



JEAN-PIERRE LAROCQUE Clay Sculpture and Drawings

Susan Jefferies
Curator, Modern and Contemporary Ceramics

 **Gardiner
Museum**

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Jean-Pierre Larocque: Clay Sculpture and Drawings inaugurates the Gardiner Museum's new special exhibition gallery. The Board and staff of the Gardiner were enthusiastic about the selection of this exhibition to mark the reopening of the Museum after a transforming expansion and renewal. This choice speaks to the power of Larocque's artistry as well as to the Museum's ongoing interest in contemporary ceramics. His work is thought-provoking and experimental. Its presence occupies our light-filled gallery and the minds of our visitors with its quietly forceful humanity.

We are grateful to Jean-Pierre Larocque for his involvement with this exhibition. He had the courage and fortitude to dedicate two years to create the work presented here. The exhibition is not a retrospective; it is a commissioned body of work that is seen at the Gardiner for the first time. It is also the first solo exhibition of Larocque's work in a Canadian public institution.

Gardiner Museum Curator Susan Jefferies worked closely with the artist to develop this extraordinary exhibition and the catalogue that accompanies it. They are a testament to her vision as well as to her very personal and unwavering commitment to contemporary ceramics.

The Gardiner Museum is respected for the strength of its historical collections. We will continue to celebrate and build on this strength. We will also develop our strong and growing collection of Canadian and international contemporary ceramics.

This exhibition and catalogue would not have been possible without the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund, and the Hal Jackman Foundation.

Alexandra Montgomery
Executive Director



The flickering shadows and darting phantasms on the walls reminded me exactly of some sights I once encountered in a cave in Spain, filled with art. All the artist had done in this cave was to highlight the edges of the shadows cast by the rocks in torchlight and, hey presto: he had conjured up bulls, mammoths, rhinos. Trying to trap shadows was art's first task.¹

Jean-Pierre Larocque's ceramics and drawings similarly seek to play with shadows—metaphorically speaking, the blurred edges of human experience, where the physical meets the psychological, that vulnerable threshold where the mind threatens to come unraveled. We see semi-transparent heads, figures, and horses in a state of transformation—primeval in their power and essence, much like those cave paintings: elusive and ghost-like. The highly charged textures and complex supporting structures give his work an apparently unfinished or open-ended presence.

Larocque's art combines the daydreaming of abstract expressionism with the reality of the figurative. He manipulates the clay, making it luscious in his hands, creating an emotional impact by the covering, exposing, and re-ordering of the material. Larocque is also interested in portraying the reality of the flesh (be it the preserved skin of the Bog Man or what writer Carol Shields graphically refers to as this "oiled goatskin I live inside"²), as well as wounds, bandages, and elaborate ragged clothing covering his phalanx of survivors.

Larocque's search for a new visual language, while symbolically vague, is still clearly about certain central themes: loss and isolation, the saintly and the diabolical. He invites the viewer to confront a fearful human existence with the same intensity with which he examines photographs and art books under a magnifying glass. With these disquieting and sometimes terrifying faces and figures he creates an allegory of humanity in which suffering, both physical and psychological, evokes the great *pietas* or Goya's black paintings.

But there are differences. Larocque's work is quieter and more existentialist than the artists I have cited. It is more enigmatic, more capable of surprise, more passive, more humorous, more humble, more resigned. The origins of the work are in a drama of absurdity—the human condition—in clowns, in disguises, in fringe culture. Total desperation is kept at bay by the intellect; one in which a multiplicity of interests—art, literature, and psychology—informs the sculpture and drawings. This is a modern take on human life: loneliness, incommunicability, insignificance, and inconsolability, unaided by an intercession of faith, a time of seemingly no design.

THEATRE AND LITERATURE

There is an aura of the theatrical about these figures and drawings, be it drama, film, literature or the circus. Whether in a medieval or existentialist world, Larocque creates a new heroic order, confounded by life's twisted course, but still managing to hold on, keeping a semblance of sanity and humour, retaining a nobility and a dignity in their seemingly overwhelming adversity.

His heads and figures bring to mind the "Everyman" of English morality plays, Bertoldt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, or Samuel Beckett's *Estragon*. It seems to me that in Larocque's art, as in a Beckett play, the artist urges us to bear witness. As Larocque improvises, taking his ideas and subjecting them to the plasticity of clay, ambiguity becomes part of his visual language.

Larocque's art works have a strong connection to epic literature—noble and classical, traditional and innovative.³ He himself has written that, "The pieces I make in clay are evocative of a narrative of wandering and desire. They tell stories with missing pages and titles lost along the way."⁴ He weaves a story within a story, embracing a mythic world to discover the essence of human experience. The narrative is not didactic or linear; it is experiential. In a discussion of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), the author could well have been writing about Larocque's work when he said, "Writing is, among other things, an activity which discovers its object, which surprises itself with the meanings it runs into, and passes sometimes with apologies, or recognizes with a start like an old friend encountered in a strange place."⁵

LINEAGE/LINKAGE

Although not overt or intended, Larocque's art does resonate with other histories. His work has the mysterious, unknowable qualities of an archaeological find with its implications about the fragmentation of knowledge as well as the evidence of lost civilizations. Larocque wishes that future archaeologists would stumble on these heads at some desolate site and wonder, "Who are these people and where did they come



Georges Jeanclos-Mosse, *Boat for St. Julien/Barque Saint-Julien*, 1991, Grey earthenware, 48 x 51 x 29 cm

from?”⁶ Viewers might see associations with the cave drawings of Lascaux, Assyrian low-reliefs, Japanese Haniwa and Etruscan tomb figures, Easter Island Heads (Rapa Nui), Maya vase painting, or Han and Tang dynasty horses. Objects and paintings from these cultures are enigmatic because of their lost context, but this does not lessen their impact. We are touched and engaged, sensing the mystery and the possibility of something shared but not defined.

Closer to our time are other connections. French ceramic artist, Georges Jeanclos (1933–97) has a similar sensibility to that of Larocque. Although Jeanclos worked with a certain delicacy as well as on a smaller scale, these two artists share a similar spiritual dimension: tenderness, empathy, understanding of their subjects and of clay as the great “recorder,” both physically and metaphysically. Jeanclos leaves a literal record of words from the

Talmud in his layered pieces; Larocque refers to the “sedimented revisions and layered remorse”⁷ that he too buries in his work. Both imply adversity and, despite this, a search for courage, dignity, humour, and hope. With their acute powers of observation, both Jeanclos and Larocque have probed the unexpected and the beautiful as an antidote to pain.

The physicality of Larocque’s approach to clay is also evident in the work of the American, Peter Voulkos (1924–2002), and the Spaniard, Claudi Casanovas (b.1956), both of whom Larocque admires. The work of all three transmits energy and acknowledges the potential of chaos. Voulkos made decisions on the spot and had an uncanny ability to “get meaning out of an almost pre-verbal ordering”⁸ of the clay or, to put it differently, to “think with his hands.”⁹ Casanovas’s work is subject to constant change: gouging, wrapping, freezing, dropping from a three-metre height, and firing. The rugged physicality and intellectual depth of these three artists creates “explosive” results in their work, which speaks to and mimics clay’s dynamic origins—its compressed and fragmented shape, its pulverized and sometimes refined nature.



Claudi Casanovas working on *Memorial als Vençuts (Memorial to the Fallen)*, 2005

METHOD

Jean-Pierre Larocque creates a substantial system of armatures to carry the heavy weight of his ceramic pieces: cones and cylinders for the horses, rectangular slabs for the heads and various structures for the figures as work progresses. Clay rapidly loses its vitality when overworked by the hands, so as part of his working method, he flings thin slabs and strips of clay at the structures to achieve a freshness of detail and to introduce an element of chance.

As the piece develops, clay is moved, removed, or added. Sometimes the artist puts clay slabs on the floor, stepping on them, accumulating bits of clay and clay dust from the floor. The work is in a constant state of flux, and here is the pleasure, the continuing interest, of finding or creating something in the work—a spark, which brings the piece to life. Larocque hopes to end up with what his fellow ceramic artist, Tony Hepburn, calls “a residue of experience.”¹⁰

HORSES—IN SEARCH OF A FORM

Larocque’s horses derive, strangely enough, from an early interest in abstraction. In his second year of graduate school at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University (1987–88), he was working on abstract forms with scaffolding-type structures extending vertically. Experimentally, he draped a slab of clay over this structure, and a horse seemed to emerge. At first, he wanted this “doodling in space,”¹¹ to remain an abstraction—poised and ready to become something else entirely, transient and surreal. He didn’t want to be backed into a corner, trapped with a realistic form.

