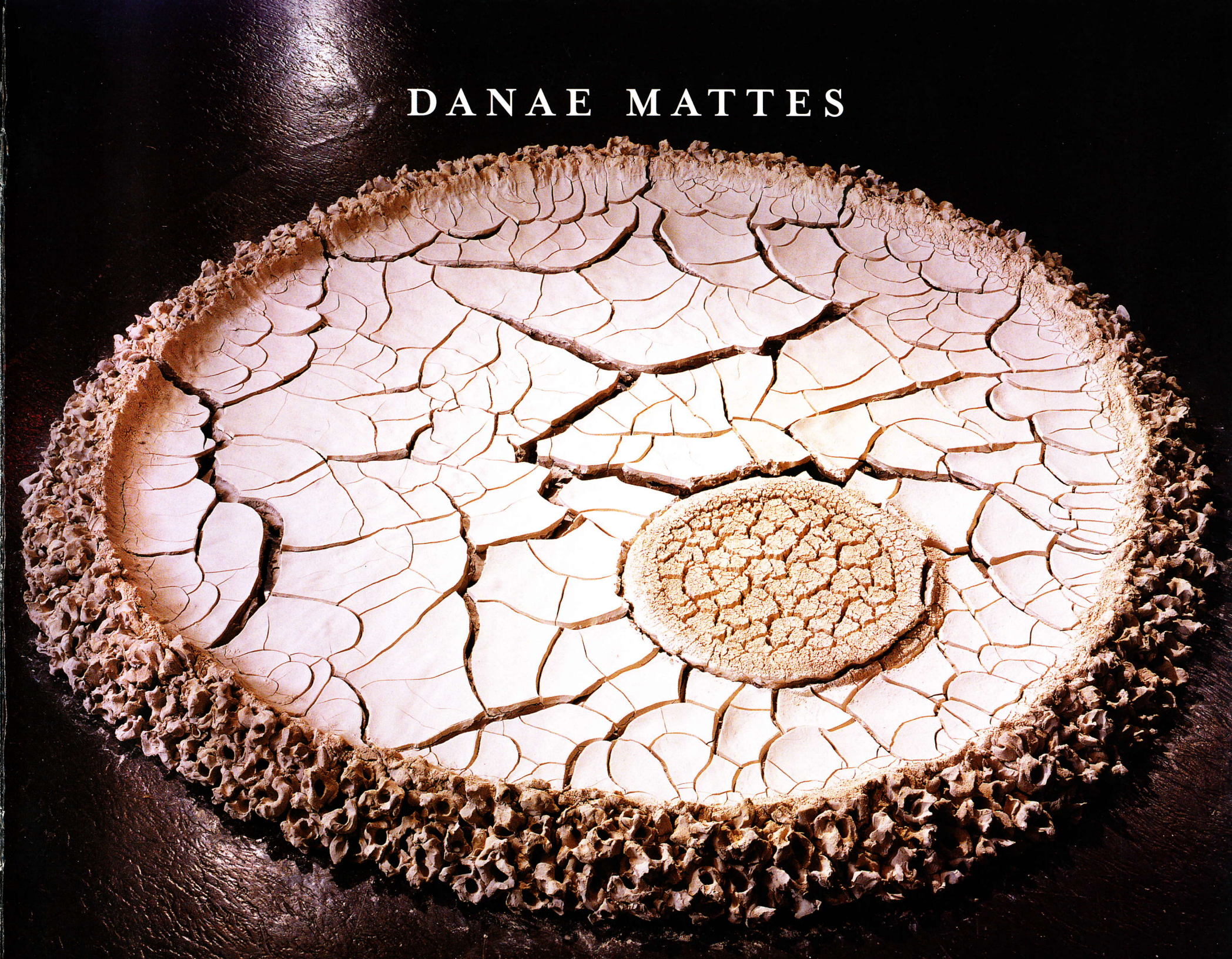
DANAE MATTES



Danae Mattes: Inherent Processes
Fresno Art Museum
September 10 – October 31, 2004

©2004 Danae Mattes Essay ©2004 Nancy M. Servis
All rights reserved
Photography: Stuart Allen, Ira Schrank, Wardell Photography
Catalogue design: Catherine Courtenaye

Printed in the United States of America

cover: *Evaporation Pool* (process piece) clay and water, 2003, diam 96", h 6"
back cover: *Alluvial Interior,* clay and fired sand, 1997, h 9", w 25", d 60"

DANAE MATTES

The Sibyl Series

and other permeable objects

Sibyl Figures #8, #5, #6, #3
clay, 2002
h 75"– 85", w 7"– 11", d 4"– 9"

