

CATCHING SHADOWS BY CLAY: A CRITICAL SELF-READING IN CERAMIC ART

A. Feyza ÇAKIR ÖZGÜNDOĞDU

...
*Stop seeking those trees
For there is nobody under them anymore
Only shadow and light on a white cover
We, blinking on and off.*

(M.C. Anday, 1973)

In Turkish language, there is a saying "If only those walls could speak..." These words sometimes express a certain demand from the walls for "testimony, taking a stroll down memory lane" and sometimes those words stand for the trust towards the sincerity of walls which have been the primary witnesses of the spaces filled with agony, the walls which have seen everything and although no one knows now, those walls have already sucked these images and sounds. Walls are the ones left standing, enduring but eventually even they collapse... "Those standing" call out from such distinct times for someone who is from my own geography.

In any intercity journey on these lands, you have a chance to see the structures of ancient civilizations or hear the walls left from these societies once you look through the car window. Thanks to its strategic position at the intersection of Asia and Europe, Anatolia -*Asia Minor* in Latin- has been a cradle of many civilizations since prehistoric ages. As time went by, these civilizations have been silenced under ground but revitalized through excavations layer by layer. Whilst digging the ground with patience, the thrill a researcher who reunites a piece of earthenware or a figurine with sunshine is a combination of not only a weird excitement that you feel after hearing a long-awaited news but also some kind of grief. Inevitably, you ask yourself: Who made that earthenware pots, who used it, who touched it last, how did it end up under ground? The deepest feeling of this dynamic geography's people feels is rapid changes and temporariness. That accounts for the reason why there are many traces on walls and ceramic pots.



View at Hattusha, archeological findings and the part of reconstructed city wall, Turkey

Soil is a loyal friend in Anatolia; it is life itself, the Mother Earth. It embodies all forms of codes. It is more than a simple biological symbol of fertility; it further symbolizes patience and worldly wisdom. In certain anonymous Anatolian folksongs, we hear the lines: *"...I would crack down if I were a stone, I am soil that is how I am still one part..."* Perhaps except those lines above, nothing could better express the endurance and patience of Anatolian people identifying themselves with soil. The creator of man, patient and strong mother earth, is the one embodying all. In ancient Greek mythology there is mother earth; creator goddess *Gaia* at the very early start of anything. In Middle Eastern myths as well we can see that all life activities of people are based on self-achievement and rejuvenation of soil. The cycles of water and air are the dynamics guaranteeing soil's fertility; they are in a sense circulation systems.

Such embracing and completing view of soil in many cultures has determined the form of a good number of belief systems as well. The created or self-created human being sees himself as a part and reflection of the 'unity'. For the self-actualization of this unity, each living being within the complex chain of nature system lives and dies, appears and disappears *"...blinks on and off."* In this holistic approach, reflection or in other words image of shadow cannot possibly be interpreted as a cheap piece of copy. On the contrary it manifests the reality of existence; it is actually the reality itself.



Shadow puppet show from Turkey: "Karagöz and Hacivat"

Image of shadow has a layered structure of meaning in the visual memory, idea and belief systems of Far East and Middle East. Shadow play is a major element of this visual memory. As a traditional performance art, shadow play employs an ancient technique which makes use of light source to reflect certain forms on a curtain to narrate a motion story. *"We can imagine Stone Age people, living in caves during the last Ice Age, sitting around open campfires fires that make fascinating shadows dance on the wall. Soon they would have discovered out how to use their bodies, hands or simple figures made from sticks, feather and animal skins, to help tell the old stories of their family and clan. The earliest forms of shadow puppet theatre are thought to have originated in Asia. Both India and China have extremely ancient shadow puppet tradition that still flourishes today...From out of India and China, the form spread across the globe, following trade routes to Turkey and Northern Africa, and even later to Europe and America" (1).*