But the horses remained persistently present, so he decided to “grow up and make a commitment.”¹² The results were constructions or architectural projects, not just horses. As artist and long-time friend Andy Nasisse commented, “This more intricate or subversive way of working on a figurative piece, informed by the process and material itself, presupposes an artist with a remarkable intuitive sense, technical skill, and confidence.”¹³

As with the heads, figures, and drawings, Larocque’s horses seem to be a work in progress. Armatures of clay, normally used by ceramic artists as supports during the making process and removed before or after the firing, are left in place. These supports become part of the piece and, along with the detritus from the process (bits of clay shavings left on the base), serve as a further reminder that the work is first about sculpture and only secondly about horses.



Abstract pieces by Jean-Pierre Larocque at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, 1987

Nonetheless, there is a daring in the selection of a subject with so many easy and often negative associations. It is as if Larocque is challenging the viewer to reject the work because of its possible facile associations. However, these are not creatures from the natural world. The horses are about transformation on one level or another, be it the physical manipulation of clay into a recognizable form or the more esoteric associations with the dignity of work and regard for the natural world.

When pressed further about his choice of subject matter, Larocque speaks about the horse as an animal whose identity and secrets were compromised as it was tamed and dragged into the human realm. Previously, this domesticated “blue collar worker”¹⁴ provided an essential service, but now, with the advent of machines, the horse’s role as a beast of burden has diminished. A symbol of a more placid existence, one rooted in the natural world, the horse is a foil to our cynicism and acculturation.

The horses are also at home in art history. Larocque concedes that it is impossible to ignore the “storehouse of images”¹⁵ from the past and that these pieces would not have been made without the memory of the Lascaux caves and Han and Tang dynasty horses, as well as the work of Marino Marini, Susan Rothenberg, and Deborah Butterfield. But with his exploration of horse sculpture, Larocque understands Marini’s admonition that, “The study of volumes is not the only goal of the sculptor, who must never forget that the most moving element of his work is its poetry.”¹⁶

HORSES WITH BAGGAGE

The house—symbol of sedentary life—as baggage moving on a horse conjures up its antithesis—the nomadic life, a house on the move. Nomadic life can refer to an earlier, adventurous time when caravans plied the Silk Roads, initiating an exchange of languages, objects, and ideas—a fertile period in human history. Longing, wanderlust, and a search for space suggest a restlessness and desire to find an escape from human misfortune.

Today, a nomadic existence might be seen as an idyllic refuge from contemporary life or it might be equated with a world in which war, displacement, or natural disaster has meant the necessity of a return to a more basic life, dependent on scavenging for food, cooking around open fires with unknown dangers lurking—one in which possessions and means of survival may be on the back of a horse.



Mounted foreign figure, China, Earthenware with glaze,
43 x 38 cm, Tang dynasty, 700–733 AD

However, in examining the pieces themselves, there is a beauty that is exquisitely expressed, a bitter-sweet quality in Larocque's series of burdened horses. He has wrapped and slapped layers of clay slabs on an abstract framework, keeping a freshness and empathy, which brings to life something that is basically an object. Whether in a physical or metaphysical sense, the artist is trying to find in these forms what Federico Garcia Lorca called "duende, a force that surges up from the soles of the feet—which is not a matter of ability, but of real, live form, of blood, of ancient culture, of creative action."¹⁷

In this series, we witness something quite different—a plethora of ideas, which even this normally articulate artist can't pin down. Sinuous coils, slabs, and pieces of clay weave in and out of these multi-layered creations, making it impossible to tell where one strip of clay begins or ends. These pieces celebrate the articulation of material, a brilliant juxtaposition of volume, shapes, and the squeezing of clay. For the first time, he introduces simulated, man-made materials such as metal, rubber, and industrial objects on these daring "burdens." Somewhat flamboyant in decorative terms, with ornamental lattice and scroll-like cornices, they still do not feel contrived.

These houses have crowned their horses with a sense of triumph; pageant fills the air. Only the plumes and banners are missing. They also provoke questions. Will these houses be inhabited and domesticated? Are they a retreat, a shell or a nest, a place of solitude?¹⁸ These compressed but beautiful sanctuaries are dream castles, an escape from the more forbidding reality of everyday existence, a fictive palace filled with Sufi poetry and obscure scientific revelations, a prelude to Shangri-la.

WALL OF DISCARDED HOUSES

Larocque has explored the interplay and the relationships between horses with burdens and a wall of discarded bird-houses.¹⁹ To this end, he made a series of 20 small houses displayed like books on a shelf or the progression of days on a calendar, re-creating serially an effect similar to a childhood memory of hubcaps on a wall.

I had this uncle who lived in an orchard, close to the monastery on the hill. My big sister would sit me in the wire basket and bike up the hill with our hats and mittens on. He made birdhouses from scrap that he painted all the wrong colours and nailed on the barn in rows like a collection of hubcaps. This is not an accurate memory. I embellished it. They all thought Uncle Romeo was a sweet dreamer but without intending it he gave me an image that continues to live in me.



Ferdinand Cheval's *Le Palais Idéal*, The Giants (detail), Hauterives, France, 1987

There is something touching about the business of birdhousing on such a heroic scale but I doubt it's the best strategy to get printed in Artforum. It is too subversive for institutional art. This primal desire by outsider artists to make stuff is refreshingly honest during a time of careerism and posturing. The Postman Ferdinand Cheval and his Palace of Dreams [Le Palais Idéal] was a huge influence on me. He's the poor man's Gaudi, the Outsider's Outsider. Never left his village and built a backyard palace out of concrete and pebbles from magazine photos of the Raj and the Taj and houseboats and palm trees. It is beautiful in a Joseph Cornell kind of way, like the gardens at the Villa d'Este and the monsters of Bomarzo.²⁰

And while Larocque is too sophisticated to be considered an outsider, he has captured some of this quality in his art, this separation from the ordered world. These guileless houses are a haphazard juxtaposition of vernacular images ranging from stately Victorian scalloped barge-boards to the dug-out tufa bird houses of Capadoccia. Looking at these pieces, the reference lights start blinking.²¹ Larocque says it is not intentional, but, rather, that he allows the connections to happen: "It's like a dream."²² He calls it "access to a jumbled memory bank."²³ Some of these memories may have connections to growing up in Victorian Montreal with its crumbling edifices, his father's wood shop and earlier wooden box constructions made from 1973–77.



Jean-Pierre Larocque, *House*, wooden box construction, made at the Université du Québec à Montréal, 61 x 12 x 18 cm, 1976

THE DRAWINGS

Jean-Pierre Larocque's drawings are a parallel but distinct body of work. In the 1990s there was little relationship in terms of the content of the drawings and the clay work, although the process (always of significance) is remarkably similar. Today there is more overlap in subject matter. Both the drawings and the clay work are concerned with the play of light and drawing as revelation, not illustration.²⁴ In the drawings, he is seeking an X-ray quality of light, illuminated from underneath, as if the light source is from within. In the clay work, colour, slips, and glazes seek to clarify and highlight various areas.

Larocque begins with the head and then adds the body, as he does in the clay sculptures. He layers imagery on imagery, erases, and eradicates. He wants figuration but at the same time he seeks the lyrical and non-representational. Meaning develops as the drawings develop; it is a process of working with the material to get to the ideas.

To do this, he uses a variety of techniques. Erasers of different sorts, many trimmed for fineness or thickness, are used in the same way that scraffitto is used in clay—a way to pierce the charcoal and expose the white of the paper. Figures vie with each other on the page, many with partial erasure; ghost-like images of the earlier drawings remain, underscoring another gesture, another focus. This erasing or “drawing backwards”²⁵ gives a visual transparency to the artist’s process and the completed work.

Visual recognition and the range of possibilities are powerful forces in the work. In these various poses, gestures, and attitudes, many erased but still visible, Larocque wonders why one gesture should be more influential than the other. Why choose between an extended, raised, or clasped hand or a mood of humour, defiance, or anxiety? It is a test of the possible. Why shouldn’t many things be possible at any one time?²⁶

In the ink paintings, Larocque uses another intricate process to study horse forms and “to find things he has never found before.”²⁷ The drawings are made on small pieces of glossy, non-absorbent paper that permit the ink to flow and remain viscous. This allows him to rework the images, wiping out areas and finding places of abstraction, satisfying his resistance to special effects not grounded in a process.

