

# Beyond Cute



Rebekah Bogard's "girlie" sculptures are powerful ... and sexy

BY K.T. ANDERS

Surrounded by sassy insects, pastel fantasy animals with long, curling tails frolic with each other, perch on puffy clouds, and lounge in bathtubs strewn with blossoms. Rebekah Bogard's sculptures look cute and girlie-girlie—until you take a closer look. Then you pause: What are those creatures doing? And—my gosh, ranging from nearly three to over six-feet high, they are so big! After another moment, you reconsider: could this actually be art—complete with sophisticated design elements and a point of view?

"I'm interested in the idea of cute—and how cute isn't considered art," says Bogard. "Cute often strains for effect and is trivial, but I think there are ways to break the rules to go beyond cute. Having a strong sense of artistic design and sexuality helps carry my pieces further. There's a strange tension between grotesque and cute."

Three forces in her life seem to have brought Bogard to this creative place. First, as a little girl, she always loved hearts and flowers and rainbows. "I don't think there is anything to be ashamed of about being girlie," she notes. "When I was a kid it was great; why can't it still be great? I think there's a place in the world for that."

Second, when she took the job as assistant professor of ceramics at the University of Nevada at Reno, Bogard found herself in a department she describes as "driven by testosterone." Surrounded by male colleagues,

Bogard says she suddenly felt the need to assert her presence as a female. Although animals had always been a strong element in her work, up to that time she had never felt the pull of gender. "I am influenced by the work of Sandi Pierantozzi," she says. "I was making pitcher shapes, starting with a form but finding different ways to abstract it, break it down, and change it. They were non-functional pitchers and teapots, all based on animals."

But in Reno, her work changed dramatically. "All of a sudden it became rather girlie, but at the same time, empowering," explains Bogard. "As a kid, being a girl meant that you were weak and prissy—a lot of negative language describes women. Now I'm trying to embrace that, but using it in a powerful way. That's why the scale is so large—it gives the pieces a sense of confrontation in a context of empowerment, but they are still feminine. If they're small, they're too easy to dismiss."

The power of her work comes from one other element as well, and that is a sly sexuality that may have been triggered by her student years at the University of Wyoming, where she studied with Phyllis Kloda. "She challenged me and gave me permission to make animals. She started asking me crazy questions such as, 'What do they eat?'; 'How do they reproduce?,' and 'Where do they live?' I was completely amazed. That's when they started changing into sculptures—I started inventing animals."

Later, doing graduate work at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, Bogard studied under Mark Burns. "He challenged me and gave me a piece of advice I didn't understand until recently: 'Free yourself.' I think that's what I'm doing now," she says. "I began exploring the sexuality of the animals I created. Of course, that may have had something to do with living in Sin City with its pervasive sexuality."

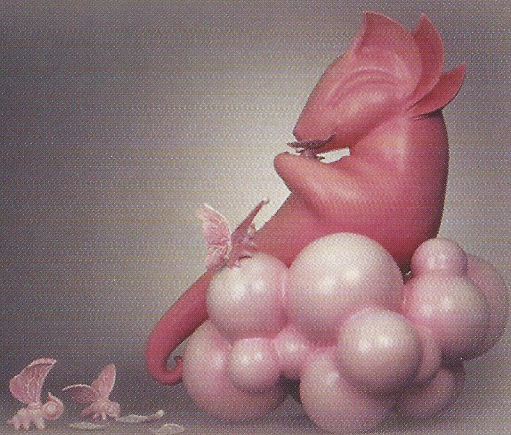
But it's not just sex that interests Bogard. Her animals aren't engaged in sexual activity; rather her pieces are full of sexual implication. "I'm exploring innocence and sexuality—it's interesting in our culture how we view sexual creatures as not being innocent. I don't think that's right—I think you can be innocent and sexual at the same time. I'm interested in those lines that people draw."

Inter-species relationships—fanciful insects exploring another creature's anatomy—are a strong element in Bogard's work. "Sexual curiosity is, by its very nature, kind of innocent and kind of sweet," she says. A friend once described her work as "dating" the viewer. "I don't think that's totally true," she counters. "I think I'm seducing the viewer. When women are flirting, they have a great sense of power and fun—so I'm flirting with the viewer."

