

SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Izydor Borys

Doctoral degree in visual arts
in the discipline of sculpture,
conferred by a resolution of the Sculpture Department Council
of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk
on 25 June 2003.

Since 1995 working as an assistant,
in 2003 promoted to the rank of Assistant Professor [*adiunkt*]
at the Fine Arts Institute (ISP) at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Warmia and
Mazury (UWM) in Olsztyn.

In compliance with the formal requirements, I present the list of sculptural works
showcased at my solo exhibition entitled *Passage* on 14 December 2017 in BWA
Gallery in Olsztyn, aspiring to meet the conditions set forth in Art. 16.2 of the Act of
14 March 2003 on academic degrees and titles, as well as degrees and titles in the arts.

*An artist worthy of the name must be the creator of forms
and not only their messenger*

André Malraux¹

In art, discovering the imperceptible and the concealed always involves an acknowledgement that the audience – the viewer being the interpreter – can make their own decision. Their conclusions guide the artist during further explorations of the impenetrable polysemy of visual signs. The artist should explore the areas which are kept far out of sight. This is because constant replication of the same schemes is a loss of time for the creator and a disappointment for the viewer. Artistic expression should be personal, emanating from the internal experiences of the author. Standing by my beliefs, I have renounced any figurative allusions, however enticing they might be for a sculptor. Instead, I have begun working on my own language of communication, made up of signs that would allow me to express universal concepts.

For nearly twenty years, I have been making ceramic sculptures, but the work still fills me with curiosity and humility. To find the sources of my fascination with ceramics, I need to look back to my childhood, spent at my father's ceramic studio in the castle of Reszel. This is where I learnt to create toys out of clay. The imagination of my younger self was greatly influenced by the ease of shaping the material, even in a child's hands, the access to the studio, the opportunity to witness the mystery of a piece of clay being transformed into a firm object fired in the furnace. My father was my first teacher: a patient supporter of my endeavours and a sensible, demanding critic of my humble 'oeuvre'.

The need to pursue my interests made me choose the high school of fine arts in Gdynia–Orłowo. This is where I met fantastic teachers to whom I owe a great deal. Under their influence, upon defending my final piece (a relief triptych in bronze), I decided to enter the Faculty of Sculpture of the State University of Visual Arts in Gdańsk (translator's note: currently the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk). My studies

¹ Quote as in: prof. S. Radwański, *Recenzja dorobku Izydora Borysa* (doctoral degree programme), Gdańsk 2003, p. 3 (typescript), translated from Polish into English.

began in 1985. The event which had a decisive impact on my further creative path – the resolution to express myself through ceramic forms – was the meeting with Professor Henryk Lula in his class. Later on, I found another important figure in my life in Professor Stanisław Radwański, who supervised my final piece. This sculpture was not made in ceramics but in rust-eaten sheet metal. Completed in 1991, *The Rider of the Apocalypse* is a synthetic take on the conjoined figures of the horse and the rider. The selected artistic convention was inspired by my fascination with the work of Lynn Chadwick. The sculpture, made up of cubical blocks, bordering on abstraction, was intended to resonate because of its dynamism and energy of the form.

Upon graduation, my first important experience was the participation in an international competition for a sculpture in stone, where my monument of Adam Mickiewicz landed me the Second Award in the Young Artists category. Due to the material and the large size of the work, the project posed some new challenges. However, it encouraged me to continue my explorations of the cubistic form in the language of figurative sculpture. In 1996, I had similar experiences while working at the International Snow Sculpture Symposium in Canada and the USA where, as a team of Polish artists, we completed four sculptures in snow, 3 x 3 x 3 metres each. The piece entitled *Mask* earned us the Second Award. Sculpting in snow resembled working in stone since it required the same subtractive method which involves rapid removal of the material. The necessity to operate fast while dealing with such an unusual material became another valuable experience and a testing ground in my quest for a pure sculptural form.

