

SCHOLASTIC

ART

FEBRUARY 1997

VOL. 27, No. 4 ISSN
1060-832X. PUBLISHED
IN COOPERATION WITH
THE NATIONAL GALLERY
OF ART, FORMERLY ART
& MAN

Sculpting in Clay

Featuring Robert Arneson

 SCHOLASTIC



COVER: Robert Arneson (1930-1992). *Balderdash-Dash*, 1978. Glazed ceramic. 33 1/2" high. Private collection. Photo George Adams Gallery, NY, NY.

SCHOLASTIC ART

Maurice R. Robinson, founder of Scholastic Inc., 1895-1982

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POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360) is published six times during the school year, Sept/Oct., Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of Publication: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmaster: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St., P.O. Box 3710 Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

U.S. prices: \$7.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$18.00 student, \$31.80 Teacher's Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$1.90 student, \$2.95 Teacher's. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Subscription communications should be addressed to SCHOLASTIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710 or by calling 1-800-631-1586. Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 555 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012-3999. Art@Scholastic.com/326. Canadian address: Scholastic-TAB Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfilm through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Worcester, OH 44691. Copyright © 1997 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher.

Printed in U.S.A.

Bringing Clay to Life

Many centuries separate all of the figures shown here, but do they look that different?



Working thousands of years ago, African artists created expressive clay sculptures like the one shown above.

Nok head, Nigeria. 400 B.C. - 100 A.D. National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria. Art Resource.

Did it ever occur to you that when you do a class assignment involving clay, you are using the same material people used 35,000 years ago? The first sculptures ever created were made from the only materials available—rock, wood, and clay. And, over time, prehistoric people found they could make their clay objects hard by putting them in a fire. Later cultures learned to decorate clay objects with paint or *glaze*, a material that bonds with clay and gives it a rich, bright surface.

China and Japan were among the earliest civilizations to create sophisticated clay sculptures. The Japanese warrior figure (right), called a *Haniwa* (HAN-ee-wah, which means circle of clay), was created around 400 A.D. The base at the bottom enabled dozens of these figures to be set into the

ground around tombs to keep them protected. Since the sculptures were made for ritual purposes, all Haniwa figures tend to look the same. The forms are angular and highly simplified, the eyes and mouth are slits, the eyebrows are raised.

A strong ceramic tradition developed in Nigeria, West Africa, centered around the village of Nok. Many highly stylized earthenware heads, like the one shown above, have been found. A Nok head almost always has large, almost triangular eyes. The elaborate hairstyles were designed to hold feathers. The clay has been mixed with rocks, giving the sculpture a rough, grainy texture.

Ceramic sculpture reached a peak in Europe, with a civilization that existed in Italy



Japanese Haniwa figures like the one on the left have influenced the work of many contemporary ceramists, including this month's featured artist, Robert Arneson.

Haniwa Warrior, Japan. 4th-6th century A.D. 38" high. Guimet Museum, Paris. Art Resource.



Ancient Etruscan artists created some of the most realistic clay figures ever made.

Etruscan sarcophagus figures from Cerveteri, c. 520 B.C. Clay, length 6' 7". National Museum, Villa Giulia. Art Resource.

before the Roman Empire began. The *Etruscans* (about 700 to 400 B.C.) buried their dead in clay tombs that were topped with life-size sculptures of the occupants—often a whole family. The figures shown above laugh and talk while lying on their own coffin. By *modeling* this sculpture in clay instead of *carving* it in stone, the artist was able to include small details such as the hair, ears, and fingers. These sculptures were brightly painted, and the deceased couple seem to be alive, and enjoying themselves.

At the beginning of the 20th century, ceramics was considered a craft, not an art. Ceramic artists were doing wonderful pieces. But only an acknowledged fine artist like Pablo Picasso could make people realize that ceramics can be as much of an art as sculpture. Toward the end of his life, Picasso began working with clay. Realizing it would take a lifetime to learn to throw and glaze well, the artist hired ceramists to carry out designs such the figure on the right. Picasso experimented with materials, broadening the possibilities of what could be created in clay.