With a large Chinese brush used primarily for watercolours and an “organic brew”²⁸ of Sumi ink (which dries with a high sheen), Larocque applies the ink to the paper. For the more delicate parts, he swivels a brush with diluted ink, recording and making visible the hairs of the brush. Outlines and contours are worked with non-diluted ink. He uses other tools to rework the painting, including a scraffitto needle, rags, and razor blades.

In 1976 and then beginning again in 2002, working with a ballpoint pen, Larocque created a very intricate series of small drawings based on a continuous curvilinear line—a doodle. It roams over an entire sheet of paper (see inside front cover and page 1), evolving into figures and heads as it trails along the paper, much like what Paul Klee described as “a line going for a walk.”²⁹ This “adventure” spins/unwinds over the page, the shadows and lines unconsciously developing (and seemingly changing before your eyes) into something clarified.

Jean-Pierre Larocque, like many artists, is interested in chasing and trapping shadows, exploring the complex, grey areas of existence. There are no inherent truths lurking in these shadows, just relative points of view. Working in an intuitive way, in which the weight and gravity of the pieces are the only reality, his ideas become incorporated into the forms, textures, and lines, creating a relationship both intimate and elemental—what Beckett called a “stain on the silence.”³⁰ Larocque’s art is a discourse that has no end, with revisions and new meanings accruing over time.³¹

Susan Jefferies
Curator, *Modern and Contemporary Ceramics*
Gardiner Museum

End Notes

- ¹ Waldemar Januszczak, art critic. "Review of Eyes, Lies & Illusion." *The Sunday Times*. October 10, 2004: Culture II.
- ² Carol Shields. *Collected Stories*. New York: HarperCollins Publishing Inc., 2004: p. 18.
- ³ According to the predilections of the viewer, Larocque's work is evocative of various epic stories. Ingmar Berman's film *The Seventh Seal* is a case in point. In this story, the valiant knight, although ultimately doomed in his chess game with death, saves a child's life. Larocque has spoken about playing chess and how he imagines that real people are in danger as he moves the pieces around. Chess metaphors abound—"man the mere pawn," propelled by what Vladimir Nabokov called a "phantom hand" towards his destiny. The chess games' impromptu moves and decisive decision-making run parallel to Larocque's process of working in clay; he often speaks of it in more graphic terms as continual risk-taking or as "jumping without a parachute."
- ⁴ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ⁵ William H. Gass. Introduction to *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge: A Novel*, by Rainer Maria Rilke. New York: Random House Inc., Vintage International Edition, 1990: p. xvi.
- ⁶ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Andy Nasisse. Personal e-mail message to Susan Jefferies. Nov. 17, 2004.
- ¹⁴ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Istituto Italiano di Cultura. *Marino Marini: Sculptures Paintings and Drawings 1929–1970*. Toronto: Istituto Italiano di Cultura, 1998. p. 32.
- ¹⁷ Harry Eyres. "Why small festivals are beautiful." *The Financial Times*, August 29, 2004: W18. For further reading, see Lorca, Federico Garcia. *In Search of Duende*. Ed. Christopher Maurer. New York: New Directions, 1998.
- ¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard has written in the *Poetics of Space* of "the dream of inhabiting all the hollow objects in the world" and of shells as "dream houses." Susannah M. Smith. "Digressions on Siestas and the Shell World." *Globe and Mail*, Aug. 12, 2004: A18.
- ¹⁹ Garth Clark. Personal e-mail message sent to Susan Jefferies. Mar. 30, 2006. "Larocque's next step was to detach the houses from their mode of transport and ground them. Why? Maybe they had reached their point of destination and no longer required their steeds."
- ²⁰ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Personal e-mail message sent to Susan Jefferies. Sept. 8, 2003.
- ²¹ Houses also have many metaphysical associations. *The Tao Te Ching*, the great Daoist work, says, "You cut out doors and windows to make a house; their usefulness to a house is always in their empty space." This famous work has been translated more frequently than any other work except the Bible and discusses, at length, the human condition. Lao Tzu. *The Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Isabella Mears. San Diego: The Book Tree, 2003: p.32.
- As well, the houses are suggestive of Jung's rooms of the mind or his "inner space." Dr. C. George Boeree. *Carl Jung, 1875–1961*. <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/jung.html>. 1997, 2006.
- As for clay buildings, consider Hopi artist Preston Duwenyie's statement referencing his birth in an adobe house, "I was born in a clay vessel." Preston Duwenyie. In conversation with Susan Jefferies, Gardiner Museum, Toronto. Aug. 8, 2004.
- ²² Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Louise Bourgeois with Lawrence Rinder. *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings and Observations*. Berkeley, California: University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, and Bulfinch Press, 1995: p. 89. The actual quote reads in reverse, "it is not an illustration, it is a revelation."
- ²⁵ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Personal e-mail message sent to Susan Jefferies. July 13, 2005.
- ²⁸ Jean-Pierre Larocque. Interview by Susan Jefferies. Toronto. May 25–26, 2005.
- ²⁹ Alan Riding. "A Curvy Klee Museum Sprouting from the Swiss Hills." *New York Times* July 1, 2005: B35. The complete Paul Klee quote is, "The original movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion (genesis of form). A line comes into being. It goes for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly, for the sake of a walk."
- ³⁰ Deirdre Bair. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Vintage, 1990: p. 681.
- ³¹ Gene Callahan. "Oakeshott and Mises on understanding human action." (Michael Oakeshott, Ludwig von Mises). *The Independent Review* Fall 2005: Vol. 10, No. 2. Oakeshott explains, "With every want, we evoke a future, and in every action we seek a future condition of things, uncertain of achievement and sure only of its transience."