Danae Mattes: Sculpture as Organic Abstraction

Nancy M. Servis

Danae Mattes was born in the Eastern United States in 1958, and spent her childhood and college years in Pennsylvania. In a region distinctly different from the West, she savored the tempo of the seasons and developed an ingrained sensitivity to the impulse of nature. These early observations asserted a lasting influence on the artist who, now in her mid forties, cites the subtleties of nature as a profound influence in her work. Today, her large studio

Sibyl Figures #14, #13
clay, 2002
h 80", w 15", d 9"

sits amidst tightly-fit homes on a shady steep slope in the Berkeley Hills. It is here that the artist sculpturally defines internalizations that germinated before her arrival in California in 1980.

Mattes' sculptural concerns are a part of a larger confluence of ideas. Nature, along with poetry and creative exchange are equal operatives in her artistic development.

Ideas are realized primarily in ceramic sculpture. Glacier-like pools and mythic steles define a scope of work she has been making for nearly twenty years. Her artistic concerns also include small, translucent wall mounts and large-scale installation that embody the synthesis of her artistic effort.

Evaporation Pool
(process piece) clay and water, 2003, diam 96", h 6"

Engaging the sensibilities of nature is a part of what defines Mattes' sculptural output. Her preference for clay as building material reinforces the intended meaning that she sculpturally develops. Through this medium, the artist explores the concepts of permeability and purification. She tempers clay with water and finds opportunity in its many physical states. Using dry powder, liquid slip and malleable mass, Mattes directs the sculpting process to a certain point, then withdraws her influence to let the two materials "freely act." The exchange of clay and water determine the ultimate result, with atmospheric conditions as a less obvious third factor. For the artist these efforts go beyond a parallel of natural action to create a piece. Her practice

Sibyl Figures #10, #11, #9
clay, 2002
h 76"–81", w 7"–10", d 4"–9"

necessitates a deep contemplation of natural phenomena to such a degree that a subtle occurrence like the reflection of a bird in flight over water is more influential than its physical reality. (The artist cites Taoist poetry and thought as an influence in her work.) Her willingness to employ the influence of atmospheric conditions speaks to her transcendental posture as an artist.

The term *organic abstraction* describes the work of some artists whose style portrays in form and substance realities found in nature.[1] Whether volcanic, biomorphic, undulating or fluid, artists use clay to create work that is not far removed from the forces of nature. As such, temporal elements are often suggested in their work. For example, *Blue Pool with Water Mark,* 1996, illustrates this transitory aspect. The work itself appears glacially hewn with scratches and noticeable fissures across the surface. Made from stiff colored clay, Mattes echoes natural forces at play on the piece forming a geologically inspired shallow arc. It then receives liquid clay

Sibyl Figures #4, #2, #7
clay, 2002
h 78"–85", w 8"–10", d 3"–6"

slip creating a pool or sluice. For the artist, the process of evaporation from the saturated form creates a situation of tension, often resulting in random cracking in the pool and the development of sunken surfaces. These sculptures are not static three-dimensional objects but rather aesthetic documents continuing an ongoing investigation of natural processes and their symbolic implications.

Mattes' stalk-like ensembles are kindred figurations. Called the *Sibyl Series,* the artist has created and arranged vertical postured forms that address the contemplative aspect of her work. The series is comprised of several extensions that reach skyward. They are dusted with stains and grouped rhythmically on a wall slightly elevated off the floor. As a mythological figure a sibyl prophesized influential events. For Mattes they signify a prophetic voice unbound by time or culture. As her focus for several years, these pieces serve as the locus for her sculptural environments which also include large clay pools and suspended mixed-media works.

The iconic pieces are long embodiments with clay curls that encase inner troughs of varying width. Approximately six feet in height, they are like intermediaries reduced to a central spine and elongated orifice.

Their amorphous presence, enhanced by surface contours and sculpted cavities invite a reflective response.[2] The permeability of clay, and the uninterrupted atmospheric effect on materials while building, support her intent to create tangible objects that provide the opportunity to

left: *Alluvium Pool #2*
clay, 2004
h 20", w 16", d 30"

right: *Alluvium Pool #1*
clay, 2004
h 19", w 15", d 27"