The ceramic figure above, created by Pablo Picasso, can also be used as a pitcher.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). Water pitcher in the form of a woman, 1949. Picasso Museum, Antibes. Art Resource.

The Many Faces of Robert Arneson

"I want to make high art that is funny, outrageous and also reveals the human condition, which is not always high."—Robert Arneson

The first self-portrait Robert Arneson ever made (below) was ruined in the kiln. Find out how he was able to use it anyway.

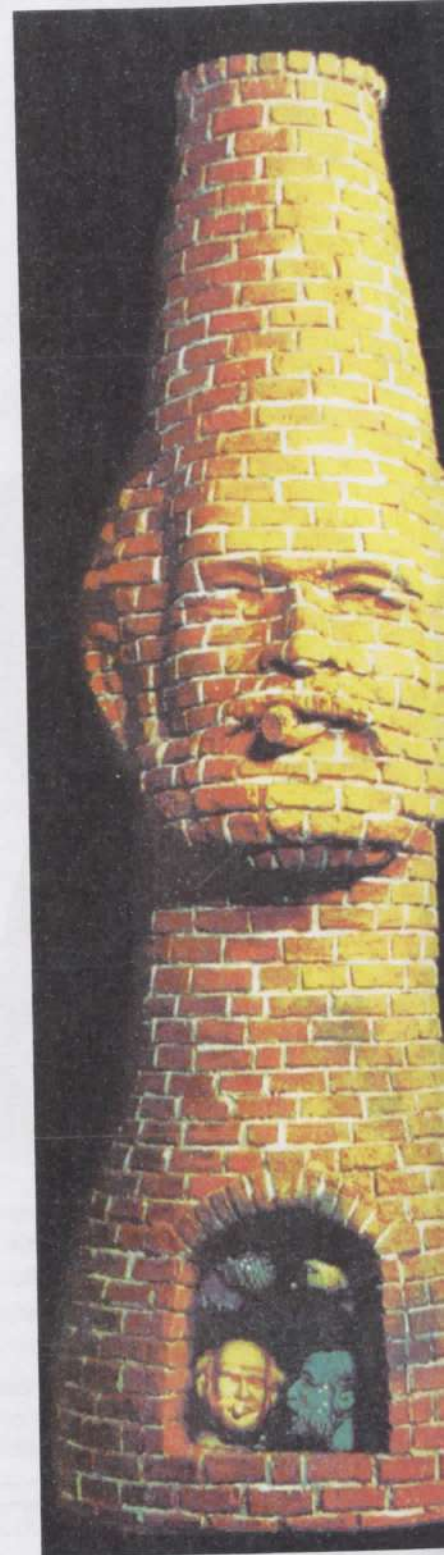
Self Portrait of the Artist Losing His Marbles, 1965. Glazed ceramic and marbles. 31" high. Private Collection.



Compare these clay sculptures with those on the previous pages. It is easy to recognize the ancient figures as great works of art. They are all beautiful. All the forms "work" in space. The eye moves over the surfaces in a pleasing way. And they all capture the essence of the human figure. It is harder to recognize the figures shown here, done by American ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson, as great works of art. They may not be beautiful, but they fulfill all the other qualifications. And they have one quality the others don't—a sense of humor.

Robert Arneson's work is known for being funny, critical, and outrageous. And his favorite object of criticism was himself. Arneson was born in 1930, in a small town near San Francisco. He taught himself to draw by copying comic strips. At 17, he was doing cartoons for the local newspaper so he didn't much care that he received a D in ceramics class. After he graduated from college and got a teaching job, he realized he would have to teach his least favorite subject—ceramics. So he enrolled in a ceramics class. He later said, "I was always making a fool of myself at the potter's wheel. Finally I learned to make a 'well-turned' pot. It was perfect. But it was also very dead." How-

Kiln Man, 1971. Terracotta. 36" high.



ever, he discovered that he loved ceramics.