Horse with Baggage #1



Horse with Baggage #2





above:
Horse with Baggage #3

left:
Horse with Baggage #3
detail, rear view of baggage



Horse #1



Ink Horse #1



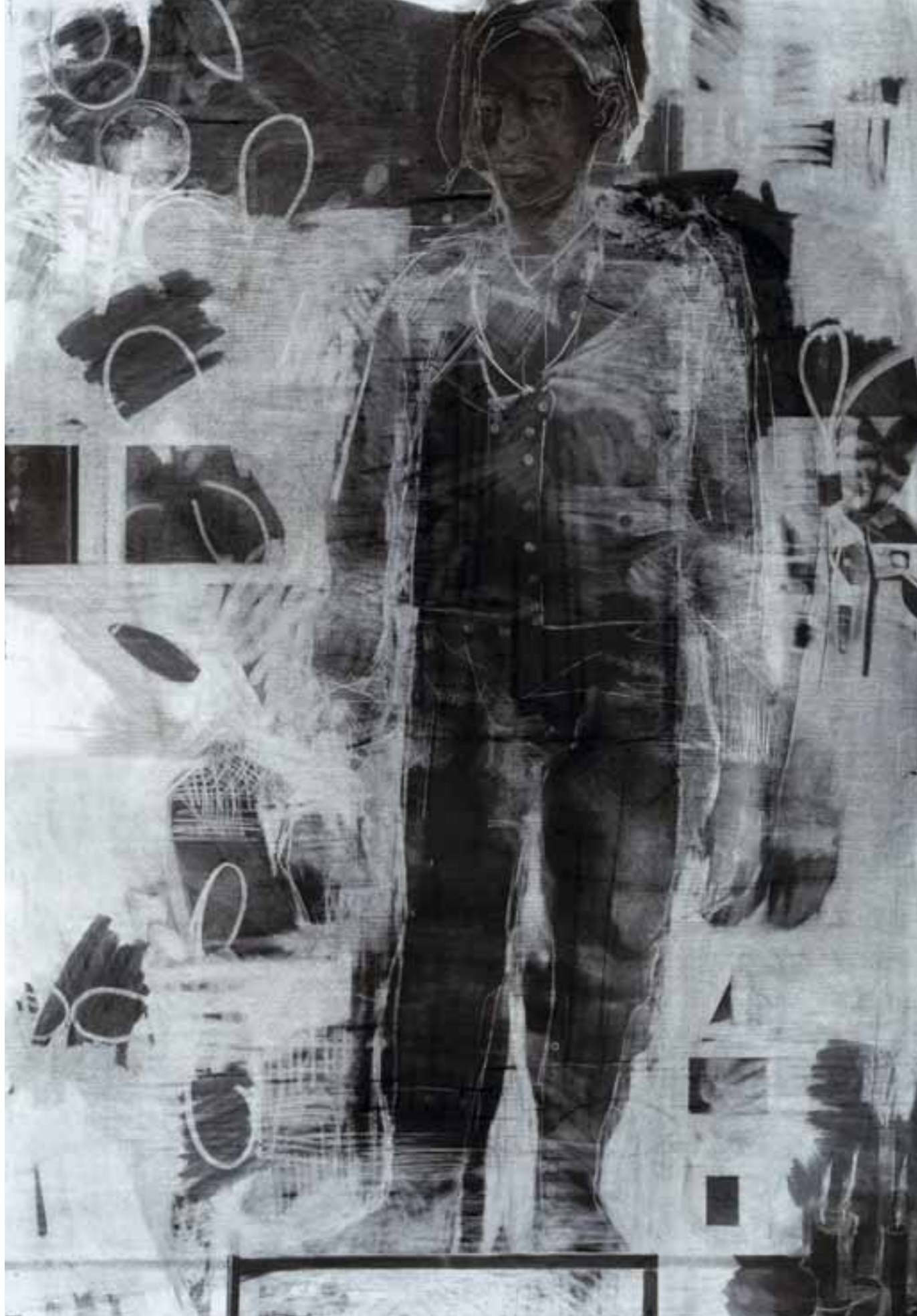




*page 30:
Standing woman in black dress*

*page 31:
Standing girl in short black coat*

*page 33:
Dark standing male figure*







far left:
Figure #3

left:
Figure #4



Figure #5





above:
Figure #5, detail, back of head

left:
Figure #5, detail



above:
Figure #6, detail, front and back

right:
Figures #2, 3, detail









Two figures, woman with red hair





Two figures, woman with elaborate headdress



Monkey and parasol





*Women with bucket
and candelabrum*





Two figures, man with red beard



Two figures, woman in blue



Men with pennants





Two figures, man with red hat









above:
Head #1, detail, side view

left:
Head #5, detail, side view



left to right:
Heads #2, 3, 4, 5





Head #6, front and 3/4 view



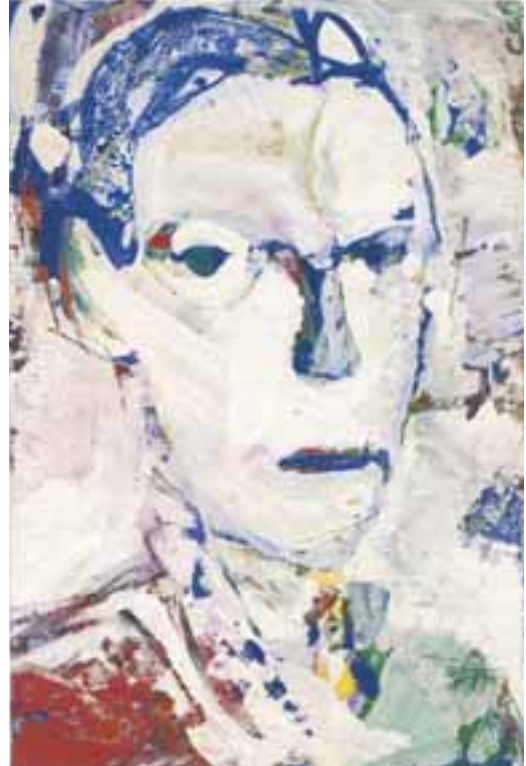
Head #7





above:
Portrait head #1

right:
above: #2, 3, below: #4, 5







above:
Portrait head #10

left:
Portrait heads
above: #6, 7, below: #8, 9

JEAN-PIERRE LAROCQUE IN CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN JEFFERIES

Montreal, May 7–8, 2004, and Toronto, April 25–26, 2005

Let's start by talking about the heads.

Much of what I do is intuitive and a response to the material, but when examining the heads, I like that they seem ancient and new simultaneously. They look and feel like a geological incident—the tension of an earthquake pushing out through the crust, the visible and the invisible parts of that tension. I get mileage out of this metaphor. I want a sense of the body more than I want it to look like a body. A Voulkos, although non-representational, has a greater sense of the weight, gravity, physicality of a body than much figurative work. I make a sculptural support out of clay; I want it sturdy because it has a job to do—it has to support all the weight that will shift around as the piece is transformed. The supports also seem there to say, "This is not a head;" it is a representation, much like the way Magritte said, "This is not a pipe" with a painting of a pipe. My piece is a hundred pounds of clay with a hat on.

The bases are littered. You seem to want to keep the discarded in the work.

I worked in a woodshop with my father. There would be the product you are making, and the floor would be littered with the leftovers—sawdust, chips, etc. I felt that one was incomplete without the other. I like seeing both the beast and its habitat.

Your work has an organic quality about it while there is also a strong structural presence. It is all mixed up together.

The ceramics studio in art school was divided between the throwers of loose pots and the tight throwers. I thought there was good and bad work in both camps. Although I never threw on the wheel, I wanted my work to be both loose and tight, highly structured and organic, with chaos mixed in. I think that body and mind are one; they are not separate. We've been trained to think there is a schism between the two. I love the Chinese artist painting a bird in three strokes, but I love that de Kooning worked for two years on revisions. Over time I found a way to incorporate these two impulses in my work. Sometimes an arm in a drawing just falls into place, and the head will take four days of adjustments and changes. It suits me completely. It is very liberating.



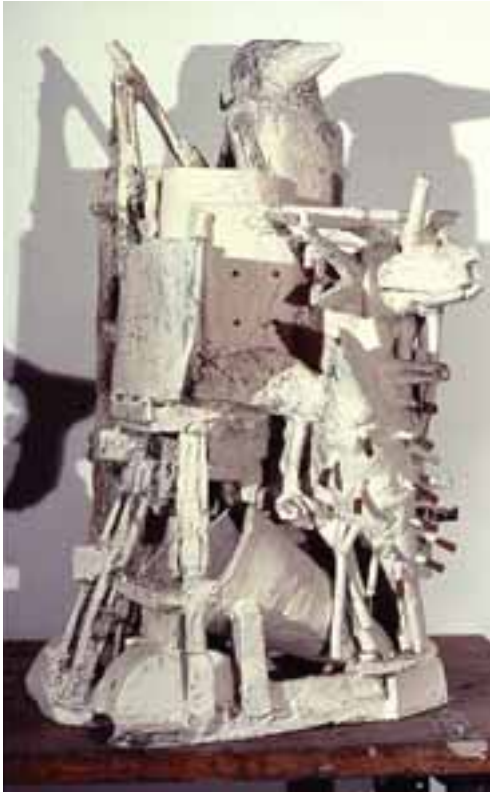
Peter Voulkos working at Lake Lotawana, Kansas City, Missouri, c. 1984–85.

Aren't you afraid of contradiction?

I like all my contradictions in the same room with the lights on. They lobby hard not to be dragged in there. You see, it's easy to keep things in compartments. The tough part is to bring as much as possible together. You can't, of course, and there is a trap in there as well; I call it the totalitarian vision. I doubt that any representational system, scientific, religious, or otherwise, can encompass all things. I think that's where the unfinished look of the work kicks in, as if to say the system is not closed; it remains open to suggest there is more that could not be absorbed or integrated.

Why clay?

Clay is very direct and is responsive to change, and it suits how I work. But in many ways I think my way of working has more to do with painting. Think of a painter like Frank Auerbach, for instance, where there's so much painting and then scraping away and then painting over that. Beginners in ceramics are taught to keep the walls an even thickness, which is important for pots. I work around a hollow structure, but my pieces get thick with layers of revisions. As you know, I dropped out of art school, and a few years later I went back to Concordia University, where I resumed my BFA. I meant to study painting.