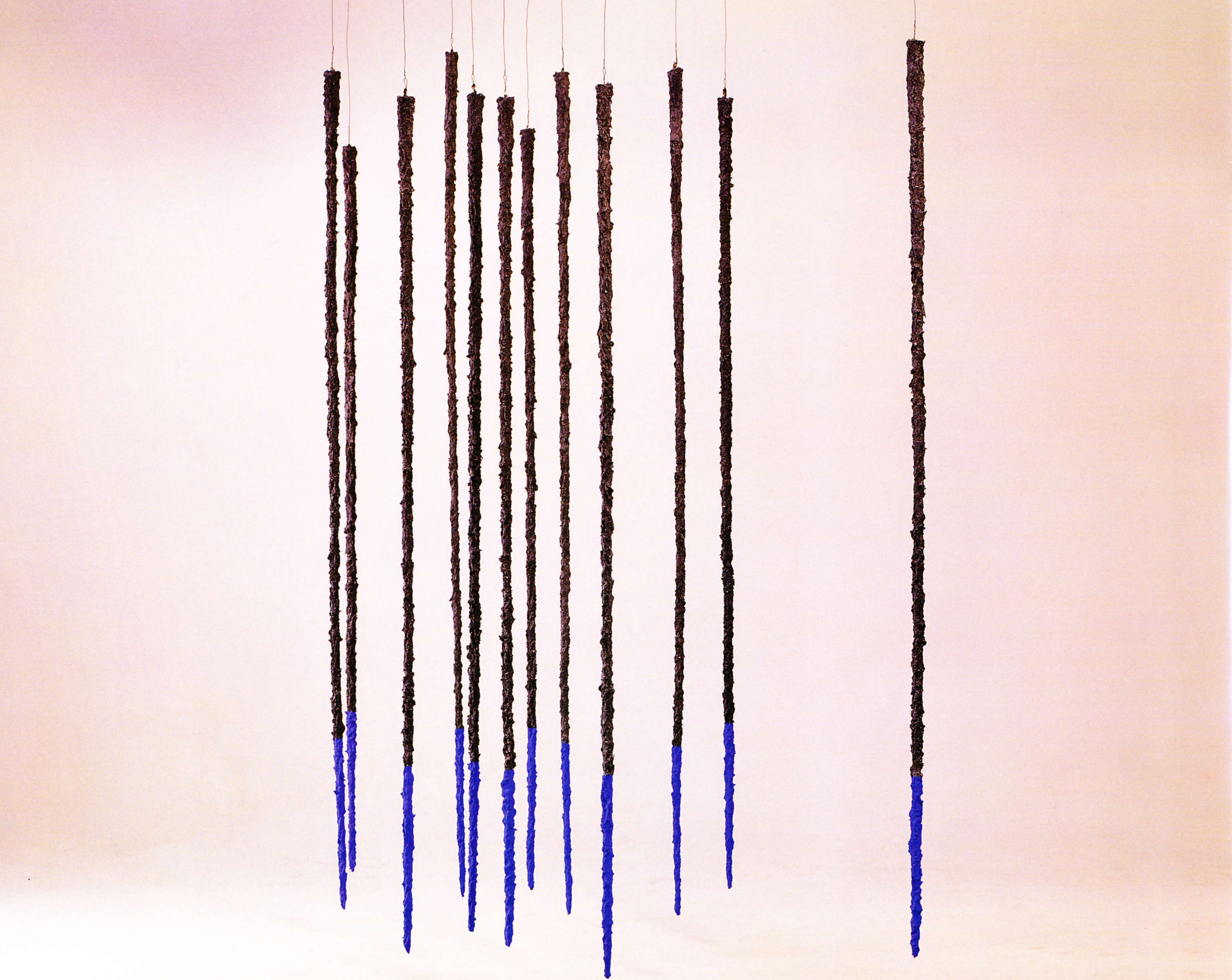
perceive the ineffable. Drawing parallels between the movement of water through the landscape and the movement of water through the body, the artist strives toward a heightened state of interconnectedness that goes beyond physicality. She explains: "Though their form feels 'of the earth,' a sibyl is not limited to the physicality of nature alone, but is permeable, existing in a state of receptivity and conveyance."