In the early 1960s, Arneson began making ceramic pots with the organic qualities of sculpture. He was influenced by Picasso's ceramics, by ancient Japanese Haniwa figures (see page 3), and by other artists working in the San Francisco Bay area. Arneson was soon creating some of the most outrageous examples of "Funk" art, as this ironic, crude, and playful style of art from California was called.

Arneson did his first self-portrait (far left) in 1965, using the potter's wheel. The work split when he fired it in the kiln (a furnace for baking pottery). So he filled the crack with marbles, calling it *Self Portrait of the Artist Losing His Marbles*. *Kiln Man* (left) is a portrait of the artist as his tool. Arneson's use of **implied texture** (the clay only looks like brick) symbolized his need to link the arts of the bricklayer, the potter, and the sculptor.

Why might Arneson have chosen to make one of *Klown's* (below) ears a bright red-orange?

Klown, 1978. Glazed ceramic. 37" high. Des Moines Art Center. Photo George Adams Gallery, NY, NY.



In the 1970s, the artist's self-portraits took on a darker tone. During those years, Arneson developed can-

cer, and his work reflects his feelings. In both *Klown* (below left) and the head on the cover, Arneson hides his own face with a skintight mask. The tongues stick out grotesquely. In *Last Gasp* (below center), the artist gasps for air above the water spilling down the column. The beard's **rough vertical texture** adds to the feeling of **movement**. The **shaggy head** contrasts with the **smooth, wet-looking water**.

At the end of his career, Arneson created biting social comments. *Holy War Head* (below right) is a distorted head set on a pedestal covered

***Last Gasp* (below), which shows a human head coming up for air, was done during a difficult period of the artist's life.**

Last Gasp, 1980. Glazed ceramic. 52" high. Private Collection. Photo George Adams Gallery, NY, NY.



with words describing the effects of nuclear war. Robert Arneson died in 1992, nine years after completing this work.

To create the work below, Arneson dented one side of a clay head with a baseball bat to distort the features. He covered the pedestal with even, unemotional lines of words describing the effects of war. When parts of the text fell off during the firing process, the artist decided to leave it. It looked like just another casualty of war.

Holy War Head, 1982-83. Glazed ceramic. 72" high. Private Collection.



Portraits of the Artists

"I like art that has humor, wit, irony, and playfulness."—Robert Arneson



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➤ The subject of Robert Arneson's sculpture on the right is Pablo Picasso, probably the most famous artist of the 20th century. Here Arneson comments on Picasso's work, his personality, and his place in art history.

Pablo Ruiz with Itch, 1980. Glazed ceramic. 87" high. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Photo George Adams Gallery, NY, NY.



➤ In the work on the left, Arneson splattered paint on a portrait of artist Jackson Pollock to make a clever statement about Pollock's work.

Jackson Pollock, 1983. Glazed ceramic. 23" high. Private collection.

Preview

At the beginning of the 1980s, Robert Arneson said, "I'm interested in doing what it seems you can't do—and that's to mix humor and fine art. Humor is generally considered low art, but I think humor is very serious. It points out our mistakes and errors of judgment. Because I deal with self-criticism in my self-portraits, I am going to have to think about all the criticism I've been getting lately."

As Arneson's work became more well-known, he began to find out how hard it is to create humorous art works and have them taken seriously. Most of his sculptures are clever visual jokes, but they also have deeper meanings. Arneson was interested in art history, and he based many of his works on well-known artists. His portraits are not merely likenesses. They also incorporate qualities associated with his subject's work, personality, and place in the history of art.

One of Arneson's favorite artists was early-20th-century Spaniard Pablo Picasso (1881-1973. See page 3). Arneson places *Pablo Ruiz with Itch* (left) at the very top of a classical column made up of examples of Picasso's many art styles. The head is taken directly from a Picasso self-portrait. The angular pose refers to one of Picasso's most famous paintings. Arneson comments on Picasso's financial success by showing the famous artist "scratching his own back."