Birdman by Jean-Pierre Larocque at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, ceramic with glazes, 127 x 66 x 63.5 cm, 1987

There were some painters I admired, but on some level I felt that I could listen, watch their work, see what they were making, and then do my own painting at home. Then I took some electives in ceramics and realized that this was something I couldn't do at home; there were kilns in the studio, and I began to play with this material after class. I had sort of cornered myself with my painting at this point, and when I began to work with clay, in a way that was not serious or self-conscious, that possibly had something to do with the fact that it worked. I began to make things, and immediately I was working large; I was working with slabs that I could fold like fabric, and I could get those things to hang in space. It somehow connected with the lyrical sensibility that I've seen in Jean-Paul Riopelle and the *automatistes*, like Paul-Émile Borduas—a way of approaching the material, to make poetry out of the material, and I sort of transferred that to clay. But I had no clue at that point about the history of ceramics or making ceramics. I was just discovering through processes, like Voulkos and some others. I guess that when playing with clay, I realized I could do something with it, and that made me want to stay with it even more. I ended up spending all my weekends and evenings at Concordia working in the studio. This is how it began, really. Two years after that, I applied to grad school, and there I was in upstate New York with people who had worked with clay for fifteen or twenty years.

What about the three-dimensionality of clay?

Well, when I think about the early work, of course it's three-dimensional, it's an object in space, it has a presence. But to start with, I made things that were more or less two sided. I was coming from the printmaking department. I did a lot of intaglio or etchings. I didn't take it really far, but I did experiment with it. When you work on a metal plate with zinc and/or copper and varnishes and you then expose some areas to acid, the plate that you get is a piece of metal a few millimetres thick, but the acid will gouge it, leaving a little relief. I transferred the printmaker's sensibility into the language of clay, not consciously, but I think this is what happened.

Can you think of other artists who made those associations? I can't think of any working in clay.

I think I was aware of what was being done in sculpture and textiles. Some people would use pieces of textile, like Betty Goodwin, who was making prints, where she would take some clothing, a shirt or a vest, and ink it and run it through the press, and you would get the structure of the clothing appearing on the print. And so I was aware of such things, and in some ways it fed my sensibility, even people who at that point were taking cars and smashing them [Richard Chamberlain], but you would still see on the outside the folded metal with all of the colours of the different fenders, etc. So it's these things that I was looking at, and I realized that clay could be folded like cloth, and with the right timing the clay could hold its form in space while it dried.

So it was the immediacy that had an appeal?

Yes, clay allows a direct way of working; if you don't like something, you can change it immediately. I learned that if you worked with two or three of those pieces at the same time, gravity working against you—they will crumble under their own weight—I could get these amazing wrinkles on the clay that seem so natural. It was not like making a mark. It was more like setting up a situation where the clay would do it, like dropping a shirt on the floor. Later, when the clay is still workable but somewhat stiffer, you can keep building on it and make something that's really tall just by using the strength of the drier clay. I used to call these things "my house of cards," as they were precarious and unbalanced. You know when you are a kid and make a structure with a deck of cards, and when you keep adding more it falls apart; when I made those pieces the same thing happened to me all the time. I would leave them and then the next morning I would come to the studio, and they would be on the floor. I would pick up the pieces, find the parts that were alive and build back from there. My classmates at Alfred were very entertained. The most meaningful part of these things was that precariousness. You could feel it.

These disasters, the ones that fell on the floor, had another life—they were reincarnated—you didn't throw them out and start again?

Well, the things that we make in turn transform us; that in itself was a revelation. In the beginning, I wouldn't have done this. I'd want to roll a very nice slab, like a foot by three feet, and then stand it up, curl it upon itself, and work with this as a departure. Well, of course, a few months into this, I am pushing some of these things to the limit and sometimes they would hold, and I would cover them with a piece of plastic overnight, not understanding that the "greenhouse effect" of having the plastic on the piece would bring too much humidity into the piece, and then the next morning they were all crumpled upon themselves. So it was interesting then to just pick up the pieces from the floor and build back from that, to experience clay's resilience and to use what the clay and gravity had done. It was like working with a found object, something that was given to me, something I had not made.

In your first group exhibition at the Gardiner, as part of *Inside Out*, you included drawings, horses, and heads. There didn't appear to be a strong relationship between the drawings and the sculptural pieces, although, if I start to think about it now, there were relationships.

Well, of course, if you make figures out of clay and then you make drawings of figures, everyone will make the connection between the two. But in a way there could be no connection at all between the two processes. I think it's different for my work: the last two years I've made drawings of standing figures, and I've been making standing figures out of clay, or the large heads in clay. So there is the parallel in the subject matter, but more important is the parallel in the approach in that I don't make preliminary drawings, and I don't make drawings from the sculpture. So when I'm doing these drawings and sculptures, the piece is the piece, and I don't test the idea by drawing beforehand. When I draw, I add and subtract, I erase; I add some more marks, make adjustments. When I work with clay, it's the same thing. I am trying to make something appear. I don't move the material around just for the sake of it. I throw



Jean-Pierre Larocque at California State University, Long Beach, 1989

some clay on a textured surface, and then some lines appear, and I push the clay around so that it's a wider face, or push it back. So I'm adding and removing and adjusting and layering and erasing. And what's important is that the erasing is as active and creative as the mark making. It's the same thing in clay: when I remove something, it's not because I don't like it—I'm making something appear. So I think the process is the same for both the drawing and clay. For a long time I was making horses in clay; later I began drawing. The approach to image making was the same. Keep in mind that until this century, drawings and clay work were often thought of as merely preparatory studies for paintings and bronzes. Now we think they are fit to record an intimate experience.

What about ideas in art?

I'm very suspicious of ideas, in the sense that you can begin with an idea, but an idea is very dangerous if it's not tested with reality. In this case, the reality is the physicality of the material—what it will let you do and what it will not let you do, and that's the ultimate test. I've seen too many people trying to impose an idea on the material. Of course, the material is just laughing away, saying, "You know, you'll never get me to do this!" You can tweak it, engineer it, and get it to do all sorts of things, but I like to play with it. I'm not afraid of the material. I'm a friend to it. I trust it immensely. I pay a lot of attention to what it will do and what it will not do. Chaos is fertile, and I see all sorts of possibilities there. For instance, I've made horses in clay that weigh a hundred pounds, and they're all standing, this mass of clay, on four small legs. Well, I did that because I began to use leather-hard [partially dried] clay as temporary armatures to support the work. As the piece progressed, I had to reinforce the structure. This is all visible and part of the final piece. These temporary supports were so alive that I left them as part of the sculpture. That was my way around that problem. To me, the material is the reality. It's very dangerous to make a piece of art in your mind and never have it feel real outside.

And there's a pleasure in that?

I don't think it's only pleasure, it's something that's very grounding. It's probably like a farmer plowing the land: if you do that for years and years, there's a connection to something very real. It's very sane to me, and I'm thinking that for the best science to work, even if it's a great intellectual model, it has to be grounded in reality as well. Don't you think?

Yes, and there's an elegance in natural laws that has an appeal, because there's so little that one can cling to in this day and age.

You just put your finger on it. There's so little that you can cling to, but this is real. Gravity is real. I can trust this, I can observe this, and I can work with it. And the material can provide that to me.

You wrote some wonderful things in various catalogues about your mother, and we spoke about your father. Was their influence important?

I think one thing that's important is that neither of my parents went to school beyond the fifth grade, and because they didn't have these opportunities, they were adamant that we have a good schooling. They grew up poor, living between a wall of factories and the CN railroad tracks. My mother worked at Dominion Textile at fourteen, and my father was delivering blocks of ice when he was eleven. But my father ended up setting up a small factory, making specialized wooden boxes from blueprints. I can still hear him in my mind doing business in his broken English.

My father was always working with his hands, and at home he'd have tools and be changing or building something. My mother was also someone who worked a lot with her hands. She was sewing and making pies at the kitchen table, so I was always around people who didn't talk too much but who could make things happen with their hands. I think as a child I absorbed a whole lot through looking. It seemed that between your hands and your mind there was a way to apprehend the world. That was very important for me, finding a

way to work where the body would not be subservient to the mind. If I wanted to spend some time with my dad, I would go to him, and he would say, "I am working on this thing—would you hold this piece of wood?" And then I'm sawing it, and then four hours later we are building a balcony together. We haven't talked yet, but I'm working with him. So it's kind of frustrating, but at the same time I sponged up a whole lot of knowledge of how to work, how to use tools, and I had this confidence with tools.

There's a lot more I could say about my father. I loved him dearly. One thing that was amazing about him is that he was a born leader. There are very few people like that. He had this kind of authority. It was not always easy, and I had to keep my distance sometimes. But he was certainly someone who had a major impact on me.

In the video of you working, your whole body seems to be involved: your legs and arms are working, you're pivoting, you're turning, which isn't true of all artists. Is that important to you?