## Constructing in Sections

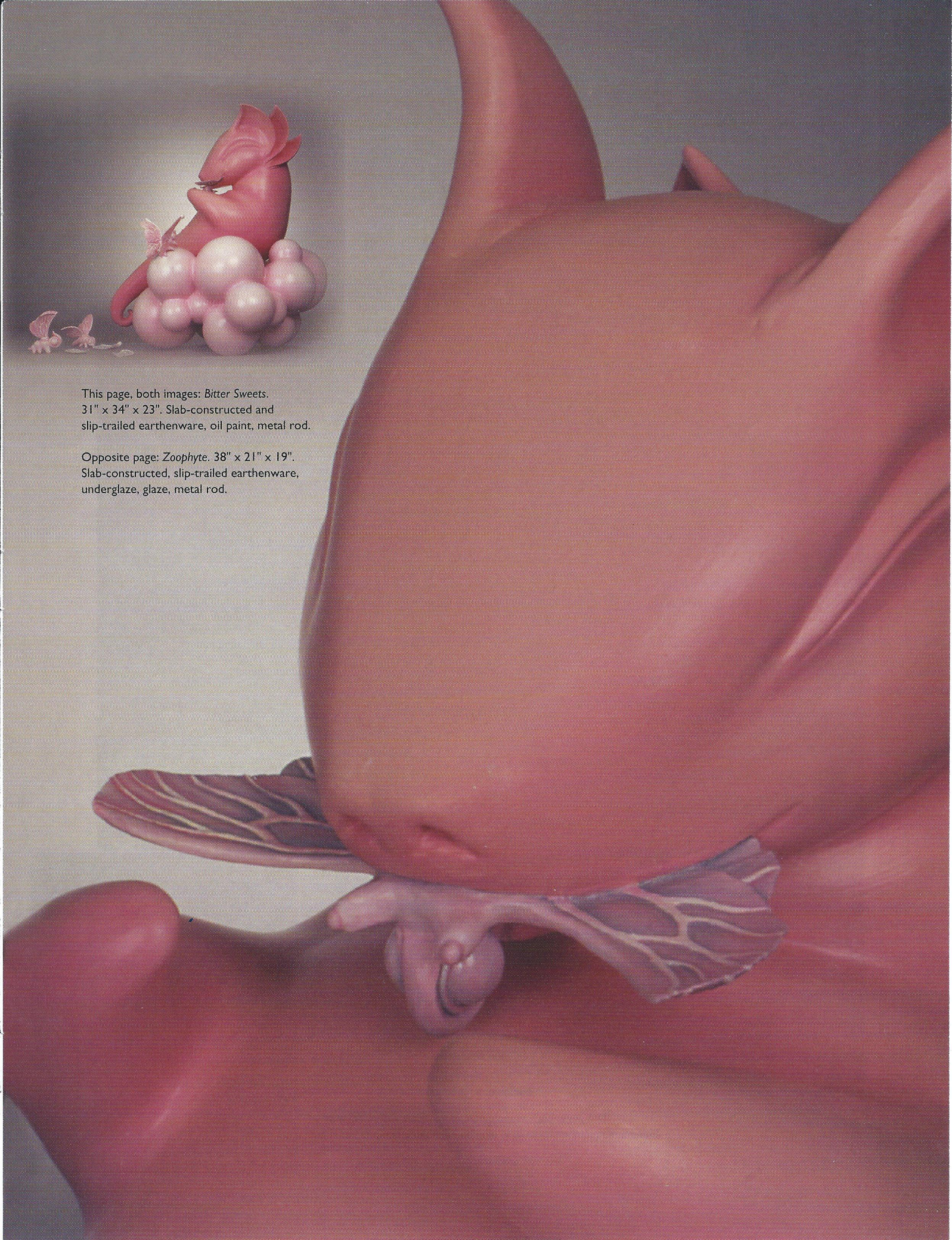
Bogard starts a piece with a sketch. When it is perfected, she draws it to full scale. That



