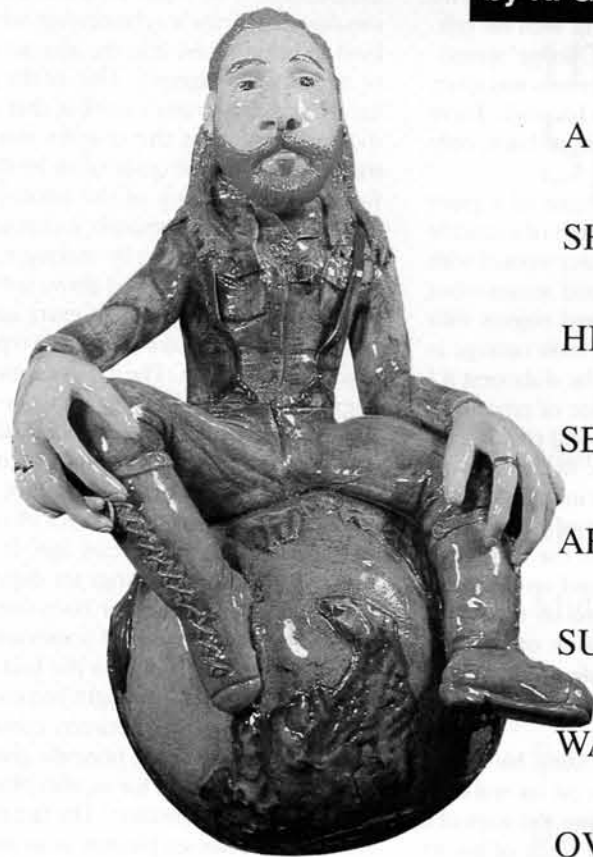


CARTOONING IN CLAY

THE CERAMIC ART OF JORDAN VAN SEWELL

by K. George Godwin



A SMALL HOUSE TUCKED AWAY ON A SHORT STREET RUNNING BETWEEN HIGGINS AVENUE AND THE RED RIVER SEEMS AN UNLIKELY LOCATION FOR AN ARTIST'S STUDIO/RESIDENCE, SURROUNDED AS IT IS BY MILLS, WAREHOUSES AND THE DISRAELI OVERPASS. YET IT SUITS JORDAN VAN SEWELL'S STYLE PERFECTLY.

The interior of the two-storey house appears to be under construction, with half-built walls and newly installed windows that let in a flood of light and a view of the river. There's the ubiquitous presence of the artist's sculptures, most completed, others in progress. The house is heated by a wood stove in the kitchen where Van Sewell burns the remnants of dismantled interior walls. His studio/home is, as he points out, a cross between "Popeye's film and Pee-Wee Herman's funhouse."

On the roof he has raised a large plywood cut-out of a dog, a memorial to his long-time friend, Steven, a big black hound who died last October after a 14-year friendship. There are also large rubber insects nailed to the wall facing the street and two broken clay robots hang from the mailbox. And planned for the future, a "sculpture garden" in which, among other things, he will erect the spaceship he has built from an old wringer-washer.

"It's very important to have your work spill over into your life," Van Sewell says, "so that your work is your life and you don't distinguish between the two. The room I call my studio extends out there. I look at this house as being a big object of art, an ongoing project, an evolutionary art piece."

In short form this could be the central theme of Van Sewell's ceramic art: the dissolving of boundaries. The theme permeates not only his anthropomorphized newts and humanized robots, but his life as well. Perhaps this is in part due to his background. Born into a fourth-generation railroad family, Van Sewell spent his childhood in "all the prairie towns from here to there." Movement was the essence of a childhood built around the railroad and its promise of impermanence. The railroad was a complicated symbol; it represented changeability but it also dissolved boundaries.



facing page:
Portrait of the Artiste, 1986,
low fire clay,
24 x 14 x 4".

left:
Fundamentals of Globe Juggling, 1986,
low fire clay, 14 x 9 x 9".

