

Fire and Light

Grace Nickel's Metaphorical Lamps

by Glen R. Brown



"Light Sconce #9," 46 cm (18 in.) in height,
handbuilt white earthenware, with terra sigillata,
vitreous slip and glaze, incandescent light, 2003.

Grace Nickel

The combination of clay and light—a dense material and radiant energy—has perhaps held fundamental metaphorical significance since the earliest pit firings of prehistory. Matter and energy, two of the three fundamental components of the cosmos, seem condensed into pure expository form when clay meets flame. The ubiquitous terra-cotta oil lamps of the ancient world were in this sense ready paragons of a primary union, and it is no wonder that clay should have been analogous to flesh in stories of the origin of human beings. Combined with light, clay symbolizes animate matter, the weight of the body raised and warmed by the intangible but vital element of spirit. Because clay is extracted from the ground, the metaphor extends as well to plant life, with its roots in the soil, and to all the creatures that burrow into or walk upon the surfaces of the earth. The union of clay and light serves to represent life in its broadest sense: the precarious, temporary wedding of matter and a mysterious generative energy.

The sculptures of Canadian ceramist Grace Nickel build consciously upon this ancient metaphor, joining hints of anthropomorphism and references to flora and fauna—especially insects—with actual light that emanates softly from the forms themselves. Although her works are in this respect ostensibly utilitarian—they function, after all, in the manner of lamps—their primary purposes are aesthetic and conceptual. They serve



"Tile Studies," 18 cm (7 in.) in height, handbuilt white earthenware, with terra sigillata, vitreous slip and glaze, 2003.
Her current tiles are inspired by butterfly and moth motifs.

first and foremost to illuminate themselves. While they are capable of standing alone, Nickel's sculptures are ideally presented as parts of larger installations, with each component literally and figuratively shedding light upon the others. It is also in her installations that space, the remaining component of the cosmological triad, is most obvious. Her sculptures effectively utilize the passage of light across space to suggest a unifying energy in the natural world.

The final wall-mounted sculptures, essentially sconces, are made to fit over separately installed commercial light fixtures rather than to house the hardware and wiring itself. Nickel in fact, conceives of them as masks, shells or even exoskeletons—appropriate designations since they imply contingency upon some kind of living interior



"Light Sconce with Openwork #2," 14 in. (36 cm) in height, handbuilt white earthenware with terra sigillata and vitreous slips, 2006.

element. While a soft light rises from the open tops of these forms, the luminous focal points are the paired panes of glass that suggest glowing eyes. The intimations these create of a cognizant being are of course intentional, reinforcing the impressions of an inherent life energy within the material.

Knowing the primary inspiration for Nickel's work, one might expect the forms of her sculptures to be more thoroughly organic: characterized exclusively by flowing lines, rounded contours and a sense of malleability, without a straight edge or right angle in sight. The relationship of matter and energy, body and spirit, is not, however, the only fundamental dyad that Nickel has explored. Nearly as influential has been the connection between the organic and the constructed, the natural and the human made, which entered her work through reflection upon the relationship central to certain kinds of architectural ornament. In 1996, when Nickel moved her studio to Winnipeg's historic Exchange District, she began drawing inspiration from the formal elements of the turn-of-the-century, neoclassical buildings there. Contemplating the volutes, wreaths, festoons and other ornamental forms, and recognizing the degree to which their stylization of natural elements balanced the shapes of the organic

world with rational principles of design, she sought to establish a similar equilibrium in her sculptures.

Handbuilding her forms in white earthenware, Nickel normally begins with large press-molded components that are subsequently altered and embellished through a process that could be likened to natural growth—the encrustation of ancient stone walls with lichens and mosses or the embrace of columns by creeping ivy. Working with a stiff paper-clay slip, Nickel might employ a palette knife to articulate scale patterns like those on a green pinecone. In other areas she might trail that same slip in a loose crosshatching that resembles interwoven layers of vines or meandering root formations wrapped tightly over constricted forms. Approximating the fibrous textures of rinds or striated plant stalks, she often impresses patterns into her surfaces with natural-object tools such as shells or fish bones. A V-shaped cross section of animal bone has, for example, proved ideal for producing textures resembling those of the softly indented surfaces of some succulent plants.