Another of Arneson's artistic heroes was American Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), who revolutionized modern art with his canvases filled with splashes, drips, and trails of paint. In *Jackson Pollock* (far left), Arneson captures the worried, distant look seen in photos of the artist. Arneson admires Pollock. But he questions the legend of the artist as tragic hero by covering the portrait with a random pattern of spattered paint that looks just like a Pollock painting.

Robert Arneson also did sculptures—like the pair of shoes on the right—based on the works of American painter Philip Guston (1913-1980). Guston created a world of sinister, cartoon-like figures. He depicts scenes from his own life, featuring himself as a hooded figure, a bloated head, or a huge pair of feet as in the painting titled *Sleeping* (top, right). Arneson probably identified with Guston's use of dark humor to express serious issues.

Look carefully at a dollar bill. Do you recognize Arneson's portrait of George Washington on pages 8-9? In *George and Mona in the Baths of Coloma*, George is accompanied by Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, probably the most famous—and expensive—work of art in the world. *Mona Lisa* is known for her smile. George smiles too. By putting these two together, what do you think Arneson might be saying about money, happiness, the art world and the combination of all three?



Philip Guston (1913-1980). *Sleeping*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 84" x 69". Private collection.



A
Robert Arneson admired the paintings of artist Philip Guston (see work at the top of the page). Arneson did this pair of ceramic shoes as a tribute to Guston.

Homage to Philip Guston (1913-1980), 1980. Glazed ceramic. 38" (left shoe); 42 1/2" (right shoe). Private Collection. 84" x 69". Private collection.

AFTER ARNESON

Each of these artists has used clay in a very different way.



< Frog World

How would you feel if you ordered a burger and the object shown on the left was put in front of you?

The creator of this "frog burger," contemporary American ceramic sculptor David Gilhooly, began his career in the 1960's as a student of Robert Arneson at the University of California. Gilhooly's work, like Arneson's, is based on humorous plays on words. *Mad Dave Burger* is an example of the series of ceramic pieces for which Gilhooly is best known.

The artist looks at society through the eyes of the animal world. He is particularly interested in the frog civilization, which he sees as developing parallel to the human civilization. In his ceramic works, the artist traces the history of well-known frog personalities—they appear on money, in food, as heroic statues. Gilhooly says, "The frog interprets and appreciates our culture as badly as we interpret his. Though usually we're worse."

In addition to the frog, this burger contains an absurd pile of raw steaks, slabs of cheese, whole eggs, blood-red tomatoes, and rubbery lettuce. The work makes a sly commentary on the quality of life in our fast-food society.

"Anything that might concern you about life can be corrected by expressing it in clay."—David Gilhooly

David Gilhooly, b. 1943. *Mad Dave Burger*, 1993. Ceramic. 14 1/2" high. John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA.



< Giants in Clay

Since childhood, contemporary American sculptor Viola Frey has been fascinated with small ceramic figurines. She has collected them for years at flea markets and thrift shops. The artist is especially interested in the ones she feels are "too awful to use right away." Twenty years ago, at the beginning of her career, Frey began to create her own clay figures, enlarging them, and combining them in groups. They became larger and larger, and so did the concepts behind them.

The ceramic sculpture on the left, *Artist/Mind/Studio/World*, is over seven feet tall. In this work, an enormous woman is surrounded by smaller figures. Most of the small figures are

men dressed in business suits. Perhaps this is the way the artist experiences the world. Art and the artist, symbolized by the tall woman and the classical column in the center, are surrounded by men in suits, a sign of power in corporate America. The men hold, or control, even smaller doll-like figures. But no one can control the creativity of the artist who towers over everyone.

This huge ceramic piece was made in parts that were fired separately, then put together. The sculpture was painted with thick, brilliant patches of glaze. The artist uses only **primary colors**—bright **reds, blues, and yellows**—to intensify the power of this monumental work.

