



Genesis 7, 2004

Messages in Clay

by Currie Alexander Powers | photography by John S. Cummings

Sylvia Hyman expresses herself as a means of communication, harkening back to the ancient means of marking clay to “convey messages, exchange ideas, relate thoughts, and to record the events of human history through signs, symbols, and the written word.” She provides a reflection of our world, the simple things we touch with our hands—a book, a pencil, a map, a piece of sheet music. Within those objects is a whole universe.

At 93, Sylvia Hyman is very much in the moment, thinking about what comes next. “As long as I’ve got ideas, I’ll continue to work,” she says. With an upcoming show in September at Gallery One (with painter Jeff Faust), her studio is humming with commissions to be completed and new works in progress.

A former Peabody College art teacher, recipient of the Tennessee Arts Commission, Governor’s Lifetime Achievement, and numerous other awards, with gallery shows from California to South Korea, Hyman explored different media from painting to bronze before finding her home with clay. “I ventured in a new direction about twenty years ago,” she says, “when my imagination turned to a form of sculpture known as trompe l’oeil.” Her realistic recreations of everyday objects are breathtaking in their accuracy of detail.

I met with Sylvia Hyman at her Nashville studio and had the honor of watching her work as well as sitting down with her to talk about her messages in clay.



PHOTO: JERRY ATNIP

Master illusionist Sylvia Hyman with one of her creations. Everything is made of clay: the books, the paper, the basket, the hinges...everything!

What is the secret to your longevity as an artist?

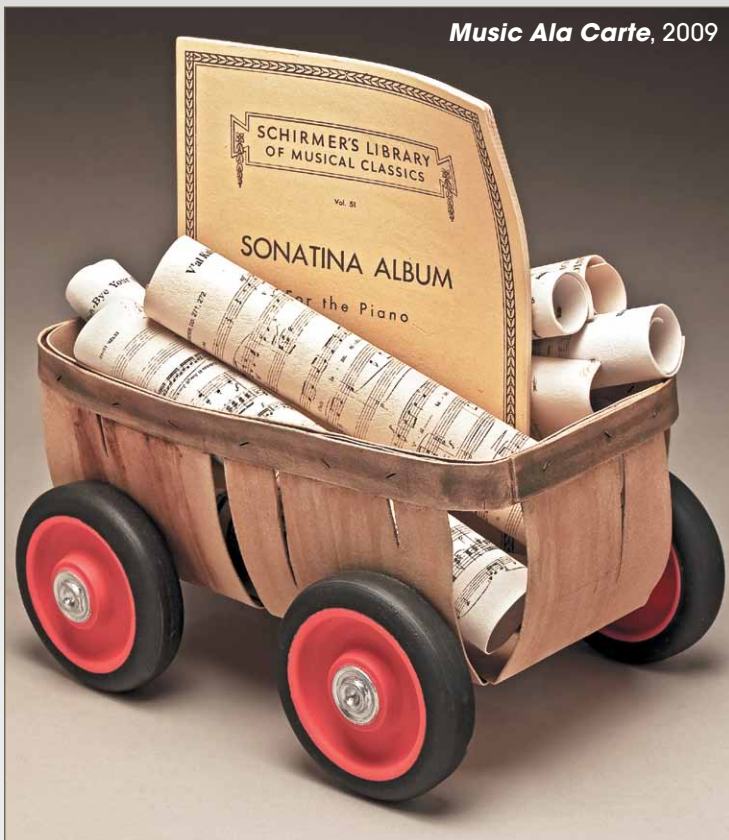
There is no secret. I think it's just determination. The inner workings of my brain have become compulsive about carrying out my ideas. I get an idea of something I want to do, I want to do it! Sometimes I'm motivated to do things that are based on our everyday objects that come out of our culture. Our culture changes so rapidly that letters are becoming obsolete; currency may become obsolete. It's only in retrospect that I can see that when you reflect upon culture, you are building a time capsule.

You are originally from Buffalo and have now lived in Nashville for fifty years.

I love Nashville! I'm very proud to be living here.

Is it the arts community?

It's growing and becoming much more sophisticated than it was in the 1960s. I think more people are supportive of the arts because they're more exposed to it; they've become more conscious of the value of art. Nashville has become a wonderful, receptive community, and I'm very pleased to have been part of that growth. I was one of the founders of the Tennessee Association of Craft Artists, and that organization gave wonderful exposure to those who worked in an art medium but were not accepted by galleries. There were really no venues to show their work. So we started the crafts fairs. That was an eye-opener for many people of how you could use clay, wood, glass—other than paint materials—to make art.



