



# You Know Where You are with Concrete

Jeff Higley

It's a bad combination, thick mud and your best trainers! If it is pouring with rain as well on a puddle-filled path through the woods, then the temptation is to defeat the defacing of your prized footwear by washing off that offensive coating. Unfortunately, as this temporary solution has to be repeated constantly, this means that cries of "Miss, Miss, there's mud on my trainers" is rapidly replaced by wails of "Miss, Miss, my feet are soaking!" As we trudged through the woods the grim-faced girl in the lead turned and glared at her classmates behind her, "Look, it's Nature, you'll just have to get used to it!"

In fact there had been some confusion about this whole question of the relation of nature and self. When we had arrived at the farm before setting out on the next stage of our journey a child, dancing with excitement, had asked, "Is this nature, is this nature, is it?" Had we somehow crossed an elusive boundary into that exciting, unknown world that was dangerous, fluid and other. We had left behind the world of paving stones, kerbs, tarmac and concrete; and in so doing had left fixed edges, surfaces that were unyielding to the feet, stuff that stayed in its place and didn't get all over you. We had entered an unknown world of possibilities and dangers: "Are there poisonous snakes in this wood? Is that quicksand?" A world of smells and slime and mucky stuff, the kingdom of mud!

Boundaries and edges are liminal places and none more so than skin, keeping your insides in and keeping us separate from all that isn't us, yet constantly picking up sign

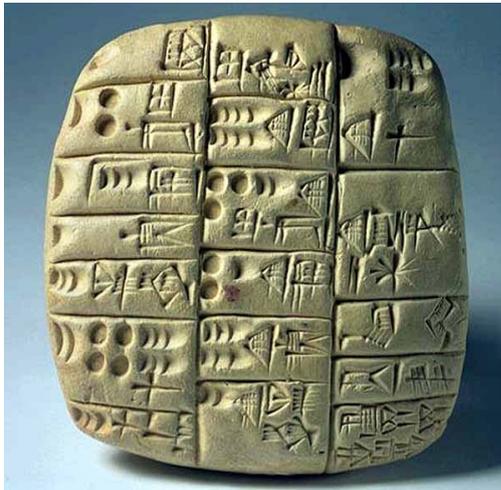


Photo Jeff Higley

and signals, constantly defining and redefining where and who we are. Trying to work that out is hard enough and it is a constant, if often unconscious, process in growing up and on into adulthood. So, naturally we like to know where we are, we like repetition, the story retold, that which is repeatable, patterned, rhythmic and, above all, not subject to time and chance. And of course, that which will tell of who we were will fix our story. One of the earliest tales humans told is that of Gilgamesh and his struggle with transience and time. We know of it because it was recorded in mud, in clay tablets



Photo Jeff Higley



Mesopotamian Cuneiform Tablet

whose soft, yielding surface allowed humans to impress their signs into it, to make their marks. That very surface, which made memorializing possible, was of course unstable, fragile and mutable and that very elemental nature which accommodated our needs became our enemy once the tale was told, the record made. Mud had to become stone-like through its meeting with fire. Fire would take away the liquid element that made change possible, meaning could no longer be moist, changeable and in the process of becoming. Making is a process of continually narrowing the potential of material to take its shape, and finally, when we have enabled matter to speak the form we have given

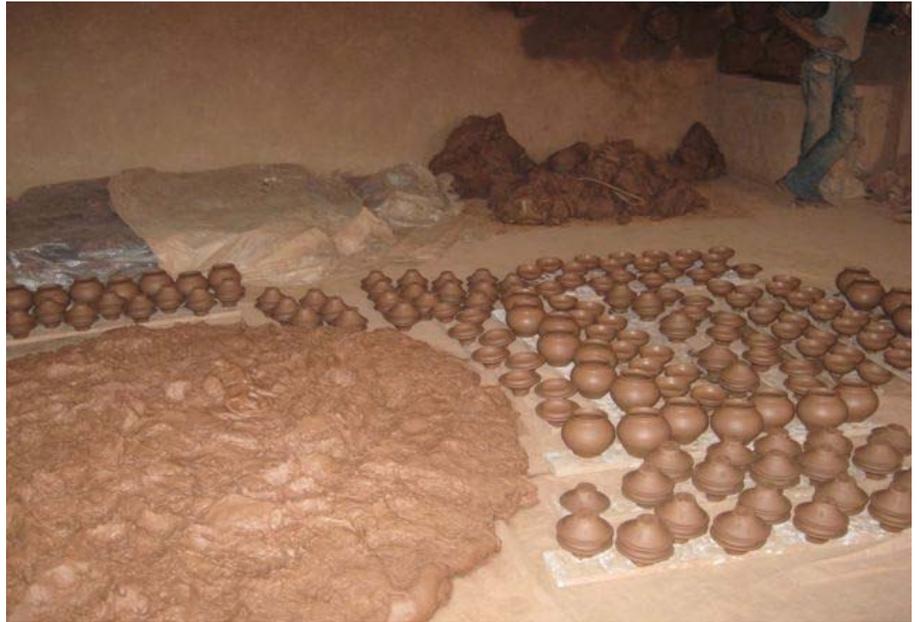
it, to have "a local habitation and a name", then of course we have to make something else.