In some eastern beliefs, just like the figures and objects seen on the curtain reflecting physical reality, life is indeed no more than a mere reflection as a replica of shadow play. In holistic approach everything is actually composed of shadows that are references to the existence of one single light. According to a different point of view, pure light or darkness indicates nonexistence for our visual world hence they structure their interpretations on top of this approach. Accordingly, the existence of shadows enables us to define what we see and perceive the space. "We orientate ourselves by means of shadows and their nuances of black and white. As vestiges of the contact between light and objects they give us information about the characteristics of objects by betraying spatial dimensions and structures through their very existence. The superficiality of any material comes into being first of all by means of the smallest

shadow. This is as valid for objects in our immediate environment - which are dependent on our immediate recognition of them as shadows – as for planets and stars. There are shadows in every dimension... Shadows are witnesses of the encounter between the material world and a world in which material things play only a minor role. They are the sole visible but yet immaterial substances, a passageway, a door between two worlds" (2).



Kumi Yamashita's shadow's works

Shadow itself is not physical but it is associated with physical object. This reflection could be dynamic too depending on the source of light or curtain. This dynamic condition allows us to reconsider the concept of temporariness by rethinking about the time dimension we are in. Together with all those meaning layers it possesses, the shadow presents a different dimension of reality in artistic expression and appears before us in a variety of uses in modern art. Kumi Yamashita's shadows are figures which emerge silently on walls and which go beyond the reality of physical object that shapes it. Aluminum plate mold mounted on wall and source of light all call out through walls. Regarding the existence of distinct perspectives and judgments in his works, Yamashita comments that: "Through my work I wish to remind ourselves of how we preconceive what is around and inside us. It is easy to passively turn to prepared information. Knowledge, ideas, and values are too often accepted without questioning" (3).



Passage of "Ghosts of the River" (ShadowLight Productions)

In expressions of modern performance, as the subject itself the shadow calls us out from a dimension dissimilar to physical references. Performance shows of Director Larry Reed are brilliant artistic samples on this field. Theatre artist, filmmaker and shadow master, Larry Reed founded ShadowLight Productions in 1972 by to nurture indigenous shadow theater traditions and to explore and expand the possibilities of the shadow theatre medium by creating innovative interdisciplinary, multicultural works.



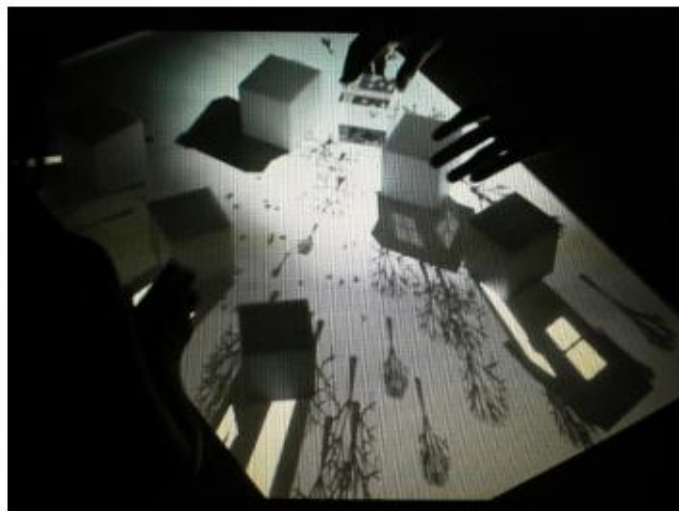
Passage of "Ghosts of the River" (ShadowLight Productions)

2009 dated play "Ghosts of the River" written by Octavio Solis and directed by Larry Reed is a multidisciplinary show composed of specially designed shadow puppets, actor-actress performances and music. Ghosts of the River features ShadowLight's hallmark shadow casting method, which combines the Balinese Traditional shadow theatre technique, the scale of film, and the immediacy of live performance. Performed behind and in front of a large (30' x 15') screen, Ghosts of the River tells the tales of extraordinary journeys utilizing silhouettes of puppets, masked-actors, and cutout sets, as well as projections and live music. This show, in addition to a great number of its fiction details, the shadow itself as a visual element, the attitude of exclusive reality it embodies, is a perspective that should not be overlooked in this performance (4).



