

Edna Dickinson • Cascaras



*Article by Francis McConkey*



Installation View. *Cascaras*. 2013.

**E**DNA DICKINSON EXHIBITED NEW CERAMIC WORK AT ZOHO Gallery, located in the design centre Fabrica de la Aurora, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The name of the exhibition was *Cascaras*, or husks, which aptly describes this group of nine large hollow pieces which are bold, lively, animated and defy gravity, draping down off of their pedestals.

I visited with Dickinson at her studio in San Miguel to find out more about the process involved in making these pieces. "Edna Dickinson begins with a single idea of a form she would like to explore and then figures out how to realise such a form in clay. The idea that has lately intrigued her is found in tensile structures." Tensile structures are seen in contemporary architecture and are used as fabric roofs because they can economically and attractively span large distances. The basic idea of tensile structures is to separate the structural elements that are in compression (ribs) from the structural elements that are in tension (membranes). The shapes that evolve are often quite beautiful, organic and natural in appearance since the resulting forms are generated directly in response to the natural forces that are applied to them. The challenge of how to make these

light, airy hollow ribbed forms in clay led her on an exploration of materials and techniques.

"It was probably three months between getting the idea and beginning to work it out with small versions. This particular process is unique; I developed it to realise the idea." Research comes naturally to Dickinson because she spent 20 years working in research for two different biotech companies in Seattle, Washington, US.

Her approach was to first build a structure and then coat the structure with paper clay slip. She started the process with nylon tubes suspended from above and then created the ribs by pushing round wooden 'ribs' inside the nylon to create compression.

"In order to work on the piece it had to be suspended in the air so I could walk around it in order to see all of angles of the piece. Then I could apply tension by stretching the material over the wooden ribs and anchoring the material-covered ribs in order to hold the piece steady. I pulled the ribs taut with paper clips attached to strings that were fastened to chairs, flower pots, bricks, chairs, the shed walls, anything I could find."

After the structure took an interesting form, she slowly began coating the outside of the structure with porcelain clay slip in order to build up the surface, just enough so that the piece could withstand the firing but still be thin and delicate. During the firing





Left: Installation View. *Cascaras*. 2013.  
 Top: *Untitled*. 2013. 29 x 14 x 4 in.  
 Above: *Untitled*. 2013. 29 x 17 x 14 in.  
 Below: *Edna Dickinson*.

the interior structure burned out leaving a delicate shell of fired porcelain clay. She finally could see the soft undulating interiors and found them interesting to look into. "A husk," says Edna. "What remains. I love how the curves are created by compressing the ribs and stacking them from larger to small. I like how lively and humorous they are."

Surface treatments were in subtle matte colours because she wanted the focus to be on form. Some were glazed in soft white or cream and some were sprayed with ceramic paint in three shades of gray. "One of the great things about living in Mexico is the abundance of skilled craftsmen. I gave Moises, a car painter, the colours that I wanted and he matched them perfectly and then painted seven of the pieces and finished them with a light lacquer spray." The result was a silky surface with a soft sheen. The outcome is a family of pieces constructed similarly, but each different from the other in shape and colour.

Dickinson is a member of a small cooperative studio in San Miguel which draws people from San Francisco, New York, New Mexico, Boston, Canada and Mexico. Some live in San Miguel full-time and others visit for six months during the winter. It makes for a lively working environment with ideas flowing back and forth, sometimes in two languages.

Ten years ago, Dickinson and her husband, Mike Kleimo, a painter, moved from Seattle, Washington

to the Mexican high desert city of San Miguel partly because it is a town that retains a rich colonial charm with snaking cobblestone streets and Spanish colonial buildings in delectable colours but more importantly because it is a mecca for the arts. They have found San Miguel to be a stimulating place to live and to work in the arts.



Francis McConkey is a ceramics artist and teacher who lives and works in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. She teaches ceramics to adults and children in San Miguel and Hawaii.