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Glass and clay

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The University of Montana

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GLASS AND CLAY

by

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The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the relationships that exist and were created by artistically investigating two varied materials. In the case of this study the elemental materials are clay and laminated glass.

The materials involved can be discussed on a number of different levels. Some of the more prominent of these levels are: the technical aspects, the essence of the materials, the design qualities, and the working qualities.

On the technical level, the materials used in this terminal project or investigation are double and single strength window glass, glass glazes that mature at 1550°F., lead "H" channel, band iron support braces, a wood frame, stoneware clay, porcelain clay, clay glazes that mature at about 2185°F. to 2380°F., various light fixtures, adhesives and other materials to put the pieces together.

The discussion of the design qualities of laminated glass and clay in this thesis will be quite brief and will touch only on those qualities which pose special interest in uniting glass and clay to form a unified work of art. Possibly the most prominent quality that must be taken into mind in working with laminated glass and clay is that of the dimensional contrast of the two materials. Since sheet window glass is the basic element forming laminated glass, it stands to reason that it will have a very distinct two-dimensional quality. On the other hand, clay is almost always three-dimensional in character. It is true that both clay and glass can break these dimensional barriers to some extent, a fact
which can be used to advantage in unifying these two components.

Color also plays an interesting role in correlating these materials. Glass, though basically clear, can be glazed in a wide range of colors. The colors used for this project were commercially prepared, which limited the control over the color response. These colors can be blended, but in general they are very clear and brilliant colors and contrast in clarity to the muted colors of clay and its glazes fired at the temperatures used.

The textural qualities of glass and clay can be made similar in feeling by the use of the natural surface of glass and the glossy surface that can be created on clay by the use of glaze. In a like manner, it possible to create contrasts in their textures. Clay can take on any number of textural qualities due to its plastic nature. Glass, too, can be textured by slumping or softening it through heat to the point at which it will conform to the surface texture of the mold on which it is placed, by the addition of glass pieces to the top surface or through the creation of bubbles between two layers of glass.

Another quality which influences these materials is the individual linear characteristics of each. Glass by itself has two distinct linear feelings. The outer edges of laminated glass are always smooth, hard edge lines because of the cutting process for glass. Contrasting with this is the linear feeling of the inner area of the pieces. This can be a broken mass of curvilinear lines formed by bubbles or one of blended color with almost no
linear feeling at all. There is no distinct type of linear feeling produced by clay. It can take on many linear types because of its plasticity. Some of the most interesting pieces created during this project used contrasts of the line qualities of glass and those of clay.

Mass, too, can be an important element. Clay is constant to a degree, in that no matter what form it takes it always has the feeling of mass and weight. Glass, however, tends to contradict itself. When glass is backed by an opaque surface or one that does not generate light, it has a feeling of mass. However, as soon as it is viewed with light projecting through it, it tends to lose the feeling of mass and begins to blend into negative space.

It is on the level of the essences of the materials that this investigation found a direction for progress and development. As with all things, there are several feelings that combine to form the total essence of a piece of laminated glass or an object of clay. In the discussion following, an attempt will be made to briefly touch on several elements that became apparent during this investigation. Some of these elements deal with the physical essences of the materials or their combinations; some arise from the actual processes or working with the materials; and yet others are on the level of spiritual or emotional concepts. The contrasts between slumped laminated glass and clay influenced the direction of the works of art created. Glass is translucent or transparent; clay is three dimensional.
A factor that influenced work on this project is the precision needed to work with glass as opposed to the extremely free working quality of clay. The stability of the original sheet form of glass can be violated to only minor degrees, contrasting to the almost complete plasticity of clay. Though the qualities just mentioned tend to speak of the forming of the materials, they are also apparent in a general feeling received from looking at the finished product.

As stated, there are also a number of elements which are on an aesthetic or spiritual level. The following are some of the strongest of these elements: the elegance of glass or porcelain; the earthiness that is common to most clay objects; the open or expanding feeling of glass; the confining or enclosing feeling of clay; the inner depth of feeling that can be transmitted from glass or clay; the wide influence of light projected through glass on the space around it; and its enveloping force, influencing the physical being and mind of the viewer.

Exemplifying the last two essences stated above are the floor lamps made during this project. In these floor lamps, the primary purpose of the clay forms is one of function. They are a means of containing the light fixtures and of controlling the light so that it will be transmitted through the glass portions of the pieces. The glass in these lamps is illuminated from within, throwing the light through the glass, where it picks up qualities of the glass and projects them into the lamp's environment. The effect of this
light and the glass itself on their environment is what is meant by the enveloping ability of the glass. This characteristic is also exemplified in the stained glass window. A person within the range of this light will be influenced by it, unless he is facing away from it in a totally black room that would reflect no light. The light from these lamps tends to break down the concrete reality of the environment by distorting color and shape. It is possible that when a high intensity light projects these images of the glass into a reflective environment, for it to distort the environment to such an extent that a person loses his sense of the physical reality of the things around him. The glass itself seems to have a drawing force and brings a person's attention to it, into it, and through it to what lies inside or beyond the glass, or his own mind into a realm of greater sensitivity.

The illustrations on the following pages will be left to speak their own truths on the application of the preceding thoughts.