"If you say 'clay is art,' that becomes a battleground. No one knows what clay is. It just becomes what it needs to be."—Viola Frey

Viola Frey, b. 1933. *Artist/Mind/Studio/World*, Series III, 1993. Ceramic, 75" x 50" x 50". Photo, Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NY, NY.

▼ Ceramic Landscapes

Contemporary American ceramic artist Wayne Higby grew up in the high mountains and open landscape of Colorado. For the past 20 years, the artist has lived in a small town in upstate New York, not far from

the Great Lakes. The spectacular natural settings of these two areas have been the driving force behind Higby's unusual ceramic landscapes.

One of his best-known pieces, *Tower Lands Winter* (be-

low) was inspired by a stay on the coast of Maine, where the rocks and the ocean seemed to meet. The artist says, "The boulders, the water stretching around them, and the sky arching over the whole landscape all seemed to be in balance." Somehow, Higby has made the

elements in this sculpture seem distant. Yet they all appear to be on a **single flat plane** that is close to the viewer.

If you look closely at this piece, you can see that it is actually made up of five different containers. When the sections are moved apart, each works as a separate design. The **straight, angular, geometric shapes** of the containers contrast with, and **visually balance**, the **natural curves** of the water, snow, and mountains. The entire composition seems to flow together, making it hard to tell where one section stops and the other begins.

"I'm interested in the way things in the landscape hold one another."—Wayne Higby



Wayne Higby, b. 1943. *Tower Lands Winter*, 1988. Five landscape containers. Earthenware, Raku. 14 7/8" x 33 1/4" x 4" Photo courtesy of the artist.

VISUAL JOKES

The odd-looking creature on the left is made up of clay figures that are featured somewhere in this issue.

Can you find each of them?

1. Can you find the work each of the details shown on the left is from and write down the page number?

A _____ D _____ G _____
 B _____ E _____
 C _____ F _____

2. Which of the following terms could be used to describe the sculptural characteristics of each detail? Write in the corresponding letter (or letters; several styles might apply).

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| _____ Curved shapes | _____ Angular shapes |
| _____ Color glazes | _____ Monochrome |
| _____ Rough texture | _____ Smooth texture |
| _____ Shiny surface | _____ Dull surface |
| _____ Concave shapes | _____ Convex shapes |
| _____ Incised lines | _____ Raised lines |
| _____ Implied texture | _____ True texture |

3. Some of the oldest sculptures found in the ruins of ancient civilizations were made of clay. Based on the information provided in this issue, can you put the details on the left in chronological order. Just fill in the letters below, oldest to most recent. (Hint: the list begins with B.)

B _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____

4. Which artist or culture created each of these images?

A _____ D _____
 B _____ E _____
 C _____ F _____
 G _____



Name _____

Per 2 or 9 ○

Scholastic Art Skills Master

Reading!
100 pts

Sculpting in Clay

Featuring Robert Arneson

1. Why did people first begin working in clay? What were some of the clay processes they learned?
2. Who were the Etruscans and what was unusual about some of the clay figures they sculpted?
3. Name three characteristics shared by all the sculptures you've seen in this issue.
4. Robert Arneson said, "Finally I learned to make a 'well-turned' pot. It was correct, perfect, but basically very dead." What do you think the artist meant by that statement?
5. How did Arneson utilize a mistake he made while doing his first self-portrait? Does his attitude give you any ideas about creating your own art?
6. Can you find some examples of "Implied texture" in the works on these pages? What is the artist trying to communicate with this device?
7. How did Arneson go about creating *Holy War Head*?
8. In his work *Pablo Ruiz with Itch*, how does Arneson see artist Pablo Picasso?
9. Why would paint spattered on Jackson Pollock's portrait be a clever statement about Pollock's work?
10. The painting on page 7 by artist Philip Guston in some ways resembles a cartoon. Does this work look very funny? How might Robert Arneson have identified with Guston?
11. By inventing a world peopled by frogs instead of human beings, what do you think artist David Gilhooly is saying about contemporary society?
12. Viola Frey's sculpture is called *Artist/Mind/Studio/World*. What do you think this title means?
13. What is unusual about Wayne Higby's ceramic landscape?

