CA       |
| 1984 | Bruce Velick Gallery, San Francisco, CA   |
| 1980 | Gallery Eight, La Jolla, CA   |
| 1979 | The Elements Gallery, New York, NY<br>Anna Gardner Gallery, Stinson Beach, CA             |
| 1978 | Meyer, Breier, Weiss Gallery, San Francisco, CA   |
| 1977 | Elizabeth Fortner Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA  |
| 1976 | Studio 7 Gallery, San Anselmo, CA   |
| 1975 | Skylight Gallery, Port Angeles, WA  |

## GROUP SHOWS

- 2014   *Raku: Origins, Impact and Contemporary Expression*, Sedona Arts Center, AZ
- 2013   *Vessel 9.5, The Human Figure as Vessel*, Oakland, CA  
        *Figuratively Speaking*, SMAart Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
        *Animals in Clay*, Grand Theater Center for the Arts, Tracy, CA
- 2012   *Bill Albright and Claudia Tarantino*, Roscoe Gallery, Oakland, CA  
        *Laughing Matters*, Healdsburg Center for the Arts, Healdsburg, CA
- 2011   Ceramic Annual of America, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, CA
- 2010   *Mastering Raku*, Jared Branfman Memorial Gallery, Needham, MA  
        Ceramic Annual of America, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, CA
- 2009   NCECA National Biennial Exhibit, Phoenix, AZ  
        *Firing A Legacy*, Pence Gallery, Davis, CA
- 2007   *Ink and Clay 33*, UC Pomona, CA
- 2006   *A Show of Heads*, Slow Art Production, Limner Gallery, Phoenicia, NY
- 2004   *Northern California Clay*; NCECA 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, San Diego, CA
- 2001   *The NCECA 2001 Clay National*, Rock Hill, SC
- 2002   *Selections: The Allan Chasanoff Collection*, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC
- 1999   *10th Annual All Creatures Great & Small*, John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA  
        *Wall Work*, Ceramic Sculpture, SMUD Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 1998   *Sculptural Perspectives for the New Millennium*, LEF FDN, St. Helena, CA  
        *The Toki Collection*, Pence Gallery, Davis and Richmond Art Center, CA
- 1990   *Chief Seattle Reply*, Hatley/Martin Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
        *RAKU: Transforming the Tradition*, Bevier Art Gallery, RIT, Rochester, NY
- 1989   *Ceramic Traditions: Figuration*, Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto, CA  
        *RAKU: Transforming the Tradition*, NCECA, Kansas City Contemporary Art, MO
- 1987   *American Ceramics Now*, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY  
        *Clay and More*, Wita Gardner Gallery, San Diego, CA
- 1986   Himovitz/Salomon Gallery, Sacramento, CA  
        University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
- 1982   *20 Ceramic Artists*, Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA
- 1979   *Architectural Dimensions*, The Elements Gallery, New York, NY
- 1974   *Surfaces in Ceramic Art*, Fairtree Gallery, New York, NY  
        *California Clay and Glass*, Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bill Abright, as a production potter for ten years, was a recognized vessel maker capable of throwing a variety of forms on the wheel. He was also considered an expert in raku firing, a process he did with fellow artists Richard Hirsch, Jim Romberg, and Paul Soldner.

<sup>2</sup> Abright says that one reason he pursued sculptural figuration was to free himself of vessel constrictions. Interview with the artist July 19, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Artist's statement.

<sup>4</sup> The sheets of paper usually measure either 39 x 50" or 25 x 39".

<sup>5</sup> This surrealist technique was developed by artist, Max Ernst in 1925.

<sup>6</sup> From 1985–2010, Bill Abright and his wife and artist, Claudia Tarantino, were ceramic conservators in the San Francisco Bay Area. Abright also pioneered a post-fired construction technique for ceramic sculpture.



NANCY M. SERVIS, Sacramento, CA, is a recognized art historian, gallerist, and author having served as curator, educator and arts administrator in the greater Bay Area for over 20 years. She developed expertise in contemporary ceramics through years of curation and research in association with the California Conference for the Advancement of Ceramic Art in Davis, CA; and the development of the course,

*A Century of Northern California Ceramics* that she taught for six years at California College of the Arts, Oakland.

Much of her curatorial work includes original catalogue essays. Recent publications are: *The Ceramic Pot Shop at UC Berkeley, 1959–1964*; *John Toki: A Life That is More Than Clay*; *Local Treasures: Bay Area Ceramics*; *Wanxin Zhang: Innovation in Ceramic Sculpture*; *Ruth Rippon; Stephen De Staebler—The Sculptor's Way*; *Contemporary Studio Ceramics: The Dauer Collection*; and *The Eve Aesthetic: Contemporary Figurative Clay Sculpture by Artists from TB-9*. Published artist monographs include *Alan Osborne—Expressionist Enamels*, *Danae Mattes—The Sibyl Series*, *Donna Billick*, and *René Martucci*.

Nancy's writings have been featured in the art periodicals *Ceramics: Art and Perception* and *Ceramics Monthly*. Recent articles include: *Jun Kaneko—Beyond Sculptural Boundaries* and *Erna Aaltonen—Nostalgia*. Nancy was invited to be the 2014 Jentel Critic at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, considered the dynamic origin of revolutionary American ceramics, and Writer-in-Residence at the Jentel Foundation in Banner, Wyoming. She also serves as a Research Fellow for the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona, California.