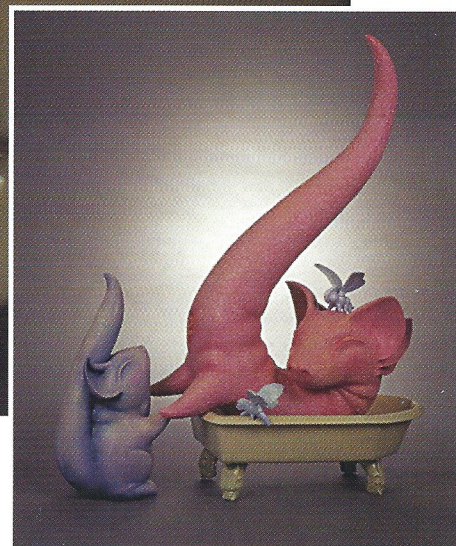
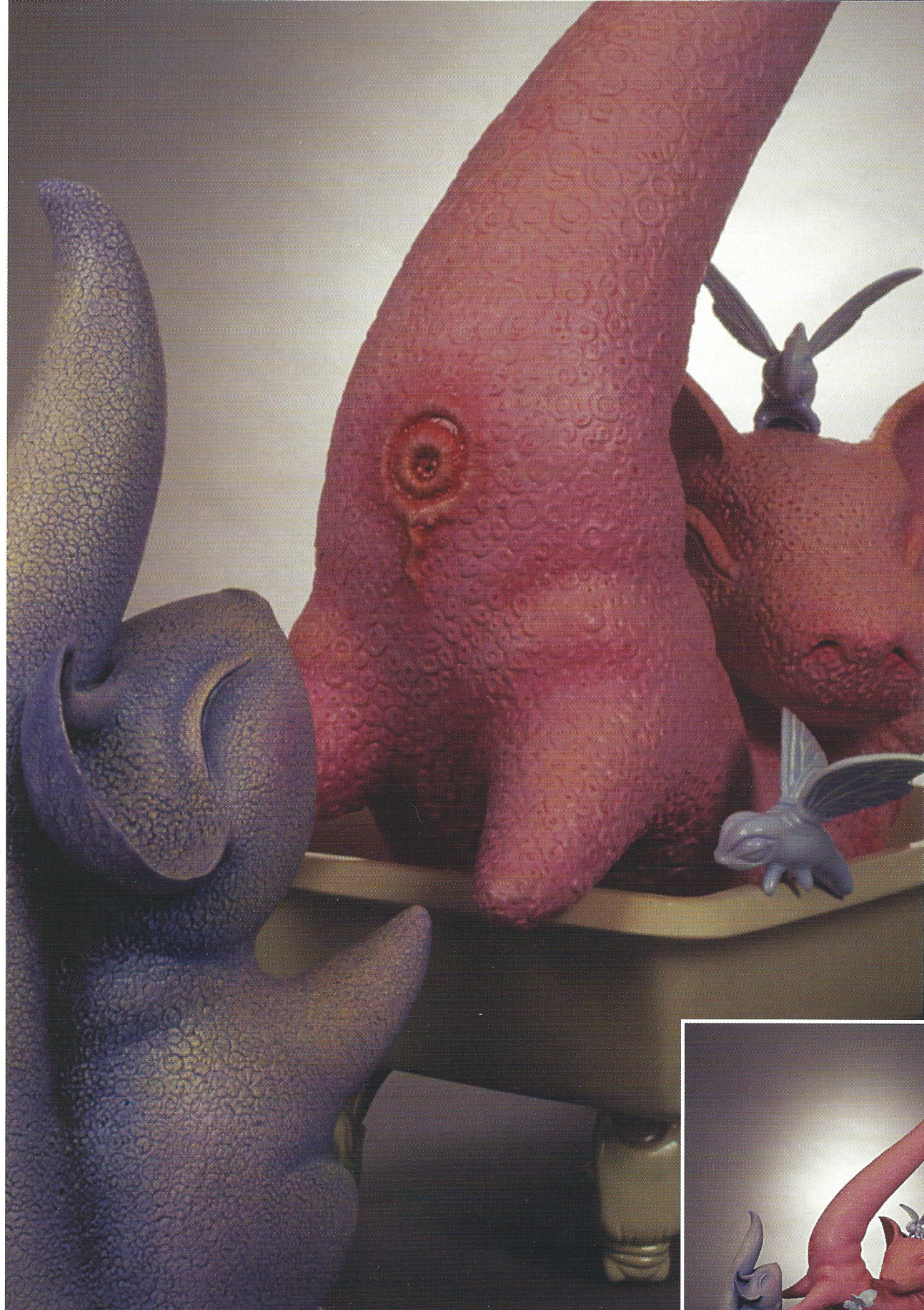