Well, it's important to me—for instance, I was never very much into organized sports, but I grew up playing hockey pickup games all the time, and there's a lot of pleasure moving in space with a group, thinking on your feet. It's like when we were in school, there was this huge stairway from the fifth floor down to the ground floor, and we would race down dangerously. We were young boys who would race down four or five steps at a time, just flying around. This kind of pleasure nowadays would probably be on a skateboard. So I guess part of this physicality is something that I'm also expressing in the work. I'm not saying that it's a better way of working, but I think that whoever you are as an artist, you make the best of your own reality. Having a certain kind of energy is not something that you can contain, you just have to use it as much as you use your brain. But I always wanted to use the two at the same time, so in my own way as a young man I wanted to redefine what real work would be. And what real work would be is finding a way where the mind and body would be equal. Some sculptors nowadays have their work fabricated by someone else. I respect that, but



Jean-Pierre Larocque at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, 1987

whenever I try this, I just get bored; it's not enough—there's something missing in the experience. What I get from my approach is a sense of total immersion that is the driving force.

You speak of it as an experience of finding your way by doing. So is there also a period of finding your way by thinking?

Thinking is a misleading word. When you play music, are you thinking? Yes, but are you thinking with words? Possibly not. You are thinking through the instrument, through the playing itself. To me that's real thinking. So when I do a drawing, there is some daydreaming happening in my head. There's a visual intelligence that drives the piece, whether it's a drawing or clay work. And then there's a moment when I'm finished with a piece. I've done all sorts of revisions, and then I'm finished with it. The idea has been resolved; I can let it go. Then I sit down and look at it for hours, as if to absorb it back again, to understand what it is I put out there. Once that is digested, I never look at it again. It's an interesting process because I think that the things that we make do transform us. The next time you make a piece, you realize that.

You have worked in abstraction before. Does it matter at all to you if you are working with a recognizable object or an abstract form?

At some point when I was drawing or working with clay in a non-figurative way, I began to see the suggestion of images, much like seeing images in the clouds. It is like the man in the moon. I know there is no such thing, but it is easy to see him, when I allow it to happen. It doesn't solve the problem of articulating a vision through the material, but it opens up different possibilities. So I told the clay, "You want to begin to suggest that you are a face or a horse or a tree? Well, I'll follow you, I trust you, let's try to go there." And this was an awkward moment, but this is how my transition to figurative work began. It's not so different perhaps, but it's a different mode and the possibilities are different. There is a kind of freedom with the non-representational, but there's also a kind of freedom with the figurative work. A lot of my heroes in art have been artists who have moved from one mode to another—you know, Richard Diebenkorn is a great example of that. Every mode I find has its own trappings.

If you had a wish for the future, what would it be?

I deeply admire old artists who remained very active. I'm thinking of Goya, Picasso, Joan Mitchell, or even Monet—they got to a point where they had nothing to prove to anyone anymore, and they were so uninhibited, so unprogrammed; they had no "ism" to respect. And suddenly, something happens that is so surprising—it's like they've freed themselves of everything. It's a beautiful thing. So I hope I get there someday.

Is this a process, do you think, of getting beyond the ego?

It's something we have talked about before. Philip Guston had this great line: "When I work in the studio, it's like everyone is there with me, all of my peers, all of my family, my friends, everyone who has ever had any kind of influence on me is in the room. They are all watching me, and as I begin to work and get involved and engaged in the work, they leave one by one. On a very good day, they all leave and I'm on my own, and on an excellent day, I leave too." It's a beautiful way of expressing what I call "a place of the mind." It's like the sentinel at the gate falls asleep, and you are not so self-conscious.

Is this related to your interest in outsider artists?

They are kind of special artists, and I've observed quite a few who are actually driven. Many of them begin to work not when they're young but later in life. It seems like there is a kind of time bomb, an immense desire to scream or to say something, and it's stronger than they are; in spite of themselves, they begin to play around with stuff in the garage and put things together. A lot of them believe in God and think they are mediums, and that's their explanation for it. I hear them, but I would explain it differently. It's a beautiful thing, the fact that they don't think of themselves as artists; sometimes they don't even know what that means, but they make things. It's refreshing to see someone make out of necessity when so much art is bogged down in cynicism.

D.H. Lawrence said, "One sheds one's sicknesses in books, repeats and presents one's emotions to be master of them." Is this relevant to you?

It's relevant. I think Lawrence meant that you can't change your history, but you can find a new angle from which to tell it. From what I've read about writers, I have a sense that many, like Alice Munro, will begin with a few characters and then a place. She wants to understand that place and what those people are doing, what happens to them. The only way to find out is to write, and the writing is the adventure. I'm fascinated with this, because this relates very much with my way of working with clay.

It's not something that can be planned in advance, so it's the same as life. So it is a life lived. Dostoevsky is interesting to me because his characters represent conflicting parts of himself, and he would force the characters to deal with one another and find some kind of resolution. It's probably why he couldn't stop writing; without the writing, there is no life. That gives a very different flavour to the writing because there's no getting fancy about this. We're talking about survival, about necessity. The only way things can be dealt with is through the writing.

So for the artist and viewer, this method of working gives the work more life?

Well, you don't make work for the viewer. That's bull. This will sound outrageous, but the audience doesn't exist. So in a sense, when I'm in the studio, I am the audience. I am making something. I believe that a musician makes the music that he wants and needs to hear. The writer writes the story that is missing for him; it's a story that doesn't exist, but he needs that story. He's the only one who can write it, and somehow, sometime, like in ten years, it builds up and has to be said. And I think it's the same thing with any art, with painting, with sculpture, especially the work that has that kind of immediacy and directness. You want something that you can't find ready-made in the world and because you have such a desire for it, because you can't live without it, your only option is to make it yourself. It is not something you have identified and can easily describe; you define it as you get closer, like making a prototype. It looks pretty awkward at first. This is what an artist does. If you are thinking about an audience, or if you try to second-guess what the audience wants you to do, you're in the wrong place. The paradox is that the more personal and honest you are, the more universal you may become, because people will relate to an experience that has been lived, that you made visible for them. How many times have I read a sentence in a novel and I will say, "Oh, this sentence sums up something that I know so well, but I've never been able to put it that way." That person didn't write that for me, they weren't waiting for me to read it. This is how an artist reaches out and communicates, not by second-guessing the audience. I really believe in that. If you make something with an audience in mind, the audience is the enemy.

You said the other day on the phone that the idea of beauty is sometimes scoffed at.

I think that it helps to leave the art world in order to talk about beauty. Beauty is the great exile, because everybody, educated or not, poor, rich, in any culture, any place in the world, looks at something and says, "This is beautiful," and it could be something that you and I would find trivial or kitsch, but to some people they look at something and their faces light up—this is the most beautiful thing they have ever seen. It could be an idea, a sentence, or it could be an object. I've seen people respond to beauty, and it's human, the striving for something. It's hard to define, but what you witness is the reaction to beauty. So it's a very relative thing; something I find ugly, somebody else will find beautiful. Everyone has seen something so overwhelming that it takes them to that place, and it's said in a way that is so honest, without any resistance. So that's what I think is beauty. Humans need beauty. They don't find it necessarily in the art world. You can find it in books, or anything—you don't have to be an intellectual to find beauty. I mean, once in a while, you see a gesture ... someone will raise an arm like this, and your heart stops. You don't really know why you are responding to this, and there's something that speaks to you on an intense level. If you need to define it—yes, we could. If we had a few weeks, we could begin to look into that.

Cute is a different thing. Something could be very elegant, nice to look at, but I think beauty is something else. I think beauty can be devastating and dangerous. And some people choose never to go there, and some people would kill themselves for beauty. Keats equated beauty with truth. Picasso said art was a lie that makes you see the truth. A lot of modern art is very ugly, but you are moved by it. It's difficult to define in that sense; it's an essence of something, and artists struggle to make something meaningful and wrestle it back into this world. This in itself is beautiful and moving ...

It seems to me that we often find great beauty in the saddest and the most tragic circumstances. I'm thinking of Greek drama ...

Well, it's poignant because I think beauty puts you in a very vulnerable place. It can blow you away. And I think that a lot of people hate beauty, cute is easier.

There's an inherent possibility of tragedy in this vulnerability. So when you think of the Greek classical drama, for instance, you know the beauty of that experience can be overwhelming and possibly violent. German writers also had this idea of a hero going on a dangerous journey—a metaphor for a trip into the unconscious to try to experience or retrieve something essential.

