



**Full Moon Canyon, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, earthenware, punctured, shaped and assembled slabs, cone 04, 2006.**



**Canyon II, 16 in. (41 cm) in length, earthenware, punctured, shaped and assembled slabs, cone 04, 2005.**

## Natural Resources: Elaine Parks' Balancing Act

by Kris Vagner

with [Monthly Method: Perfect Perforation](#), by Elaine Parks

"I'm trying to recreate the feeling I get from being in the landscape," says Elaine Parks. She's an artist in Tuscarora, Nevada, a town so small that any resident can tick off an accurate census count on their fingers. Currently it's thirteen.

Parks' ceramic sculptures aren't shaped like the rugged, dry terrain or decorated with the purple lupine that carpets the hills in spring. But if you joined her on one of the hikes that punctuate her daily routine-from any house in town, you can walk to a few thousand square miles of open wilderness-you'd see a lot of the same textures and shapes you see in her studio.

Disembodied brick chimneys, crumbling stone walls and untended patches of poppies or rhubarb now decorate the sparse, gravelly lots where homes and businesses used to be. The town was built by miners and entrepreneurs during a gold rush in the 1860s and 1870s. In its heyday, it had a few thousand residents, but by the 1960s, when artists from urban areas started trickling in and out, the gold-rush population was long gone. Most of the original houses have succumbed to a century of heavy snows and dry summers. Some have been lying in splintery heaps so long they've become part of the scenery. Long-abandoned mining equipment, rusted halfway to oblivion, has littered the hills for so many decades that it seems more like part of the landscape than trash. Human industry and natural entropic processes have been competing for so long here, the boundaries between nature and culture are sometimes blurred.

Parks' sculptures present a similar kind of overlap. Nature and culture both inform her aesthetic, which balances a primitive roughness with the polish of conceptual art.

A recent series of low-fire earthenware sculptures, some long like boats, some tall like vases or branchless trees, are influenced by the austerity of modernist sculpture and the organized chaos of the natural world. Parks explains, "I think of these pieces as something of a translation of the sensation of living in a remote place like this."

She was born and raised in Los Angeles, where she'd already established an active ceramics career before she moved to Tuscarora in 1999. She earned a B.F.A. from California State University, Northridge and an M.F.A. from California State University, Los Angeles, where she also taught ceramics classes. She worked at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and she's exhibited her ceramics in museums and galleries in California, Nevada and Germany. In 2004, she was awarded the Nevada Arts Council's Artist Fellowship Award, and the following year she won the commission to design the Governor's Arts Award.

In 2007, she had a solo exhibition titled "grid/nest," at Indie Collective in Los Angeles, and she participated in a group exhibition, "Selections From Dada Motel," at The Marjorie Barrick Museum of Natural History at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2008.

In each of these exhibitions-and in Parks' whole oeuvre-references to nature acknowledge its aesthetic and philosophical complexity. Bird motifs hint at flight and death at the same time; oversized archaeological specimens that are half-tool, half-bone exude a harsh kind of beauty and a seductively ambiguous surface quality. Some of



**Green Pool, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, earthenware, punctured, shaped and assembled slabs, cone 04, 2003.**

her glaze effects-speckled matt grays, mottled greens with a waxy gloss-resemble the surfaces of naturally worn rock or metal. Some look like the artfully weathered patinas of the car bodies that have been lying around town for decades, attracting photographers and plein-air painters.

Parks is quick to point out that she approaches her subjects more conceptually than literally. She says, "I couldn't possibly recreate the landscape, or even parts of it. Any attempt at recreating, for instance, lichen on a rock, would seem cheesy or too kitsch. But I do feel like I can recreate some clues."

Often, she takes her conceptual cues from 1960s Minimalism, personalized with a hand-made aesthetic. She finds affinity with the work of sculptors such as Robert Morris, whose stark, wooden cubes helped change the rules about how sculpture should occupy space in a gallery. "The idea of getting sculpture off the pedestal and into the space appeals to me," she says. "Most of my own work exists on a human-sized plane, neither precious nor monumental. Sometimes a series will be that precious size, and I do show it on pedestals. Then, the next series I work on usually evolves into something that shares the space more seamlessly with viewers." In a 2006 residency that culminated in an exhibit at Gallery Merkel in Rheinfelden, Germany, she experimented with arranging curved, bone-shaped ceramic pieces in a spiral atop a layer of black gravel on the ground. She says one of her most successful experiments with occupying space was in the Selections From Dada Motel exhibition at UNLV, where she installed a ceramic tree, made of over 100 spindle-shaped branches, on two perpendicular walls.

Lately, she's been experimenting with poking holes through the clay, puncturing the slabs in a grid pattern that covers most of their surface area. Parks says the puncture marks are inspired by the shapes she sees repeated on different scales in the landscape. Tiny pores in a rock and holes in the earth, which has been mined ambitiously around Tuscarora, are both comparable in shape to the holes in the sculptures.

Even though the sculptures' graphic elements are traceable to specific influences, they always stay within the realm of abstraction. Parks says, "I like the open-ended quality of working with an abstract approach. It gives viewers a direct experience without sidetracking them into ultra-technique. It more easily allows the viewer to make their own associations. I like to walk that line."

Wherever Parks' references to technique do become overt, they appear to allude to different mediums altogether. Some of the seams and darts from her sculptures look as if they're borrowed from welding or dressmaking. "There's a long history in ceramics of making clay look like other things, which it's good at," she notes.

Usually, though, it comes right back to the landscape. "I'm interested in the theoretical quality of the terrain, simultaneously on a grand scale and an intimate scale," Parks says. "When I see things in the landscape that remind me of my work, it makes me feel that I'm on the right track."

#### **Monthly Methods: Perfect Perforation**

*by Elaine Parks*

1. I start by rolling out two or more slabs between 1/4 and 3/4 of an inch thick on a canvas-covered board.



Above and below: *Chinese Landscape*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, earthenware, punctured, shaped and assembled slabs, cone 04, 2006; by Elaine Parks, Tuscarora, Nevada.

2. Since I'm making tall forms, I cut out long, narrow rectangles for the cylinder wall.

3. I flip them onto a thick piece of foam.

4. I poke holes into the inside surface using either my finger or a small wooden tool, depending on what size hole I'm looking for. Sometimes, I draw on the front surface with a pencil while the slab is still on the canvas board, then transfer the slab to the foam and push out around the drawn lines.

5. I bend the individual pieces around forms, so they will set up in a curve. I usually use rolled towels and cardboard tubes from rolls of newsprint.

6. After the pieces get to a soft-leather-hard stage, I stand them upright and join them together. I don't let them get too set up, because I want them to be soft enough to push from the inside when the piece is together. Sometimes this part is a little tricky, getting the cylinder to stand up and get it joined while it's a bit soft, but I can get a more organic result this way. The curve of the individual piece is helpful. At this stage, I wish I had three hands.

7. To finish, I push the seams together to get them joined well, then I push out and in to get the texture how I want it.

8. After it sets up to firm leather hard, I lay the form on its side on the foam and beef up the seams with coils.

9. Last, I add the foot, which is quite thick. I do this when the form is upright first. When the foot sets up enough, I put it back on the foam and push the middle up to form a foot ring. There's a little back and forth-upright and laying on the foam-to finish the foot.

10. I dry the piece very slowly and then fire to cone 04.

11. I glaze using a combination of studio-mixed and commercial low-fire glazes. Some are painted on, and some are layered using a mouth sprayer. The sprayed-on glazes are mostly layers of very matt glaze.

12. Last, I fire again to cone 06.