In 1995, I started working at the university: firstly, the University of Pedagogy (WSP) in Olsztyn and then the University of Warmia and Mazury (UWM). I began as an assistant and have conducted my own classes since completing my doctoral degree. University work increased my participation in exhibitions. In addition, getting to know young people and their explorations became – and has remained ever since – a source of inspiration, as well as satisfaction from pedagogical activity. As an artist, I found myself in a good place. Besides, I achieved both financial and private stability (I have a wife and two sons). With access to my father's studio, equipped with sufficiently large furnaces, I had every opportunity to freely create ceramics, which became the

medium of my truly personal expression. My work on a piece is divided into stages which include both technological processes, subject to strict requirements and timeframes, and – most importantly – the process of sculptural creation. I could discern three main stages of the work: designing, modelling, and glazing and firing completed sculptures. The design stage may be compared to the biological act of hatching. At first, the imagination conjures up a general idea which subsequently needs to be put to paper. Time and time again, my drafts end up in a trash can; other wait to be rediscovered, sometimes years later. My working style is chiefly informed by my personality – I operate at snail’s pace to achieve a satisfactory result – just like my decisions to repeat the same form in many variants, to return to selected themes and motifs. It is the search for the form that generates the constant dilemma between the idea and the limitations imposed by the physicality of the matter. The dissonance between a sketch completed in light strokes and its physical representation in sculpture may be compared to the clash between the sacred and the profane.

I find clay incredibly pleasant to work with. No other material has such characteristics: lightness and ease of forming shapes, modelling profiles and surfaces. Clay may be cut, glued, compressed and torn. Adding water suffices to easily turn it into a liquid. In contrast to firm materials like wood, stone, or steel, clay allows one to achieve a result in a relatively short time. However, it has its limitations which need to be considered in designing sculptural forms. Clay requires an excellent sense of its characteristics, the ability to maintain the right pace of work and a steady level of humidity. Any negligence or mistake during the modelling process is likely to have disastrous consequences. Undisputedly, the material has immense impact on the character and the form of the sculpture – it is the substance, the fabric, often providing the piece with a symbolic significance or even a metaphysical context.

Clay is rich in symbolism:

Modern cultures know an archetype of clay as a stop-gap for living matter. According to a plethora of myths, clay is the substance of living beings. The golem was a clay creature brought to life by a magical formula. Man was also made of clay or dirt (according to myths from many parts of the world). In a sense, clay is a link, an intermediary stage between the world of the living and the non-living. An excellent

*illustration of this transmutation – of the non-living into the living and vice versa – is provided by the wet, modelled clay which solidifies after the drying and the firing.*²

Firing and glazing may be the most fascinating and mysterious stage of the processing of ceramic clay. This transformation of this matter of the sculpture, frozen in place (dried up), could be compared but to an inscrutable ritual whose originators are fire and time.

As a result of thermal processing, clay – and thus the sculpture itself – transcends its physical properties when the delicate matter turns into a firm shell. The process is irreversible and clay never returns to its original, plastic state. The alchemic transformation of glazing and clay is shrouded in a magical veil of mystery, goes beyond the materialist interpretation and gains a spiritual aspect. To quote the superb description offered by Lawon Tracewski:

*Nothing bewitches man quite like fire, live, bringing light and warmth, fire that could be watched forever. Many thousand years ago, man saw through its soul and transformed the menacing and destructive power into a creative force. The first creation of the harnessed fire was ceramics. Ceramics... the fruit of mutual love between man and fire.*³

The inspiration for my ceramic sculptures came from the works completed in Professor Lula's class during my studies. The *Spheres* series was a fruit borne by my fascination with geometrical abstraction, which has continued ever since and greatly influenced my thoughts on "the language of sculpture". My creative concept involved making a series of transformations of this highly symbolical geometrical form. The universalism of the geometrical discourse was discussed very early on by Herbert Read:

The claim, therefore, of the abstract artist is that the forms he creates are of more than decorative significance in that they repeat in their appropriate materials and on their appropriate scale certain proportions and rhythms which are inherent in the structure of the universe, and which govern organic growth, including the growth

² Jarosław Maciej Salański, *O symbolice materiałów – glina*, Blog: Garncarz Maciej Bene Akebe, <http://www.garncarz.net/index.php?lang=pl&grupa=31&kategoria=81> (access: 4 April 2018).

³ L. Tracewski, *Dotyk ognia* Introduction to the catalogue published to celebrate the Fifth International Ceramics Biennale, Stowarzyszenie Keramos, 2001, p. 2.