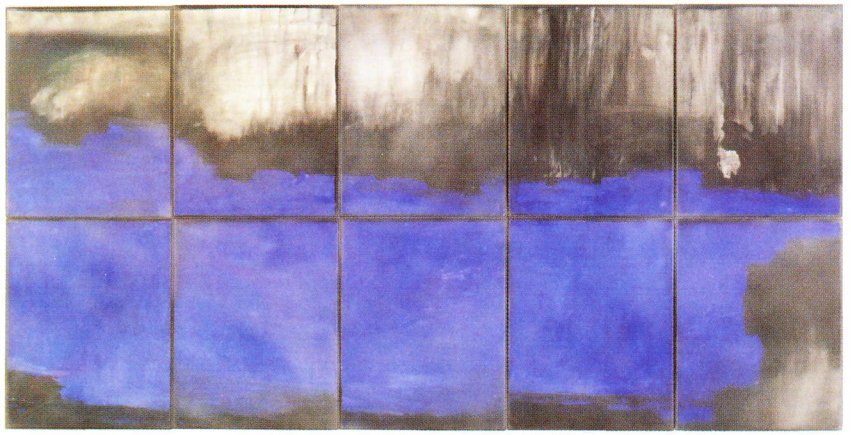
As a sculptural presentation the *Sibyl Series* is complex. The tempo of their arrangement and their poetic juxtapositions provide an interpretive opportunity. Her preference for colored clays coated with engobe or with black, yellow or blue stain, define a surface that is at times crusty and tactile or cracked and smooth. The negative spaces between the forms also create a visual ebb and flow. When asked why she chose to work with clay in a series, her response that, "any one idea cannot be contained in that one piece," reflects her approach to the creative process. She continues the ceramic sequence with series of clay squares and ovoids whose depressions are like unique atmospheric thumbprints. The ensemble, more than any other of the artist's current work, alludes to her site-specific process pieces. The interplay of individual sculptures creates an

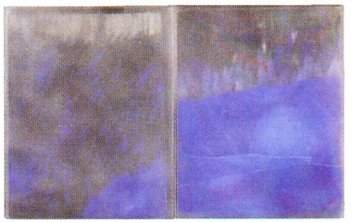
Blue Pool with Watermark
clay and water residue, 1996
h 14", w 13", d 31"

environmental dialogue where her complexity of thought is fully achieved.

Mattes attains conceptual cohesiveness with installation. An example of this effort is *Durchlässigkeit,* Wasserturm Eutin, Germany where in 1999 she made four installations on each of the three levels of a water tower with the requirement of utilizing the building and its interior to define new pieces. The second floor was the site of *Saturation Field,* a 5' x 5' rectangle made from 700 polyurethane form cut rectangles soaked in colored clay slip. Each rectangle was dried and then placed through the open mesh surfaces of an interior fence creating a square color field that permeated the fence structure and could be viewed in suspension. This piece, partnered with clay and mixed media pieces captures the artist's intent as she depicts both physically and conceptually the force of water. Suspension of clay pieces, weightless verticality, and permeability were themes explored in this setting and further developed in her current







sculpture. These and additional larger-scale process installations like *Evaporation Pool,* 2003, provide a fresh venue in which to develop artistic intentions that would otherwise be undertaken in a controlled studio setting. For Mattes, the opportunity to delve physically into a project amplifies her understanding of the conceptual and structural concerns that she was simultaneously creating in her studio.

above: *Inner Tide*
paper, pigment, translucent boxes, 2004
h 28", w 90", d 1.5"

left: *Tidal Markers*
paper, pigment, 2002
h 84", diam 108"

While not all of Mattes' pieces contain the transitory component of water evaporation and residue, her sculpture consistently addresses environmental "trace." Whether

through ceramic sculpture, site-specific installation or her recent folio-sized wall objects made of transparent paper and ink, her concerns go beyond the immediate objectification of the work to a transitory implication. Many sculptors desire the fingerprint or hand as a visible touchstone in their work, whereas Danae Mattes implies geological forces to further suggest a secondary impression.

To achieve this result is as much an internal as external process and one that is inspired more by a scope of thought than by the work of other artists. As clay is the most chameleon of all substances in its liquid, soft or malleable form, it allows for the subtlest manipulations realized in her sculpture.

NANCY M. SERVIS
DAVIS, CALIFORNIA, 2004

[1]Mark Del Vecchio, *Postmodern Ceramics,* New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2000, p.82.

[2]Del Vecchio cites Garth Clark's discussion of organic abstraction creating less of a confrontation between the viewer and the artist's ego...and how when "textures are torn from nature and the palette is drawn from the colors of rocks and plants, the viewer tends to see the work as not being solely the result of the artist's skills but as part of a partnership with nature's gifts." See: *Postmodern Ceramics,* p. 82

Nancy M. Servis is an art historian and curator who resides in Davis, California. She also is the Senior Lecturer in the History of Ceramics at the California College of the Arts in Oakland. Portions of her essay appeared in the article, *Danae Mattes' Sibyls and Pools* published in *Ceramics Art and Perception,* #52, 2003.

