ARTS

Sculptor's ancient memories echo with bones, rocks, clay

By DONNA GOLD
Staff Writer

MONROE — Potter Squidge Davis lives on a back road off a back road in this town of 657 people.

Her studio, in an old chicken barn, looks across a field to a ridge formed from some of Waldo County's many hills, where the foliage is just beginning to be spotted with yellow.

Davis has one potter's wheel inside and one outside, overlooking the ridge. Downstairs, there is a raku kiln, a propane-fired kiln, and two electric kilns. Her showroom is half meditation room.

This is a woman who cherishes space, and the privacy associated with it.

When she goes into schools to teach ceramics as a member of the Maine Touring Artist program, the children — kindergarteners as well as high school students — work in silence. Only Davis talks.

Davis is currently exhibiting her work in a solo show she calls Rocks, Bones and Ancient Memories at the Elements Gallery on Maine Street in Brunswick. Elements is a gallery that highlights the artistry of craftspeople.

In exhibition space at the rear of the gallery, large and small figures form dark circles. Burnished bones rest among stones in baskets and bowls. A large stone sits on a pedestal. All — figures, stones, bones, baskets and bowls — are made of clay.

The feeling is of an artist searching to find personal connections to ancient themes.

Davis has been living in Monroe for 20 years, arriving at the heart of the back-to-the-land movement. She grew up in Hingham, Mass., studied English literature at Wheaton College and settled on ceramics after graduation.

When she arrived in Maine and moved into the rambling white house across the road from her studio, she supported herself as a production potter, creating utility pottery through her business, Starflower Forge and Pottery.

Davis speaks of her life as moving in cycles, based in part, on seasons.

She concentrates her teaching in the hard winter months when her rambling studio becomes difficult to heat.

Every year or two, she cycles around to sculpture. This year, she devoted the summer months to exploring the sculpture she is showing at Elements.

Though Davis has only recently begun forming rocks out of clay, the connection circles back to her childhood, when she says, she began collecting rocks at age 3 or 4. She collected them, she says, without categorizing them, though people were constantly trying to get her to name and classify her collection.

"I didn't know it then," she says, "but I think I was trying to get power objects."

Five years ago, she toured England with her daughter, then 13, to look at the ancient stone circles and earthworks that dot the landscape.

"I was connecting with big rocks," she says.

A tall, elegant woman with neck-length blonde hair and a gracious manner, Davis has the appearance of the other form dominating her show — the female figures she molds to look like the leg bone of a moose, with the nobs of the knuckle forming the head and shoulders.

Bones and stones are related in Davis' mind. Stones, she says, are the bones of the earth.

Davis' pottery stones range from a cube of little more than an inch to one over a foot long. As she described them to me, I first thought: how silly to make stones out of clay when she could pick them up from Maine's rocky soil. But after seeing the nubby, hollow pieces, I found it's no sillier to sculpt a rock from clay than it is to sculpt a torso or paint a portrait. These rocks are homages to earth; their odd lightness makes them eminently tactile.

"In making rocks, in finding that shape in my own hands, I feel I'm stepping in line with mother nature," Davis says. "I feel like I'm partaking in a creation myth."

Davis speaks in a language that is becoming increasingly common, especially among women artists. Her work, too, follows a theme of searching for ancient meanings, resurrecting a spiritual connection to the earth and the feminine.

But rather than feeling influenced by her contemporaries, she sees her search as running parallel to them, without direct influence.

"I live kind of in a remote place," she says, "I'm influenced by the natural world more than by people, and yet (my work) seems to be connected with what other people are doing."

Perhaps it is the process that is similar. Yoga, relaxation breathing and Tai Chi are a powerful part of Davis' life, as they have come to be for many other contemporary artists. Some artists have moved from similar forms of meditation to delicate, ethereal work; others, like Davis, have dug in to create art that is solid and earthy.

The raku firing process she uses enhances the sense of Davis' attachment to the earth. Essentially, the process tames fire with dust.

A raku-fired piece is removed from the kiln at 1900 degrees Fahrenheit, a temperature when the glaze becomes liquid. It is then plunged into sawdust, which the heat immediately ignites. The piece is allowed to burn in a box without oxygen, so that it smokes. The result is an ashen quality from which spots of brilliant color emerge like fire from coals.

The Elements show is a dark one, clearly an internal exploration. But the journey is also an artistic and tactile one. Along with the bones and stones are some polished and urn-like pillars and a ceramic arch (which comes from an earlier body of work) that looks like it was constructed from the curved pieces of viaduct tiles, topped by a porcelain face of a woman.

With these several styles present — the ancient earthbound images and the more ornate pieces — Davis also seems to be searching the centuries. She moves through Victorbriana and Roman decadence to primitivism and roots to forge a connection between earth, clay and her own gut. She finds it in the primitive.

The most successful of Davis' pieces are the most abstract of the ceramic "bone" torsos. These are raw, sensual figures suggesting both a woman and a bone. Their harsh, black, corrugated finish hints at life's brutality. Through their simplicity, these figures bridge earth with sky suggesting a woman seeking the heavens from the confines of a single bone.

In Rocks, Bones and Ancient Memories we see a woman beginning to mold clay into the form of her soul.

Rocks, Bones, & Ancient Memories

- Squidge Davis
- Elements Gallery
- 56 Maine Street, Brunswick
- Through Oct. 20
- Monday-Saturday 10-5
- 729-1108

Kennebec Journal / Jeffrey A. Wilson

Squidge Davis works on a coiled totem form in h her Monroe studio.