What the hero does is he or she goes to a place where nobody has been before. Imagine a place in the mind, and it's a voyage or journey that one does alone; the writer writing a novel is right there, the researcher working in the lab at three in the morning, is right there as well. And the hero goes to that place and finds something, and sometimes gets lost. And then gets back with that thing to show as a witness, to prove that he's been there and he's seen something.

But maybe we're talking about beauty again, because it fits within the same realm. And there's a lot against the heroic in art, a lot has been written against that. I believe that there is no art without a sense of the heroic. This word has been hijacked in some ways; it has bad connotations nowadays. Heroic seems so grandiose and full of oneself, but in fact, in the most noble sense, I think it's a very human thing; it's part of human nature to strive for something. Some people find it in religion, some go to other places—the moon, to discover America, climb Everest—on some quest.

There has to be something that forces you along ...

I think it's appetite. Actually, appetite is just another form of desire, and there are different levels of it.

Are prehistoric clay pieces of interest to you?

What I like about very ancient objects is what happened to them. It was a long perilous voyage to reach us that transformed them. This is also true of cities, places; time can do marvels with an ugly, pompous building. The gap between what it was meant to be and what it turns into now only means that nothing ever remains the same, and that includes our perception of it. Old Picasso said he was more interested in the movement of his ideas than in his ideas.

Are you interested in other aspects of ceramics?

I know a whole lot about it, not as a scholar but from looking at the work. There is such a wide range: Etruscan, Haniwa tomb figures, Maya vase painting, Iznik and Italian maiolica, I find so beautiful. Greek Tanagras were trinkets, but it doesn't matter; the objects have survived, changed from what they were intended to be, their surfaces eroded from being buried for years. There are missing parts, but still the thing that reaches us after all this time is—and I don't have any other word for it—gorgeous objects. It seems like it's totally unpretentious and immediate, and it's an intimate experience, looking at that. Which actually is something that my work is about. You know, a lot of sculpture is fabricated; it's designed on paper, engineered, and then given to someone to fabricate. This enables sculptors to work on a large scale with machinery, but that's not what I'm after. I've never been very interested in that. Generally, what I'm looking for is an intimate experience and making something directly, and then it pushes people to experience it that way. There's that connection, but it is not always obvious or direct.



Tanagra figure, Greece, earthenware, moulded, 27 x 10 x 6 cm, 400–300 BC



Codex-style cylinder vessel with deities, Guatemala, Maya, earthenware with cream, black and red slips, 14.7 x 11 cm, Late classic period, AD 675–725

What about somebody like Gertraud Möhwald?

Oh yes, I didn't know she existed for a long time, and I think that had to do with her particular situation, since she lived on the other side of the Berlin Wall. But when I discovered her work, it was like Ry Cooder going to Cuba and finding moth-balled music, and I feel the same about Möhwald's work. It's coming out of a very different place, not coming out of the American ceramics bubble with Voulkos, Arneson's work, or from other great artists in Britain and Europe. She came from left field for me. I like her use of the material. You see an artist inventing a language that didn't exist to say something that she must say. There are some people or works of art that years later I'm still thinking about. When I was twenty, I saw a show of boxes and drawings by Alan Glass. I still think of it as the most beautiful exhibition I have ever seen, and not a day passes that I don't think about Alan's work. He's lived in Mexico for forty years, and the work is like no one else's. It was like, the Postman Cheval doing drawing. It has haunted me because what you get to see is someone thinking his/her way through/via a material toward a piece/idea that's as resolved as it's going to get for them at that point in time. This is not linear; it's all over the place. It's like a Miles Davis piece, because when you listen to Miles, what you're listening to is his thinking in the moment. It's beautiful because you're right there watching someone thinking, right in front of you.

What about something like Haniwa figures or the Easter Island heads?

Many people make this connection with the big Easter Island heads. I don't ever think about them. They're not that interesting to me, really, as a maker. But I understand why people connect with that, because it's a large head, in solemn wonder—where is that coming from? But it's not something that feeds me a whole lot. I think that the story about those heads and the fact that we don't know where they are coming from and that they are a riddle in time is why they are captivating. It is like finding a book with no title and many chapters missing. I relate to that, because I wish that mine were like that, and that's why I leave mine untitled.

You know, the best crit I ever had was when someone came to my studio and said, "JP, who are those people?" They saw "someone" in front of them but with no name. This figure did not come in with a CV; you have to relate directly to that presence. Something intrigues you when you see that figure out of clay. So I do connect with the essence of the Easter Island heads in that way. But as objects, well, I would have to go there and see for myself.

I wonder if you'd talk a little bit about the glazing on your work?

Traditionally in ceramics, you have a step-by-step process. You make it, dry it, bisque fire, glaze, and then you fire it once again, and you have a piece. A lot of people in contemporary ceramics either bypass some of those steps or expand them. I didn't want the glaze to look like a glove on a hand. Glaze is like that, you know; like snow on the staircase, it changes the form, and I didn't want the glaze to change the form that way, so I tried a number of things, and I found that what works the best for me is to do multiple firings using a really watered-down, low-fire glaze, and then I apply this wash on the piece. Then I fire it, and when the piece gets out of the kiln, it's a bit like a painting that you work on every day. And the second day you come in, you look at what you've done yesterday, and then you do something else to it.

But when I'm actually looking at the glaze, I'm looking at it in the same way as I did when I was making it. I'm looking for areas that may need more life brought back into them. So every trick in the book and outside the book is okay. There are no rules. In the making stage, a piece can become very chaotic at some stage, and I won't see it clearly anymore, so sometimes I use the slip to cover some parts, to isolate those parts from the rest. Later, as I continue, I cut through that, so I get a surface that reveals the process. It is the by-product of the making.

I like that word by-product. I'm interested in what happens while I am busy making a piece—the relationship between the piece and the debris that piles up while I work.

Talk a little bit about the houses and the houses on the horses.

Oh, the houses came out of my curiosity about the range of possibilities with this material. For instance, the clay has a propensity to work as an organic material. What I mean by organic is that it can so easily allude to a geological process. Claudi Casanovas does that very well. For me, that was what attracted me to clay at first. It looked like what the planet was doing but on a smaller scale. The cracks and the canyons in clay really appealed to me. You fold clay so that it cracks; you don't draw a crack on the clay. With the figure, the work became very fleshy. I managed to get the figures to look like bog mummies, skin that looks wet even after thousands of years. Clay has a very wide range, and I always wonder what else I can say with clay and how? I realized I could treat clay like plywood and cut it to get forms that were more to do with geometry and planes. Essentially it was like making bird-houses combined with something that a volcano might make. A volcano makes a form very different from what a bandsaw makes. And I wanted to try all of these things and possibly blend them in together. The houses look as if they've been made by some crazy birdhouse maker a hundred years ago, and they were found all piled up in an attic—spiders, birds, pigeons in the attic, that's what I'm alluding to.

In 1987 I made some horses, and they were so kind of organic, as if they were made out of mud and sticks but still it was clay. I put some slabs on top of them, and it began to suggest houses, and so there's this contrast of objects that come from two different places. A bird's nest, chicken coops, and houses are all habitats, made by different species, and I wanted them to connect. I began to really play with the material. I cut it, and it began to suggest vernacular architecture. I'm interested in Gaudí, of course, and the Postman Cheval, the poor man's Gaudí. At first I was concerned with the structure of the houses. Over time, they became more embellished. And lastly, I had an uncle when I was younger, and he made bird-houses. If you take an image of the moon and an image of the birdhouse and you put them in the same place, they begin to have a conversation. When I am working, what happens between my head and my hands, the material and the piece in progress, is the equivalent of our rambling conversation that happens when a shy guy begins to ramble and talk. I think there's an equivalence ...