Shallow Pool #1
clay, 2004
h 3", w 22.5", d 27"

Shallow Pool #2
clay, 2004
h 3.5", w 24", d 29"

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2004 "Inherent Processes," Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, California
2003 Galerie b15, Munich, Germany
2003 Sonoma Museum of Visual Art, Santa Rosa, California
2001 b. sakata garo, Sacramento, California
2000 Davis Art Center, Davis, California
1999 "Durchlässigkeit", Wasserturm Eutin, Eutin, Germany
1996 City Gallery, San Jose City College, San Jose, California
1992 Galerie am Lambertihof, Oldenburg, Germany
1991 Galerie Hoch Die Tasse, Neumünster, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany
1991 Künstlerhaus Lauenburg, Lauenburg/Elbe, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany
1988 Cabrillo College Gallery, Aptos, California
1987 Creative Arts Gallery, College of the Redwoods, Arcata, California
1985 Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Portland, Oregon
1984 Gallery C, Long Beach State University, Long Beach, California

TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1997 Artworks Foundry, Berkeley, California
1997 Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada
1988 WORKS/San Jose, San Jose, California

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2001-04 "KuKu Ru KuKu; A Ceramic Dialogue Between Two Continents," Brunswiker Pavillon, Kiel, Germany; Galerij Marc Van Meensel, Selem-Halen, Belgium; Schlossmuseum Landeck, Landeck, Austria
2003 b. sakata garo, Sacramento, California
2000 Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France; "Watershed," Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, California; Texas Woman's University, Denton,Texas; Thirteenth San Angelo National Ceramic Competition; San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, San Angelo, Texas
1999 John Elder Gallery, New York, New York; b. sakata garo, Sacramento, California; Ashtabula Art Center, Ashtabula, Ohio; Mendocino Art Center, Mendocino, California
1998 "Kunst, Made in Schleswig–Holstein," Alte Papierfabrik, Neumünster, Germany
1996 Galerie Les Années Folles, Four Person Show, Maastricht, Holland; Taller Huara-Huara Group Exhibition, Catholic University, Santiago, Chile; Studio Galerie Wasserman-Gierend, Lothringen, France; Ceramics in Northern California, Bedford Gallery, Award, Walnut Creek, California.
1995 Landesshau Schleswig–Holstein, Landesmuseum Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany; First Street Gallery, Claremont, California
1994 Landesschau Schleswig–Holstein, Stadtgalerie Brunsbüttle, Germany "Leuchtende Ideen," Galeriewerkstatt Gisela Sievers, Kiel, Germany, "Maquette Exhibit," Travelling Exhibition, San Francisco; Val d' Aosta, Italy; Bremen, Germany; Copenhagen, Denmark
1993 Art in Technology, Contract Design Center, San Francisco, California
1992 "Keramik aus Schleswig–Holstein," Holstenhalle, Neumünster, Germany
1990 Künstlerhaus Lauenburg, Lauenburg/Elbe, Schleswig–Holstein, Germany
1989 "The Clay Connection: Long Beach Ceramic Artists," Roberts Art Gallery, Santa Monica, California
1984 "Ink and Clay, VIII," California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, California
1980 NCECA, National Conference on Education for the Ceramic Arts, Group; Invitational, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
1977 "Local Clay Deposits," Erie Art Center, Erie, Pennsylvania

GRANTS AND RESIDENCIES

2001 Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France
1996 European Ceramic Work Center, s'Hertogenbosch, Holland
1995 Artist in Residence/Workshop, Taller Huara-Huara, Santiago, Chile
1992 "Plateau Series", Kultusministerin des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, Germany
1992 Elbstrasse 41, Studio Sponsorship, City of Lauenburg/Elbe, Germany
1990-91 Artist in Residence, One Year Grant, Künstlerhaus Lauenburg, Kultusministerin des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, Germany

COMMISSIONS

1994 Mühlenstrasse 9, Mölln, Germany
1993 Firma Abel, Büchen, Germany
1992 City of Launburg/Elbe, Germany
1989 Redwood City Public Library, Redwood City, California
1988 Forum Country Club, Tokyo, Japan

EDUCATION

1984 M.F.A., Long Beach State University, Long Beach, California
1980 B.F.A., Edinboro State University, Edinboro, Pennsylvania

SELECTED PRIVATE & PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Mike and Foster Beigler, Santa Rosa, California
Candice B. Groot Collection, Evanston, Illinois
Andreas Meixger & Jacqueline Piotaz, Hirzel, Switzerland
Thomas Schröder-Berkentien, Lübeck, Germany
City of Lauenburg, Lauenburg, Germany
Schlossmuseum Landeck, Landeck, Austria

Sibyl Figures #17, #16, #15
clay, 2002
h 75"–81", w 7"–9", d 6"–9"