I WAS DOCUMENTING MY SITUATION AS MUCH AS ROYAL DOULTON WAS DOCUMENTING SOME ALIEN WORLD.

Van Sewell may well have stayed a railroader, bound by his love of tradition, except for his unhappiness with the changes he encountered. "There aren't even cabooses anymore. A conductor is just a glorified timekeeper, and the engineer just a machine operator. There are no longer any railroad families. It became just a job." But while the railroad altered, his love for it remained, along with an intense awareness of the process of change. It was only in the past few years that Van Sewell began to create trains out of clay. Having achieved some distance from his disillusionment, he can now capture "the same kind of spirit I felt when I was a 17-year-old kid riding freight trains in Saskatchewan." He describes the experience of motion and the sight of a train moving across the prairie as awe-inspiring. "For me," he said, "the connection with the railway was a spiritual thing." Even now, Van Sewell will cross over to the nearby tracks (he can see both the CN and CP main lines from his house) and hop a freight for a ride.

When he left the railroad behind there was no question in his mind about what he would do instead. He had already been making clay sculptures in his spare time, having been introduced to the medium in high school. His first pieces in Grade 12 were "a rabbit with a waistcoat and a watch and some little gnome." He discovered that he could create his own miniature world, a fantasy reflection of what he knew and saw. He calls it cartooning in clay. He sees his work as parallel to the Royal Doulton figurines his mother collected. "I began to feel like I was documenting my contemporary situation as much as Royal Doulton was

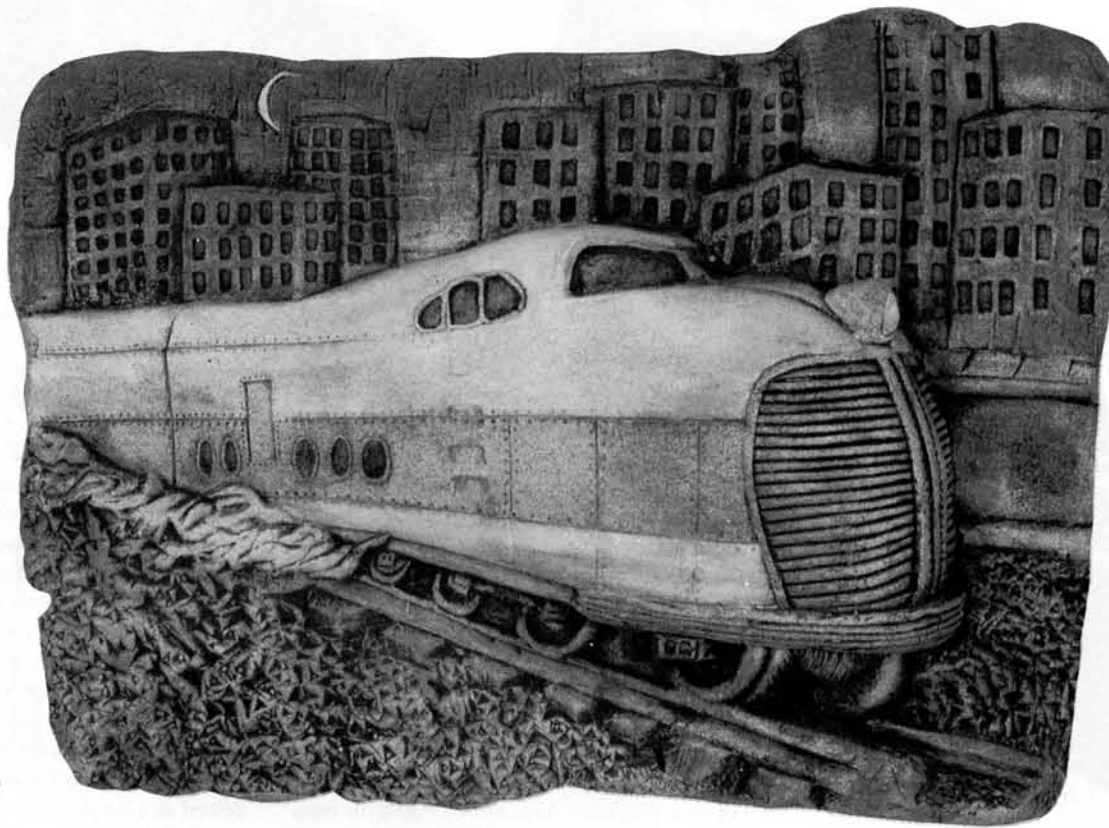
THE NEWTS BECAME METAPHORS FOR MAN'S DARKER SIDE.