Passage of the video, "Augmented Shadow" (Joon Y. Moon)

Such language of reflection stands before us commonly in a great number of modern art projects with digital artistic practices. Joon Y. Moon's work "Augmented Shadow" can be given as a sample. "Augmented Shadow" is a design experiment producing an artificial shadow effect through the use of tangible objects, blocks, on a displayable tabletop interface. Its goal is to offer a new type of user-experience. The project plays on the fact that shadows present distorted silhouettes depending on the light. Augmented Shadows take the distortion effect into the realm of fantasy. Shadows display below the objects according to the physics of the real world. However, the shadows themselves transform the objects into houses, occupied by shadow creatures. By moving the blocks around the table the user sets off series of reactions within this new fantasy ecosystem (5).



"In this world creatures are linked to each other, mainly affected by light..."

Passage of the video, "Augmented Shadow" (Joon Y. Moon)

The final example I would like to render on digital shadow projects is Cynthia Pachikara's 2005 dated "Taking Place" which I deem to be parallel to my ceramic works on account of its way of thinking. This piece is part of a larger project entitled, "Shadow Catching." The process employs a screen mounted to a 16 foot moving truck to isolate and record shadows from the urban environment. Like the impressions of the landscape framed through a windshield, images glide by at cruising speed to tell an abstract story of a city. At her installation titled "Shadow catching" (2006) two distant landscapes slide by each other on a bent screen. Shadows taken in the early morning light in Ann Arbor comingle with silhouettes of coconut groves in Kerala, India, registering the 14-hour time difference between the two places (6).



Passages of the video of Catching Shadows, Cynthia Pachikara, 2006

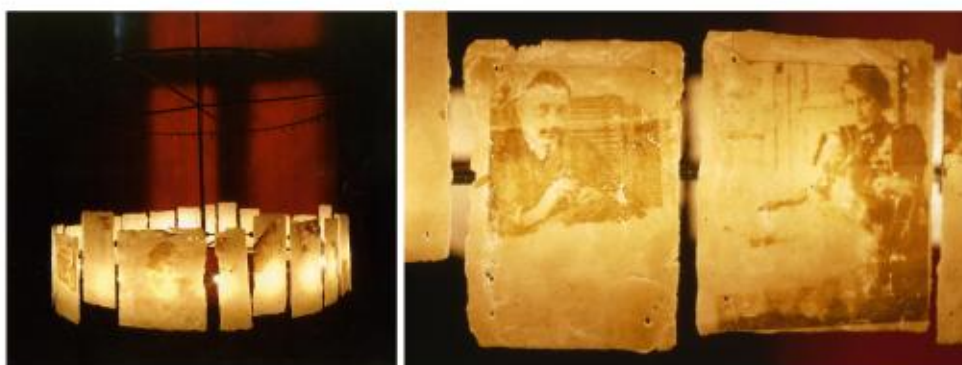
The fact that light adds a different reality of meaning on the surface it falls on is an aesthetical value on its own in three-dimensional pieces of art like sculpture and ceramics. The amount of light fallen over ceramics creates dramatic changes in the perception of main structure. We are aware of a number of samples in which this quality affects the audience as a separate plastic element. The works where color white in particular is preferred or the porcelain is white to prefer the accentuated size effect of the main mass particularly are: The first name that comes to my mind is always Ruth Duckworth. The works of this artist are like plain and yet striking poems.



Works of Ruth Duckworth and Margaret O'Rorke

For those artists who work on light transparent porcelain, it is a real adventure to create shadows by controllably using the light. Margaret O'Rorke is among those artists having experienced this adventure. According to me, just to say "Margaret's porcelains" is simply ignoring another noteworthy element in her works. She is making her light shows by the help of her porcelains.