This page, both images: *Bitter Sweets*.  
31" x 34" x 23". Slab-constructed and  
slip-trailed earthenware, oil paint, metal rod.

Opposite page: *Zoophyte*. 38" x 21" x 19".  
Slab-constructed, slip-trailed earthenware,  
underglaze, glaze, metal rod.







This page, both images: *Miracle Romance*. 62" x 32" x 24".  
Slab-constructed earthenware, oil paint, rubber coating, metal rod.



helps her get the whole picture as she constructs each work in sections, using cylindrical slabs and press molds. "I have a series of press molds that are spheres, so I turn them into ovals and pop them together and then manipulate them—a circle on top of a cylinder, etc., pressing in for eyes or whatever. The press molds make the process go a lot faster." She also uses slip casting for the small insects. "With some pieces, I don't get to see the whole piece completely until it is bisqued and I can stack the sections up and see how they work."

### Surface Treatments

The soft colors come from either underglaze or paint, or sometimes a combination of both. "I love underglazing because you don't

have to wait for the paint to dry," she notes. "I layer my colors—I'll start with a light color on the bottom and gradually get darker, so it gets richer. Sometimes I brush the underglaze on and sometimes I airbrush it. If the piece is smooth, it's better to airbrush so you don't see the brush strokes."

To refine the surfaces even further, Bogard mists with a super light layer of clear glaze or paints them with polyurethane. "This gives them a sense of moisture so they are not quite as chalky looking." Pieces are fired to cone 06 or 04.

Because the work is so large, it must be assembled in sections. To ensure a good fit, Bogard has a little trick. "On the inside of the bottom piece, I build a sleeve—the female part—and

make it like an open cone. The piece that will go into it—the male part—has the pointed part of the cone that then fits into the female cone. As the two cones come together, because of the taper, they will always fit at some point. For sections that require stabilization or balance, Bogard inserts brass rods into a hole drilled into the finished piece. One rod fits over the other like a sheath to maintain rigidity.

### Transportation Solutions

Bogard ships her sculptures to shows in pieces, along with diagramed instructions on how to assemble them. In addition, she sends a small amount of museum wax, which holds the joints very firmly.



*Kisses Number 2*. 31" x 30" x 24". Slab-constructed and press-molded earthenware, underglaze, glaze.



“I’d like to challenge the way people think of art.”

—Rebekah Bogard

From the time she discovered that ceramics didn’t have to be functional, Bogard has challenged the rules of design. “I think it’s a great place to be—when you’re breaking the rules of art but you’re doing it intelligently. I think that’s what I’m doing. There’s a playfulness and sense of fun, but I’d like to challenge the way people think of art—they think of it as boring or stuffy, or sophisticated and cerebral,

but I think that it can also be fun—fun and serious.”

And what about that advice from her mentor, Mark Burns, about freeing herself? Bogard says she finally understands it: “It’s about giving myself permission to make the work I want to make. I can’t tell you how inspiring and energizing that is. I feel more driven

and compelled to make art. It’s incredibly exhilarating.”

Rebekah Bogard can be reached at [Rebekah@Rebekahbogard.com](mailto:Rebekah@Rebekahbogard.com).

*K. T. Anders is a potter and freelance writer who resides in Upperville, VA.*



*Cloud Nine.* 29" x 41" x 30". Slab-constructed and press-molded earthenware, underglaze, glaze, oil paint, metal rod. (Detail appears on this issue’s cover.)