documenting some alien world. But instead of having somebody doing a minuet, I'd have some wild-looking troll driving an old pick-up truck. I think it's important for people to make icons that reflect the time and place and situation that they live in."

Van Sewell's sense of humour runs throughout his work. He began with "old pick-up trucks and Saskatchewan rural scenes," but quickly added the first of his characters, the Newts. These lizards were drawn in part from his childhood in Minnedosa, where he used to observe the annual spring coming-out of salamanders. "When the frost left these things would all stand on the edge of the highway and they'd make a dart for the other side. You'd wait on the side of the road and you'd see one and you'd see a semi and you'd have to wait till the semi was gone and after it was gone, the newt was flattened on the road." When he incorporated them into his work they had become metaphors for "man's darker side, what humans can sink to, what they can become."

Van Sewell's work reveals even in its figurative beginnings his concern with the idea of change: one form aspiring to the condition of another. Newts and fish might indicate lower forms but at the same time they can reflect the belief that humanity is the ideal to which all else aspires. We see these creatures doing things that people do—driving cars and trucks, sitting in cafés, relaxing in armchairs—as if they were the most natural activities in the world.

Even the machines in Van Sewell's work seem to be striving to escape their condition. His cars look softly rounded, bending out of shape as if capable of a kind of motion that would defy their structural limitations. His robots are machines that have become fully humanized. These human-built artefacts mimic the behaviour of their makers. Again, they drive cars, lounge on beds,

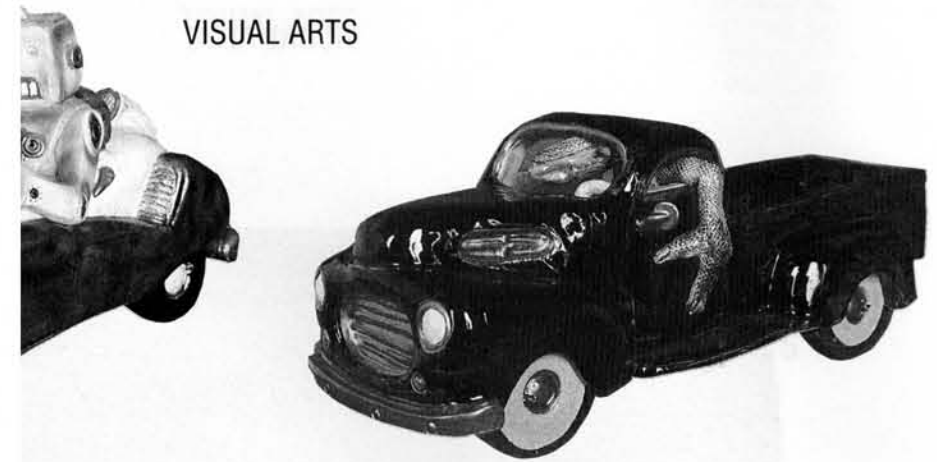


sit in bars or at the breakfast table. But this dissolving of boundaries between human and reptile and between human and machine goes both ways. The immediate humour arises from seeing the non-human mimicking our behaviour and perhaps making us look at it with fresh eyes. But beneath this there is another, slightly darker level: the pull of the animal and the machine away from the human. It is not surprising that Van Sewell found himself drawn to Gregor Samsa of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, this century's primary symbol of disturbing transformation.