The connection of ceramic work with light requires that it exhibits the relationships in its composition, the texture and color in a comprehensible and accentuated way for our sight. The element that artist employs while composing size pattern and audience makes use of whilst watching the work is the accurately calculated amount and angle of light, the quality of shadow itself. Opacity formed by semi transparent porcelains within their own structure points to a different use of shadow. In semi transparent porcelains, the see the formation of temporary values created by shadow dimension which emerge as the light is reflected on outer surface or absorbed inside the cut-off-wall.



"Holy family" by Maarit Mäkelä, 1999

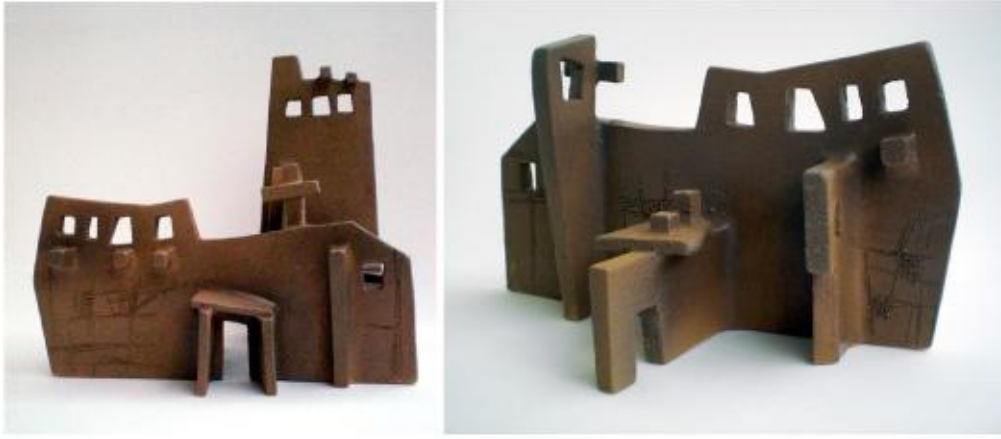
Silkscreen on raindeerbone porcelain (Photo.Rauno Träskelin)

I have already mentioned earlier as I was mentioning the geography I live in that the deepest feeling people of this land possess is rapid changes and temporariness. That is why I acquired a personal intuition and awareness that there should be many traces on walls and earthenware in particular. This subjective sensitivity drove me to perceptual selectivity and eventually to an artistic point of view. As I glance over my shadow-catch adventure, I can see that those shadows that can present a different composition in urban life and fly from the surfaces of buildings to the streets I walk in, to a garden or another building find a meaning in the ceramic buildings I create. Parallel to Cynthia Pachikara's approach, I too try to fix the shadows reflected from the window of my studio to my works on ceramic surfaces. In the end, my shadow diaries that I have been long keeping with passion on photographs or sketches are finally settling in my recent porcelain structures. I catch the shadows I have borrowed on ceramic surfaces and start to vitalize them on my own curtain just like a shadow play director.



Shadows of the studio window, Kecskemet, 2006

I realize that one of my inspirations for the shadows I try to catch via clay is the adobe structures of Central Anatolia. Finding out that historical roots of those clay structures are far too distant and witnessing their archeological traces allow me to visualize the forms I design as an architectural structure. In addition to my earthenware sculptures which reflect clay constructions, in my casted stoneware works too these constructions turn into pure prismatic structures.



Example pieces of the Architectural Collages Serie by Özgündoğdu
Earthenware clay, handbuilt, 2010.

Cast stoneware and porcelain surfaces enable me to employ the right technique for the illusion I want to create with shadows and compositions. Smooth surface and simple texture I possess with the right amount of light and light angle can offer me the dramatic contrast I need. I would rather prefer these forms make a finer preparation with a scene and light exclusive for them than establish a communication between my works and audience in any given time, setting or light. That is exactly why the walls of my ceramic structures fall silent when not exhibited. Just like the curtain of a silent shadow play...They do not expose the shadows I attribute to them. When the right light for shadows is caught however, the stories appear on curtain.