*of the human body. Attuned to these rhythms and proportions, the abstract artist can create microcosms which reflect the macrocosm.*⁴

The language of geometry or – in broader terms – of abstraction is powerful not because of the precision of its message but because of the wide, imagination-stimulating field of universal interpretation it offers. In the case of my works, spherical shapes both fit the symbolism of perfection existent since the Antiquity and can be regarded as references to the planet Earth, the globe and the universe.

In the quest for geometrical perfection, I turned my eyes to architectural models. While creating the spheres, I have also worked on two series of sculptures: *Cathedrals* and *Archetones*. Both of them combine my penchant for geometrisation, conformity to mathematical accents and rhythms, and the classical approach to sculpture which – like architecture – exists in space. I have discovered a new area of creative explorations: my pieces began to speak in a universal language of allusive abstraction. I searched for archetypal forms which could be felt in a manner that was nearly palpable. Those sculptures were supposed to rise to the rank of totems, magical objects imbued with their own energy and power.

According to Carl Gustav Jung, the creative process involves: *animating the eternal symbols of humanity to transform the mystery of external and internal stimuli into a completed work of art. The artist uses symbols to find himself in his actions.*⁵

The form of *Cathedrals* and *Archetones* was greatly influenced by their material. Chamotte allowed me to create massive, geometrised forms, contrasting at times with their fine-spun detail. Subtle use of glazing was intended to underscore the texture and the sculptural expression. The series discussed became the foundation of the doctoral thesis which I defended at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk in 2003. Those explorations were complemented by my theoretical work entitled *Rzeźba – konstrukcja przestrzenna* (Sculpture – a spatial structure) which analyses phenomena related to the sculptural space and the connections between sculpture and architecture.

⁴ H. Read, *Art and Society*, William Heinemann, London 1937, p. 260. The English version as in: https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.114076/2015.114076.Art-And-Society_djvu.txt (access: 26 April 2018).

⁵ Quote as in: prof. S. Radwański, *Ocena dorobku Izydora Borysa*, (doctoral degree programme), Gdańsk 2003, p. 1 (typescript), translated from Polish into English.

My most recent pieces (2008–2017) make up two series: *Phantoms* and *Cocoons* which have become the foundation of my habilitation entitled *Passage*.

Passage, or the metamorphoses of sculpture

Semantically, the word “passage” conveys a wide array of meanings, ranging from the banalities of daily life to profoundly symbolic senses. There are many references which illustrate the notion of passage. To evoke those relevant to my creative work, passage is: a change (passage from one thing to another), the process of getting through, a way leading to a destination, a place that may be passed through, an intermediary phase between two elements, phenomena, periods. Psychotherapy knows the notion of crossing the threshold, changing from the known to the unknown, passing from the sacred to the profane. The English word “transition” also means a passage, going through, transformation and change. Cultural anthropology discusses the issue known as “the rite of passage” – *a custom characteristic in that it changes (removes and confers) a property of the individual. Oftentimes, a rite of passage would mark turning points in the one’s life. It could be related to moving from one phase of life into another, entering a new age or social group... Rites of passage may also include customs observed to mark physical changes of location: crossing a border*⁶ (e.g. the ritual of crossing the equator).

Phenomena that accompany “passage” may relate both to the spiritual sphere and the material world. In my creations, I am interested not only in the physical change in the work and the material but also in the evolution on a metaphysical level. Clay undergoes a transition in a purely material dimension. Firstly, it is excavated from the ground, then processed by the artist and finally dried and fired. At each stage, the clay becomes transformed, changing its physical state, properties, form, smell and colour.

In terms of change in form, my cocoons undergo a metamorphosis of compensated or dispersed shapes. Many a time they allude to the world of nature – metamorphoses of the beginning of life and death. The symbolical aspect of my pieces is expressed in the language of abstraction: intuitive and not immediately evident. Another aspect is the mystery of creation: as a result of the artist’s activity, personal

⁶ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obrz%C4%99d_przej%C5%9Bcia (access: 04.04.2018).

experiences, knowledge and contact with the material, the change occurs both in the work and in the artist. For the author, this process is *a rite of passage*, witnessed by and recorded in the work which may then be subjectively interpreted by the viewer.