This dual process, the fluid and the fixed, the formless and the formed, is the maker's dance and one that shapes not just our art but our lives. From time immemorial we have taken the stuff of the earth to make things, not just pots, tablets, bricks and so on, but ourselves - coating our skins with ochres, painting ourselves to resemble our dreams, our fears, our fantasies. Early dead were coated with red ochre, the blood



Preparing to Fire photo Jeff Higley

of the earth. We strew our heads with ashes, daub ourselves with the residue of fire, to mourn, to express grief at the loss of those who have now become changeless and outside time. Clay before firing has endless potential - it can be endlessly shaped, dried, re-wetted and re-formed for an infinite time. It is no surprise that in so many creation stories humans are formed from it, reflecting our sense that we evolve and become, are a work in progress, change our form and in the end are reabsorbed into the earth.



Moroccan Potter's workshop photo Veronica Kellow

This potential, this fluidity of a dimly known groping towards the light is part of what is sensed when we enter the world of unknown boundaries. When we step into the fecund mud it is both deeply satisfying and deeply disturbing. "Does this mud have a bottom?" is a sensible question after all. Knowledge, perception, fixing of boundaries is a deeply-rooted human process. With concrete we know where we are: hard edges frame a known world, one it is hard to alter the form of without extreme measures. The very rigidity of form gives us a sense of permanence. Yet concrete too starts as a thick malleable paste; it needs form to hold it while it undergoes its metamorphosis. Like baked clay, once set it seems outside time (for a while). It isn't, of course, friendly once set! Fallen against or stumbled into, it offers no yielding embrace but a harsh dent into our

flesh instead. "Watch out" it says, "take care, I'm unforgiving." It is emphatically other, not in that soft, dissolving, beckoning embrace of earth and water with its promise of sensuous delights but like law, non-negotiable and ignorance is no excuse. Rules are rules!



Floating Island photo Jeff Higley

In taking those children on a trip into the woods to see an oak felled, the plan was for them to encounter an environment very different to the green spaces they were used to, like parks and area gardens. In the event, because of the

weather, the trip was even more memorable than expected. Finally, as we reassembled at the edge of the wood, trainer washing began again - a necessary ritual for re-entering the concrete world, removing all traces of that excursion into that threatening yet exciting mud. However, the wood had one last experience to offer - what appeared to be a deep puddle with a muddy edge offered a good washing spot – until the edge dissolved and the washer slid neatly into a waist-deep hole and stood shrieking.

When we encounter a new edge, it may like concrete offer us no way in, throw us back onto ourselves as we are. Other surfaces have more potential, they may, like the open gate, the small door, the pool, the cave mouth, take us into a world of expanding potential. Like the surface of water, we may be shown a shadow version of ourselves, dancing with light, shape-shifting and shining. This is what King Gilgamesh finds when he leaves Uruk, the city built of baked brick, to unite with his shadow self, Enkidu, the wild man who roams the natural world.

We live in being and becoming, hopeful of the limitless potential of the fertile, mud, mind or imagination, and these trips to our interior or exterior wilderness nourish us, provide the raw material for us to work with, as we play those games with time and death which underlie all art and all love. Every time the tide flows in over mud and then recedes, it leaves a different blossom of ripple forms that briefly offer themselves to the eye before the dance with water begins once more. Always the same process, forever different in its subtle forms.



**Shadow Selves photo Janet Swailes**

You may know where you are with concrete as it defines and maps boundaries and forms, directs flows and seemingly controls natural forces but to find out who you are, that needs the help of a very different substance. The best flood defences are swamps and wetlands, those edges perpetually hovering between form and fluidity. Too many paving slabs leave nowhere for the rain to go, no welcome for its kiss of life. If you build on a flood plain your house had best be able to float and then who knows to where you may travel.

Jeff Higley Feb. 2009