Gertraud Möhwald, *Head with wire curl*, clay, shards, glazes, oxides, paper, coil spring, 42 x 30 cm, 2000



Work in progress, early horse forms, by Jean-Pierre Larocque at New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University, 1993

ABRIDGED CHRONOLOGY



Yvonne Tellier and Paul-Émile Larocque,
c. 1936

1953

Jean-Pierre Larocque born in Montreal, Quebec, the second child of Yvonne Tellier and Paul-Émile Larocque (sister Lise born in 1941); mother works in a cotton textile mill; father is a fireman and manager of a print shop

1953–60

Father starts a business making wooden boxes; family moves from the Saint-Henri section of Montreal to the town of Saint-Basile-le-Grand, south of Montreal, and then to Montreal's Saint-Laurent area; father designs a house for the family in the Saint-Lambert suburb of Montreal on the south side of the St. Lawrence River

1960

Attends boarding school, Petit collège Anasthase-Forget, Montreal; taught by the nuns of Les Soeurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et Marie

1967

Enrols at Collège classique Mont-Saint-Louis, Montreal, Grades 8 to 11

1972

Enrols in art department, Cégep du Vieux-Montréal

1973

Leaves the Cégep and takes first trip to Europe, including France, England, Italy, the Netherlands; spends two months in Greece, mainly on the islands of Corfu and Crete



Jean-Pierre Larocque with Lucky on
dog house, 1956

1973–76

Works at odd jobs in Montreal: house painter, carpenter, in father's workshop

1976

Enrols at Université du Québec à Montréal, Fine Arts Department: print-making, intaglio, wood sculpture (sometimes using leftover wooden bins); creates large organic clay vessels

1977–82

Father has serious illness; interrupts art school to work at family business for four years; paints and draws at home

1982

Father dies; travels to Europe and Africa for three months

1984–86

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Concordia University, Montreal; ceramics with David Dorrance, workshop with Rudy Autio; both encourage him to apply to graduate school



Jean-Pierre Larocque dressed for his first communion, 1960

1986–88

Master of Fine Arts from New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, New York; instructors include Anne Currier, Val Cushing, Andrea Gill, John Gill, Tony Hepburn, Wayne Higby; becomes friends with fellow classmates Tony Marsh and Paul Kotula

1988

Returns to Montreal; works as a barman, waiter, construction worker, technician at Concordia University; Exploration Grant from Canada Council for the Arts; works at Bemis Foundation in Omaha, Nebraska, for a six-month residency; spends summer in Long Beach, California, with Tony and Lisa Marsh; works on experimental figures at California State University at Long Beach

1989

Artist in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta; meets fellow resident artist Andy Nasisse from Athens, Georgia

1990

First solo exhibition of ceramics and drawings at Swidler Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan

1991

Studio in new MFA facility at Concordia University, Montreal

1991–92

First teaching experience, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; sabbatical replacement, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver, British Columbia; exhibitions at Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; First National Canadian Biennial of Ceramics, Trois-Rivières, Quebec (travelling); Swidler Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan

1992–94

Assistant Professor at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, New York

1993

Solo exhibition, Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan; additional exhibitions in 1996, 2001

1994

Mother dies; teaches summer school at Cortona, Italy, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; Assistant Professor, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Visiting Artist, Seoul, South Korea; exhibitions at the National Canadian Biennial of Ceramics, Trois-Rivières, Quebec; NCECA Downtown Gallery, Loyola University, New Orleans, Louisiana; The Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Arkansas, catalogue by Allan Dubois; University of Georgia, Athens,



Jean-Pierre Larocque, 1972

Georgia; solo exhibition, Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan, catalogue with essay by Karen Kleinfelder

1994–99

Assistant Professor at California State University, Long Beach, California, with Tony Marsh and Jay Kvapil; they bring in the following artists to teach and share studios: Kim Dickey, Jae Won Lee, Casey O'Connor, Vincent Palacios, Sunkoo Yuh

1995

JINRO International Invitational Exhibition, Seoul, South Korea

1996

JINRO International Ceramic Art Exhibition in Belgium; cover article, *American Ceramics* 12, no. 3 by George Melrod

1997

Exhibition at Henry Ford Community College, Dearborn, Michigan; article in *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 27 by Karen Kleinfelder



Jean-Pierre Larocque, workshop demonstration, Seoul, Korea, 1994

1998

Group exhibition *Inside Out* at the George R. Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto, Ontario; 54th Scripps Annual, Pomona, California; article in *Vie des Art* 171 by Jacques-Bernard Roumanes

1999

Establishes a studio in Montreal; solo exhibition at Dorothy Weiss Gallery, San Francisco, California; joins and exhibits to the present, Garth Clark Gallery, New York, New York

2000

Exhibitions with Fay Gold Gallery, San Francisco, California, and Atlanta, Georgia; Dolphin Gallery, Kansas City, Kansas; solo exhibition (with catalogue) at Garth Clark Gallery, New York, New York; video made for the National Canadian Biennial of Ceramics, Trois-Rivières, Quebec, by Carolane Saint-Pierre, wins first prize at Montpellier Ceramics Film Festival, Montpellier, France

2001

Group exhibitions: Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina; Museum of Arts & Sciences, Macon, Georgia; Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Northern Clay Centre, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Baltimore Clayworks, Baltimore, Maryland; Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006

Solo exhibitions at Garth Clark Gallery, New York, New York

2006

Major solo exhibition of specially commissioned clay sculpture and drawings for the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Ontario; catalogue by Susan Jefferies; video of the artist at work by Carolane Saint-Pierre; cover articles in *Vie des Arts* 202 (Spring) by Bernard Lévy; *Ceramics Monthly* vol. 54 no.6 by Andy Nasisse; *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 63 by Susan Jefferies

Awards

2005 and 1989, Canada Council for the Arts; 1990, Ministry of Cultural Affairs/ Ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec; National Canadian Ceramics Biennial, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

Selected Collections

The Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto; Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec; The Detroit Art Institute, Detroit, Michigan; The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina; The Silber Collection, Laguna Beach, California; the Robert Pfannebecker Collection, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; The Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred, New York; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

All ceramic pieces are untitled. Dimensions are height x length x depth. Unless otherwise noted, drawings were made at the artist's Montreal studio. Artist's collection © Jean-Pierre Larocque.

Clay Sculpture

Ceramic with glazes, multiple firings. All ceramic pieces were specially commissioned for the exhibition and made in 2005–06 at the artist's Montreal studio.

1.–8.

Heads

From 102 x 49 x 48.5 cm to
178 x 56 x 51 cm

9.–12.

Horses

From 71.5 x 89 x 28 cm to
75.5 x 89 x 28 cm

13.–16.

Horses with Baggage

From 96.5 x 70 x 40 cm to
107 x 86.5 x 53.5 cm

17.–24.

Figures

From 94 x 30.5 x 19 cm to
109 x 34.5 x 28 cm

25.–40.

Houses

From 18 x 17.5 x 11 cm to
19 x 21 x 12 cm

Drawings

41.

Two figures, woman in blue

1998, Los Angeles, California

Conté crayons, paper

48.5 x 64 cm

42.

Two figures, woman with elaborate headdress

1998, Los Angeles, California

Conté crayons, paper

48.5 x 64 cm

43.

Two figures, man with red hat

1998, Los Angeles, California

Conté crayons, paper

48.5 x 64 cm

44.

Two figures, woman with red hair

1998, Los Angeles, California

Conté crayons, paper

48.5 x 64 cm

45.

Two figures, man with red beard

1998, Los Angeles, California

Conté crayons, paper

48.5 x 64 cm

46.

Women with bucket and candelabrum

2004

Gouache, paper

120 x 188 cm

47.

Standing woman in black dress

2005

Charcoal, paper

112 x 77 cm

48.

Standing girl in short black coat

2005

Charcoal, paper

112 x 77 cm

49.

Dark standing male figure

2002

Charcoal, paper

112 x 77 cm

50.

Man in torque position

2002

Charcoal, paper

112 x 77 cm

51.

Seated man/group of faces in a cloud

2004

Charcoal, paper

77 x 112 cm

52.

Men with pennants

2004

Charcoal, paper

77 x 112 cm

53.

Standing male figure/many heads

2004

Charcoal, paper

77 x 112 cm

54.

Group of figures with monkey

1998

Gouache, paper

77 x 112 cm

55.

Monkey and parasol

2004

Gouache, paper

77 x 112 cm

56.–65.

Small doodles

2004

Ballpoint pen, paper

25 x 34.5

66.–75.

Portrait heads

2004

Gouache, paper

19.5 x 14 cm

76.–79.

Ink horses

2004

Ink, paper

20.5 x 15 cm

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And to Bob, Alison, Lorenzo, Rachel, and Mark.

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It has been an extraordinary experience working with the artist, Jean-Pierre Larocque, over the last three years. Our conversations and his intelligence, accessibility, and trust have been greatly appreciated and made the project a pleasure.

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