The entire *Phantoms* and *Cocoons* series was presented at the *Passage* exhibition held at the BWA art gallery in Olsztyn on 14 December 2017.

The *Phantoms* series was a new beginning in my creative explorations. Its precursor was my piece from 2007, bearing the same name, whose shape alludes to a ship or a boat. In contrast to my earlier pieces, it is not a solid block representing a closed form but an openwork sculpture, light-structured and composed of delicate strips of clay. I intended to evoke the symbolism of the boat and create an original image which would not only resonate by way of the expressive force of its surface and shape but also convey a clear interpretive message, inexorably providing the viewer with some food for thought. The choice of theme was by no means accidental. Marine art and the structure and appearance of ships have interested me since I was a child. I have read a lot on the topic, analysed construction plans and made model ships. Later on, my dreams included travelling and even entering a maritime school, although finally, I ended up only as an amateur sailor. However, my interest in boats is not limited to the material aspect. To the contrary, there is a nearly transcendental dimension to it – in a sense, that is my *idée fixe*. At this point, I cannot help quoting the Rod Stewart song: *I am sailing... I am flying, like a bird... Oh Lord, to be near You, to be free.*⁷

Thus, it is hardly surprising that the theme of the ship as a symbol has found its place in my creations.

Phantom I, the sculpture commonly referred to as *Boat*, draws back to the symbolism deeply rooted in our culture. It concerns both the religious sphere: boat – vessel – Noah's Ark, church nave, and mythology: boat of Charon the ferryman, but also the Sun sailing across the sky. In my book, the boat is a symbol of a certain alienation, but also of safety, like a cocoon which separates us from the things outside, the things unknown and thus – dangerous. Whence came the name *Phantoms*? For me,

⁷ *Sailing*, 1972, composed by Gavin Sutherland. Rod Stewart performed the song since 1975. An excerpt of the lyrics.

titles are rather fluid and non-committal. Using the language of abstraction, I often follow my intuition. Nevertheless, the word “phantom”, defined in dictionaries as a ghost, an apparition, adequately renders the nature of pieces constituting the series. It is a synonym of the indeterminate, the unsettling, whose existence is only implicit. *Phantom I*, included in the set of my habilitation works, is the third version which represents boat-like shapes. While making subsequent works of this series, I looked for themes connected in terms of form and interpretation. Working titles of my pieces included: *Wind, Sails, Wings*. They were consistently “built” in the paper clay technique and took the form of complex structures resembling the frameworks of boats, buildings and even animals. One of the sculptures is fitted with an exoskeleton which firmly commands the surrounding space. Another piece brings to mind a torn kite whose aggressive form cuts the air like a razor. Those “skeletons” allude to the passage of time, destruction and decay. The decomposition afflicts both biological forms and artefacts. It is a memento and a symbol of transformation – passage.

For me, the *Phantoms* series was “innovative” both in terms of form and aesthetics. In addition, it forced me to introduce some alterations in my technique. Looking for new means of expression, I started experimenting with a new ceramic material, the so-called paper clay, which is a composition of clay and paper added in the form of a grinded pulp. Paper clay shows much more resistance during processing, which allows me to make subtle elements and join them even after drying. In a way, the process resembles model-making where completed elements are glued together. Therefore, the term “building” seems more appropriate than e.g. modelling. This technique has greatly enriched my skillset and allowed me to complete complex projects. However, some technical problems have cropped up. Despite its advantages, paper clay turns out to be very fragile when fired. Working in this material is rather irksome and requires much caution. I still envy painters the ability to repaint their creations with relative ease. In paper clay ceramics, every mistake is irreversible.

The other series presented at the *Passages – Cocoons* exhibition was created concurrently to *Phantoms* (the first sculptures were completed in 2010). Most of the pieces are made in chamotte. They are more massive in form, showing less fascination with structure and more elements alluding to organic abstraction. The title itself

suggests an act of closing, sealing oneself off in insect cocoons. At times, the cocoons open up and absorb the surrounding space. *Cocoons* bring to mind change since they are transformations of recurring motifs. Replication of the motifs has become my creative method. This cycle includes reiterations of the boat theme. They are also featured in reliefs: looking closely, one might see a transformation of the chrysalis into a butterfly or spot an outline of a bird, a moth or a falling angel. These pieces speak to the viewer in the language of allusions and associations, symbolically representing the existential problems of man: the issues of alienation, loneliness, inescapable death and rebirth in living matter. In the same vein, I draw upon the religious connotations of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ – the mystery of passage.