I was moving from British Columbia back here in 1981 and I was packing all my possessions into these banana crates that I had got at the local supermarket, and in one of these banana crates was

this giant bug. It was about the size of your fist and it was all squashed between the wrapper and the box and I thought it was dead, so I put it on the table. I'm reading *Metamorphosis* and all of a sudden this bug starts to move and all this shit that had been squashed out of it, it kind of cleaned itself off and it kind of looked up. So then I started feeding it sugared water and put it in one of the houseplants that I was moving. I did some drawings from this bug and ended up doing a wall piece. I guess because of my personal involvement with the book and the bug and the material, it was incredibly successful. I don't know what happened to the bug; by the time I got here and unpacked all the plants and everything, he was gone.

Given this constant dissolving of boundaries between the human and the non-human, is it possible to locate at least some temporary stability in Van Sewell's human figures? They seem to exist in a self-contained world, perhaps a little bemused, their features speaking of a belief in self which seems both innocent and endearing. But if you look closely, you realize that their expressions are really little different from those on the faces of the newts. Even in his self-portraits—the artist perched on top of a globe, the Fool Poet standing with his gleaming bicycle—the figures are wide-eyed, ready to observe, open to experience, and yet somehow blithely unaware of what might be in store. I think of the character in the piece called *Life, the Picnic*, perched amidst the remains of his meal, barely hearing the howling wolves just below him.



Van Sewell creates larger-than-life, benign-looking characters, but when you look at them you realize they're not all there, as if they've just had lobotomies. They exist in a world where there are no heroes but in which people want—even need—heroes. In his series *Hero Gone Zero*, he depicts what happens when a would-be superhero fails at his job. "One day you might think that you're on top of the world, the next you're rifling through the dumpster just to scrape by."

What separates the failures from those who are still carrying on is not a difference in potential, but rather a difference of belief in that potential. Van Sewell dates his own realization that "you really can do anything" to the time when he was 18, working on a snowplough train which got stuck in a huge snowdrift 20 miles outside North Battleford, Saskatchewan. He and the engineer managed single-handedly to dig out the train and get it running again. "You just believe in what you're doing and believe that you can take care of yourself. It's the same being an artist. You've just got your hands and you've got a bag of clay and whatever you can juggle out of that bag is going to account for whether your bills are paid at the end of the month or not."

Van Sewell absorbs his surroundings, transforms them and then reabsorbs that changed environment. It's an ongoing process without apparent limits. The changes his work has undergone have been gradual and subtle. It is not simply a matter of increasing technical skills. The process of growth is as organic as the interaction of hands with clay, a perpetual give and take, modelling and remodelling, an instinctive understanding between artist and medium. And if, as he says, the work he is doing now "no longer has the immediate charm and innocence" that his early pieces possessed, he has developed a greater complexity, a deeper humour.

One work in progress, a piece called *Details at Eleven*, indicates that his blithe, trusting, confident characters might be awakening to the flux in which they exist. This piece, one of a series, is a large-scale TV (our ultimate symbol of containment, all the world within a glass tube trapped inside a plastic box) from which the crisis-ridden world of network news is erupting in all directions: a figure thrusts himself urgently out of the screen as flames burst through the sides of the box; an industrial smokestack belches poisonous smoke from the top; and skulls litter the surface. In this piece, the mutability of boundaries is perceived as a breakdown of structured certainties and the position of the human figure is exposed as very precarious indeed.

As for the artist himself, he seems to feel no uncertainty beyond the need to meet his monthly bills. Since those two pieces in Grade 12, Van Sewell has been on "a crazy, wild, twisting road" and, in his estimation, "it seems pretty good." Having made the decision to become an artist he has managed to establish himself and make a living doing what he likes to do.

Characteristically, his summary of his career to date fluctuates from catastrophe to genial acceptance: "You might wake up at 40 and say, 'Oh my god, I made a horrible mistake,' or you might wake up and feel pretty good about yourself and where you are and what you've done. I don't know because I haven't reached 40 yet." And then, philosophically, he quotes one of his personal heroes. "I yam," he says in his best Popeye accent, "what I yam." ♦

K. George Godwin is a regular film reviewer for Border Crossings. This is his first excursion into ceramic art.