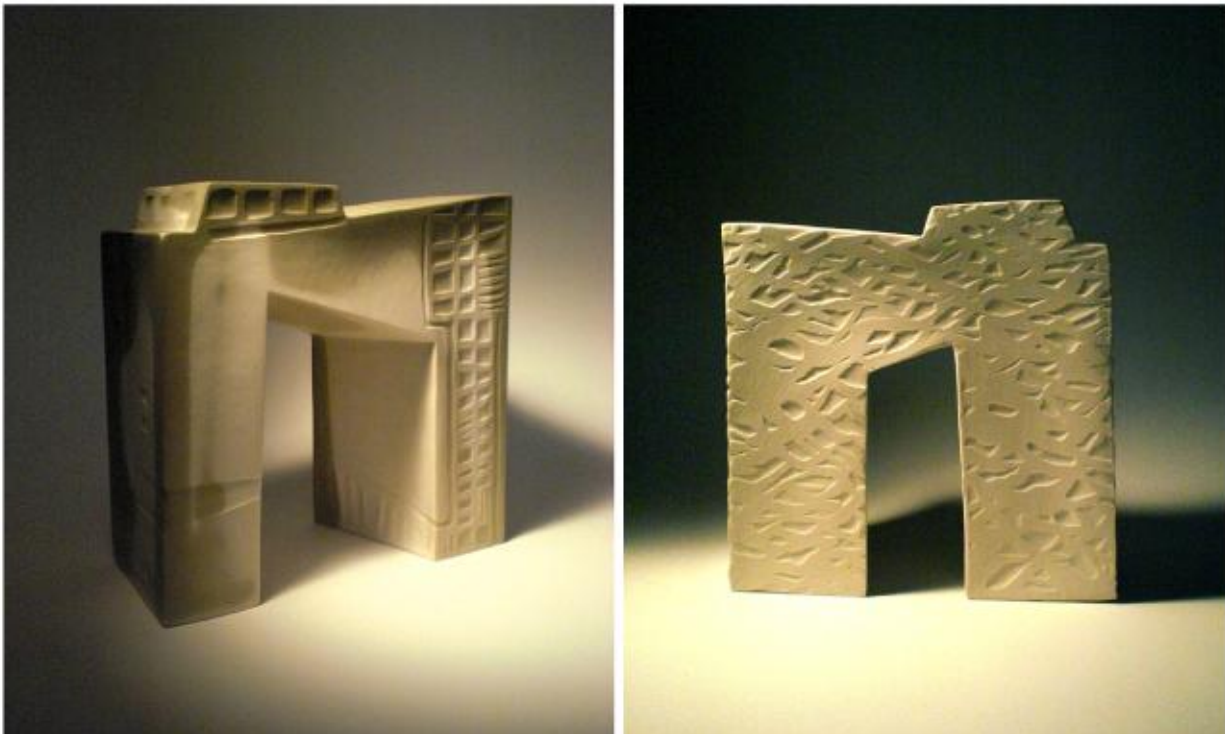
Stoneware cast works by Özgündoğdu, 2010

I create each composition in my structures by consulting to my visual shadow diaries I took notes in sometime somewhere. I draw these notes on the surface while they are unfired then via shellac resist technique I help them to become visible.



Creating shadows by shellac resist technique

The stories I saw through the window of my studio in Kecskemet or Beijing or on the patio in Avanos or the ceiling in my house that shone at night with street lamps can all unite in the very same work. I pick the memories I like from the walls then bury them again in my own walls. I expect the audience as well to hear those voices and find those stories just like an archeologist.



Limoges porcelain cast works by Özgündoğdu, 2010

References

- (1) <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/projects/shadowinfo.html>
- (2) N. Götz. http://www.schattentheater.de/index_e.php
- (3) Kumi Yamashita. <http://yamashitakumi.com/>
- (4) <http://www.shadowlight.org/>
- (5) <http://thesis.joonmoon.net/>
- (6) A. C. Pachikara: Taking Place, Shadow Catching, (2005) <http://vimeo.com/7798492>