Symbols are the most important and enduring phenomenon in culture. They represent the essence of how humans function in their realities and society. In symbols, the system of visions and meanings of life comes into sight. The relation between the signified and the signifier is always mutually elevating but never monosemous. My visual signs act as media for symbols, seeking to express the inexpressible. The ambiguity of this discourse allows for a multiplicity of interpretations.

The symbolical purport of my pieces is underscored by the glazing covering their surface. In the case of chamotte, the glazing is only subtly rubbed in the porous structure, amplifying the effect of rigidity. In the case of openwork skeletons made in paper clay, the earthen glazing blends in the surface, gleaming here and there with metallic lustre. The entire piece gives the impression of a site after fire or an artefact recovered from the bottom of the ocean.

My works in ceramics are complemented by sculptures in other materials. In the course of my career, I have completed several monumental projects intended for public space. In 2012, I sculpted a monument of Pope John Paul II to the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross in Klebark Wielki near Olsztyn. In 2015, the Polish community in New York commissioned me to sculpt a statue of Saint John Paul II for the parish in Copiaque, Long Island. The piece, cast in bronze, is more than two metres tall. In the same year, I completed a sculptural composition called *Cranes*, which was placed in

the Olsztyn–Mazury Airport Terminal in Szymany. The sculptures, representing three cranes, were made in steel sheet metal and set on a stand covered in granite slabs. The entire composition is approximately three metres tall.

While working on the sculptures, I have also co-operated in the design of aluminium panels placed on the wall of the airport terminal in Szymany. My contribution involved the design of cuts in the panels fashioned by the Pantel Studio of Architectural Forms (designers of the entire terminal). Each of the four panels is more than 850 cm long.

Apart from my artistic and academic activity, what gives me pleasure and satisfaction is my work with students. I have numerous accomplishments in this area, as confirmed by the awards received for my didactic and organisational activity. In years 2000–2017, during my tenure as the Head of the Sculpture Department, I supervised twelve BA [*licencjat*] and nine MA [*magister*] degrees. In most cases, the final pieces were very favourably evaluated. I stay in touch with many of the graduates and keep track of their careers.

In my eyes, a student is always a partner. Thus, in all matters related to didactic work, I try to offer my assistance.

My organisational activity involves the preparation of exhibitions of works by students from the Sculpture Department, but also the popularisation of art (lectures, organisation of an academic conference, workshops). Many of my workshops are held periodically, in the framework of co-operation with schools, kindergartens and other cultural and educational centres. In 2017, I was a member of the organisation team preparing the project entitled: The University of a Young Explorer. The initiative, financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, was organised at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Warmia and Mazury (UWM) in Olsztyn.

As part of the project, I conducted Ceramic Orchestra workshops for primary and junior high school students, as well as Imprints Made into Reliefs workshops for primary school students.

For many years, I have been a juror in the Provincial Competition for Folk and Non-Professional Sculpture held by the Biskupiec Cultural Centre (BDK). Furthermore, I am a member of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers

(ZPAP), the Areszt Sztuki association, and the Wyłom foundation which unites employees of the Fine Arts Institute (ISP) of the University of Warmia and Mazury (UWM). In 2017, I published my monograph entitled *Izydor Borys. Rzeźba. Poszukiwanie formy* (Izydor Borys. Sculpture. Explorations of the form) and reviewed by Prof. Mariusz Białecki.

While observing recent developments in contemporary sculpture, I have noticed a considerable group of sculpture artists who use ceramics as their main medium. Figures such as: Adam Abel, Krzysztof Rozpondek, or Natalie Doyen (the USA) challenge the stereotypical understanding of the material.

It is my belief that the explorations and experiments apparent in this discipline further contemporary sculpture by showing novel, interesting areas of exploration.

Looking at my future as an artist, I try to remain optimistic. My sketchbooks still hold many “unhatched” ideas waiting for their time to be worked on and given form. What I know is that a love for ceramics is a love for life.

Olsztyn, 4 April 2018



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