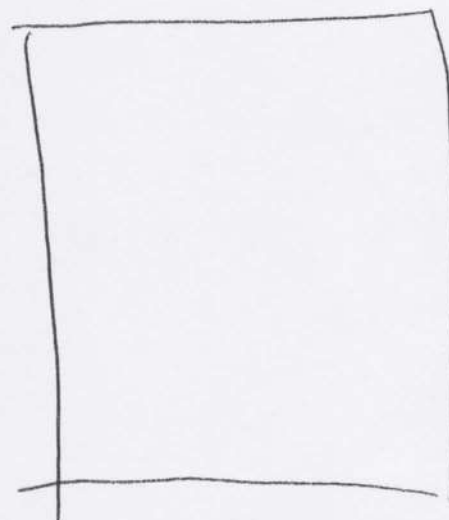
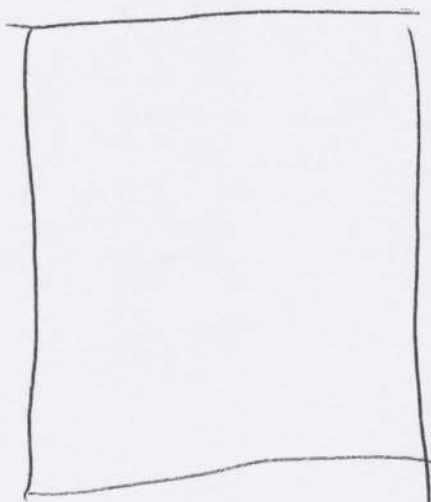
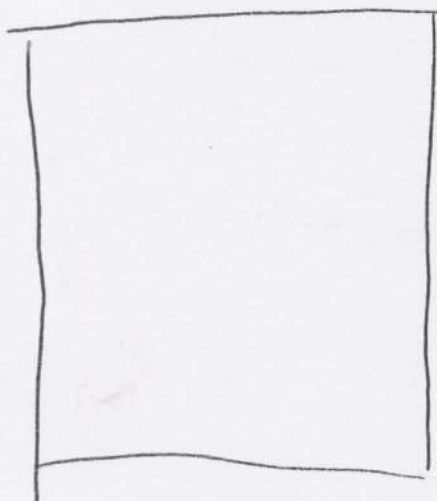
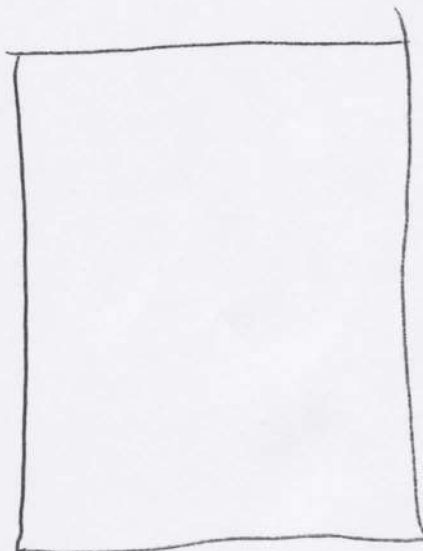
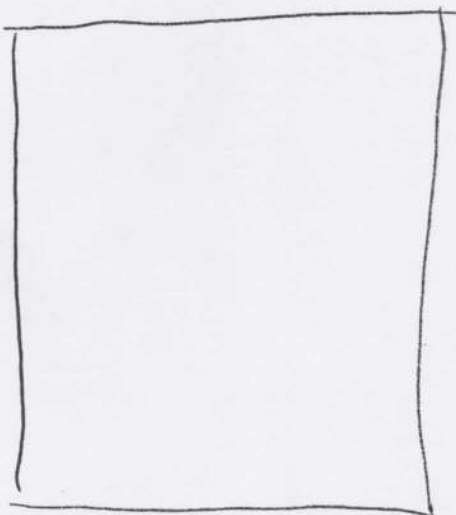
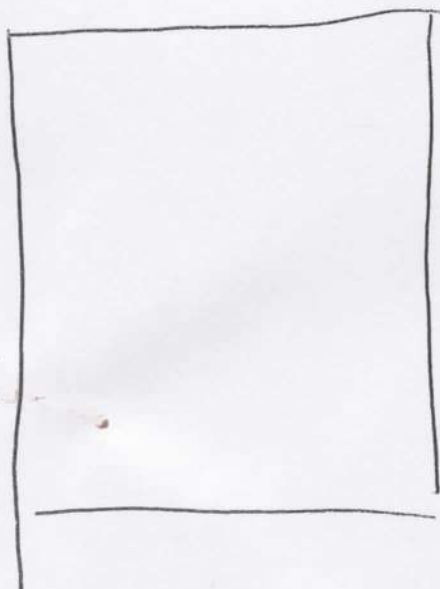
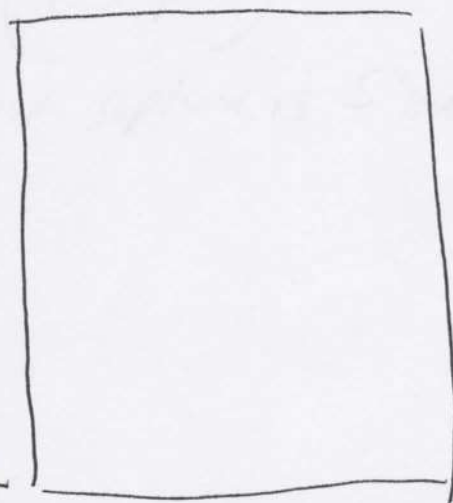
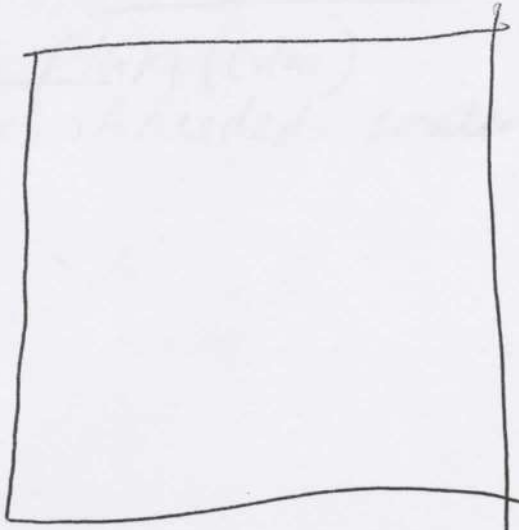
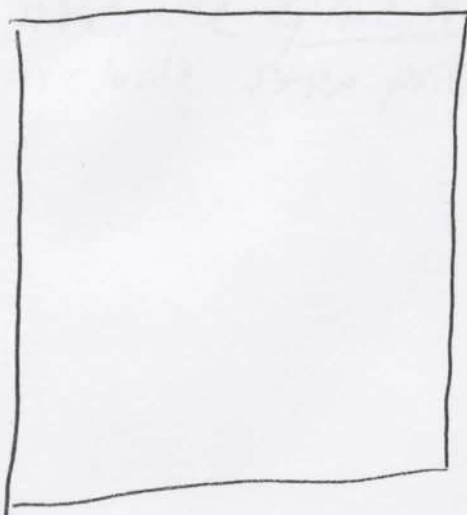
★ Complete last page
Quiz on Back

SELF PORTRAIT in Clay using
Spheres + Cylinders -

NAME _____

Thumbnails

35 pts



Self Portrait in Clay NAME

Plan Drawing with Measurements (65 pts)

- include glazing plan (color)
- include extra pages if needed. smallest sphere is 5" dia.