In order to accentuate these textures, both to heighten their impact on the eye from a distance and to reinforce certain rhetorical content having to do with light and shadow, Nickel permits the clay to dry and then applies a thin wash of black copper oxide and water to the entire surface, lightly sponging away all but the residue of this mixture that remains in the recessed areas. Color is added through the application of terra sigillatas, some in natural earthen hues and others tinted with various oxides, including cobalt and chrome. During firing the traces of black copper oxide burn through the opaque terra sigillata, increasing tonal contrast and enhancing the visual effect of depth. The dark smudges of copper oxide also introduce a degree of organic irregularity, which for Nickel provides an important counter to the more-controlled aspects of the work.

The dynamic between control and accident, order and randomness, reinforces an underlying theme of complementariness to which Nickel has consciously adhered throughout the series. In addition to the pairing of matter and energy, with its metaphorical implications of body and spirit, and the dyad of nature and culture that is referenced in the combination of organic imagery and architectural form, a vaguer duality has often infiltrated her sculptures. Describing this as an ironic interdependence of the attractive and the repulsive, she attributes to it a curious influence over the creative process. Although admirers frequently describe her sculptures as beautiful, Nickel stresses that her inspiration sometimes derives from objects that she finds fascinating, yet at the same time, disconcerting or even sinister. The heads of insects, with their great unblinking eyes have, for example, influenced more than one of her works. In some cases, forms have derived from reflection on melancholic or even tragic themes. The process of altering and enhancing such forms, however, invariably softens them, leaving only hints of an unspecified pathos among the more aesthetically tranquil elements.

If these shadowy traces of pessimism had been omitted from Nickel's illuminated organic forms, her sculptures might reasonably have been described as decorative. Despite their deliberate cultivation of dualities, they might have proved incapable of moving the viewer on any level deeper than that of simple appreciation of formal

LETTING IN THE LIGHT SLUMPED GLASS FOR SCONCES

dynamism. After all, their metaphorical evocations of a linked body and spirit only acquire poignancy from a vague apprehension of the frailty of this union. Life free from the shadow of death is in the end only a fantasy, and representations of this unreal state may, like pleasing patterns, momentarily charm the dreamer within, yet lack the power to spark a more lasting reflection. The dark spots of copper oxide in Nickel's works, suggestive of a creeping decay, couple with the ephemerality of the actual light emanating from the forms to confirm the artist's sensitivity to the imperative of the tragic in any art that purports to encompass the human condition. The pathos infiltrating the beauty of Nickel's sculptures is thus their guarantor of sustained relevancy. Ultimately, her works owe their success as metaphors to a willingness to embrace the inevitable and not merely the desirable in human experience.

the author *Glen R. Brown is a professor of art history at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.*

Nickel acquired some rudimentary glass-forming skills when she began her current series of sculptures in the mid-1990s. The glass components, convex panes set into the ceramic frames from behind, were originally made through a simple process of slumping. After bisque firing the ceramic elements, Nickel cut flat sheets of float glass (ordinary window glass) into shapes corresponding to the apertures in the sculptures, leaving the dimensions slightly larger than those required in the final forms. Laying the sculptures face down in the kiln and setting the glass panes over the openings in the ceramic walls, she fired her pieces a second time to about 1472°F (800°C), a temperature considerably lower than that of the bisque firing. Slumping with the heat, the glass elements acquired the curving dimensions

of the surrounding ceramic forms. At the proper moment, Nickel crash-cooled the kiln to about 1292°F (700°C), then allowed it to continue cooling naturally, fixing the glass elements with the desired curvature. Easily removed after, these elements can be sandblasted to give them a softer translucency and permanently reinstalled once the ceramic forms had passed through the final firing.

In her recent work, Nickel has adopted the more complex procedure of casting the glass components in silica-and-plaster molds, a technique that not only allows for greater precision but permits her to incorporate patterns into the surfaces as well. The resulting glass forms are integrated into the ceramic structures exactly as before.



"Light Sconce #10," 19 in. (48 cm) in height, handbuilt white earthenware, with terra sigillata, vitreous slip, glaze, cast glass and incandescent light, 2004, by Grace Nickel, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.