Music Ala Carte, 2009

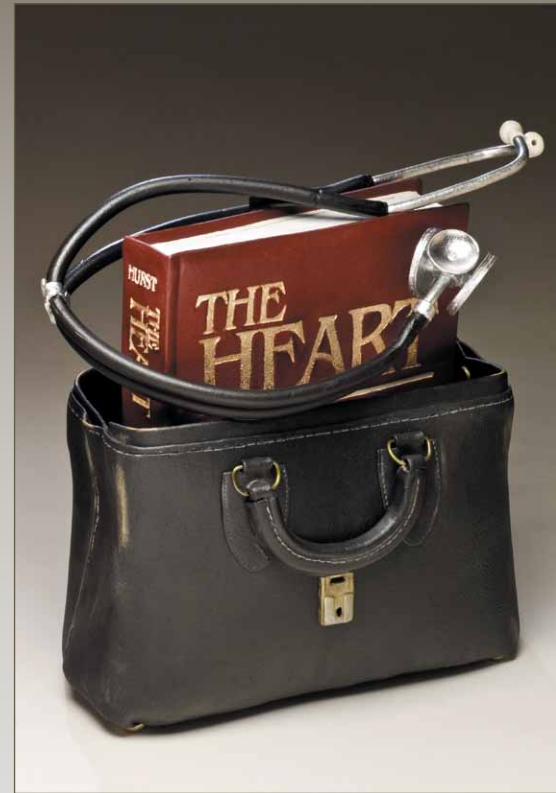
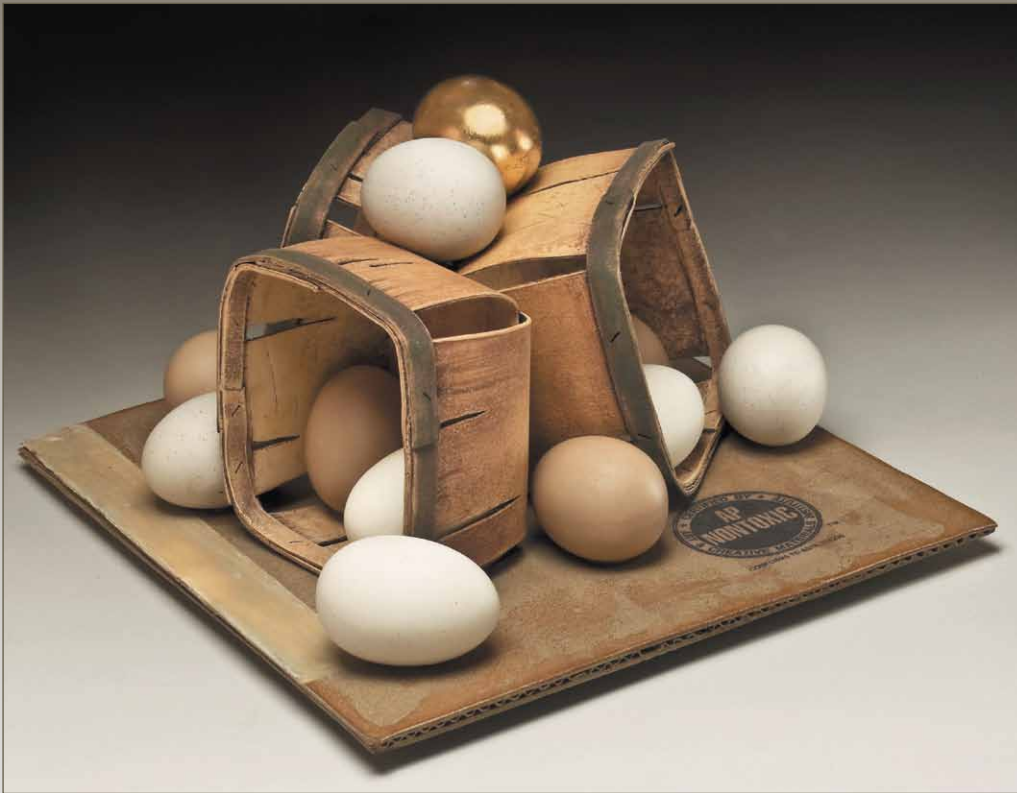
“I try to capture not only the appearance of things but also their essential nature, giving equal weight to meaning and to visual impact.”

Do you think that clay and ceramic art have gained more acceptance in the art world? Is it taken more seriously?

Yes indeed it has. Not just here, all across the country. Becoming a member of the International Academy of Ceramics opened my eyes to the world of art and the world of crafts. Thinking that the United States is always at the forefront, in the lead, is not true. I learned that many European and Asian countries are way ahead of us in technology and their ideas about what constitutes art. The distinction between art and craft is arbitrary. It's a subject of great discussion. You could write a whole book on that subject alone.



Detail from *Music Ala Carte*, 2009



What is it about clay that draws you to use that as your medium?

The thing about clay that attracted me was its potential. Its possibilities. I really started out just exploring its potential—how thick can it go, how thin can it go, how can I manipulate it, can I use this to express ideas, because the work I do in clay is about exploring ideas as well as exploring a medium. I just love the feel of clay. ✓

For her upcoming Gallery One show, Hyman will have pieces of her trompe l'oeil sculptures that reveal her sense of humor and spiritedness, that demonstrate her passion and precision—boxes that look like leather, woven baskets, objects that appear to be paper, metal, or marble. The pieces are



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: **Evolution**, 2009;
Mending Hearts, 2008; **Inside the Box**, 2010;
Opus, 2006; **Nu Shu**, 2006



life-sized, further enhancing the deception, fooling the eye as to what is real. Hyman has developed a way to print onto sheets of clay to create crossword puzzles, diplomas, musical scores. The method is screen printing onto wet clay that has been pressed into sheets in a large slab roller, and Hyman created a special type of ink that could withstand the heat of the kiln. The slab roller can be adjusted to produce slabs of various thicknesses that will be constructed into baskets, boxes, or bags in her still-life sculptures. Textured surfaces are achieved by sending the clay through the slab roller sandwiched between two layers of fabric, such as burlap, to produce the desired surface appearance. No detail is overlooked. A pencil is cast from a specially made mold that is slightly larger than a real pencil so that the end product will be the right scale. The eraser on the end is even painted to look like pink rubber.

“All will fool your eye and your mind in a way that makes you look harder, deeper below the surface to the message contained within.”

For more information, you can reach Sylvia at Sylviart@comcast.net, or visit www.galleryone.biz.

A show of Sylvia Hyman's work opens Tuesday, September 6, and runs through October 15, 2011, at Gallery One, located at 5133 Harding Pike.

A reception open to the public will be held Saturday, September 17, 6-8 p.m. ✓



Economic Collapse, 2011