GOODBYE, GEORGIA BLIZZARD: MARKING THE PASSAGE OF AN IMPORTANT, OFTEN-MISUNDERSTOOD VISIONARY ARTIST (2002)

Ceramic sculptor Georgia Blizzard was a longtime friend whose work I've admired since I first saw it in the early 1980s. Her death on June 1, 2002, was a sad loss and a significant milestone for the field of contemporary folk/outsider art.

Blizzard had just celebrated her eighty-third birthday on May 17, and she had been in poor health for a number of years. She never had much in the way of material wealth, but she was a singularly important figure among American self-taught artists, and examples of her work have found their way into a number of public and private collections across the country. But while it has attracted admirers, her art is often misunderstood and remains underappreciated.

Typical of the way in which Blizzard's work has been misread and dismissed was the reaction of the editors at *Raw Vision*, the Britain-based international magazine of outsider art, to an Atlanta art critic's recent proposal of an article about Blizzard. Although they had previously published this critic's work, in this case they said, in effect, "We don't publish articles about southern face-jug potters."

Blizzard worked in clay and on rare occasions made vessels in the form of humanoid heads or, more often, humanoid figures, but she was not a traditional folk potter turning out formulaic, stylized vessels. She was a visionary artist who worked in the only medium she could afford--native clay that she dug from the banks of a creek near her home outside Glade Spring, Va.--as she had done since her childhood. Aside from the fact that clay was her medium, she had more in common artistically with William Blake than with face--jug potters like Lanier Meaders.

I first encountered Blizzard's work in the early 1980s in an Atlanta gallery whose owner had learned of the artist strictly by chance. I was initially struck by the work's resonance with certain strains of preColumbian pottery from Mexico and Central America, but at the same time there was something seemingly ancient about it, there was also a palpable feeling of modern angst in the work.

Not long afterward, in the fall of 1983, I was returning south from a folk art conference in Washington, D.C., with poet/publisher Jonathan Williams. Our driving route through Virginia along I-81 south brought us right past Glade Spring, so we decided to exit the highway. Stopping in at the local post office, we inquired as to where we could find Georgia Blizzard. With instructions from the postmaster, we were able to find her cabin on the steeply sloped side of a wooded mountain, a few hundred yards off the hilly blacktop road through a little community called Plum Creek. She had lived there since her father--a millworker and coal miner--bought the land and built the house about in the 1930s..

Small as the ramshackle little dwelling was, she shared it with her older sister, Mae, her daughter, Mary Michael, and Mary's daughter, Sheila, and they all seemed glad to have unexpected company that afternoon. Blizzard was then in her early 60s, rail-thin, with heavily wrinkled, leathery skin, and she peered out at the world through penetratingly soulful eyes under a shock of orange-red hair. She looked both humble and noble, deeply imbued with the kind of stoic wisdom that comes from enduring very tough times.

During that visit she showed us the simple, coal-fueled outdoor kiln in which she fired her vessels, plaques and figural sculptures, which were often partially blackened

by the kiln's flames, their unglazed surfaces treated only with materials such as wood and cow dung. She also showed us a few recently completed pieces, stored in an unheated shed near the house. Jonathan bought one of them, and insisted on paying her more than she asked for it. After an hour's visit, we were on our way

I came to know and increasingly appreciate Blizzard and her work in subsequent correspondence, phone conversations, visits, and periods of looking at her creations, wherever I happened to encounter them. In talking and corresponding with her, I learned a lot about where she had been and what had inspired and informed her art. The more I came to know about her, the more I was struck by the unlikelihood of her artistic trajectory.

As a child she used the creek-bank clay she dug to form dolls, effigies of neighbors and other figures and objects. Unlike most children who pursue such activities, she never gave them up, and by 1960 she had begun making pipes, vessels and other clay forms that roughly replicated those found in American Indian pottery traditions. These were made on commission for a local trading post and another outlet in Arkansas, rather than out of personal inspiration.

Her work took a new turn toward more serious concerns in the 1970s. Of that time, she once told me, "I started making art about things I felt. I got to thinking more about spiritual things than I did when I was younger. I got more interested in making pieces about something that's touched me--something that makes me happy or makes me sad."

Blizzard started making vessels and wall plaques whose surfaces featured compositionally sophisticated, bas-relief narrative scenes inspired by events in her own

life, mythological sources or her own thoughts about human suffering, mortality and transcendence. By 1990, examples of her work had been purchased for collections such as those of New York's Chase Manhattan Bank and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta." But income from such sales was rare, and Blizzard was never able to afford more spacious, comfortable quarters than the hillside cabin where she spent most of her life.

Fortunately, much of Blizzard's art remains among us. Although she occasionally made a relatively lighthearted piece, her work typically dealt with suffering and mortality--another likely reason it hasn't received as much attention as much other contemporary folk and outsider art.

Blizzard's ultimate subject was the relationship between flesh and spirit. Through her art, she spent her last thirty years famiiarizing herself with matters of spirit. I envision her release into that realm, in the early morning hours of June 1, as a smooth passage into a realm where she had already learned to feel very much at home.

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