

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINUTIAE:

Valerie Pugh

Roberta Pazdro

Valerie Pugh fait des portraits d'édifices en céramique. Elle est séduite par les détails et peut passer une heure sur chaque pouce de son ouvrage.

Valerie Pugh was raised in Calgary, where she obtained her BFA in Painting from the University of Calgary in 1974. When her print-making instructor observed how messily she worked, he suggested she try clay. She recalls an initial experience in this medium:

'As soon as I touched clay, that was it for painting. I could make paintings that I could touch. They were real — physical, not a mental illusion you fought with and carried around and somehow mentally solved. They were this real, physical, tactile, approachable surface. Who could resist?'

Work in this medium continued at the Archie Bray Foundation in

Helena, Montana where Pugh, inspired by the idyllic rural scenery, began to create what she refers to as 'farm art,' pastoral landscapes.

Having approached clay without preconceptions about 'precious' ceramic objects, Pugh's work displayed a playfulness that made her vulnerable to criticism. Her consciously naïve style was thought to be too cute and toy-like. At times she was not taken seriously. Her work did not meet the criteria of the 'macho potter' — massive and bold. But despite criticism, Pugh had found her niche.

A move to Vancouver in 1976 set the stage for the development of her most recent work. Whereas Pugh was once freely inspired by the seemingly endless Montana countryside, she found a few feet of the city streets packed with details awaiting her careful study.

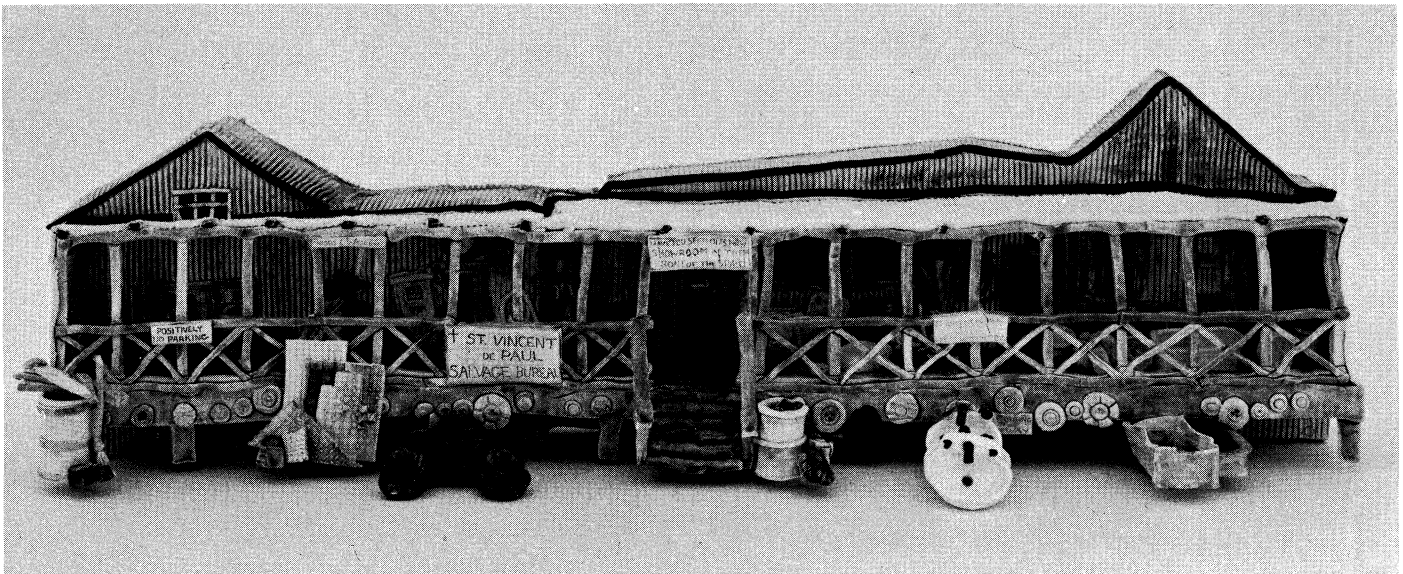
Upon arriving in Vancouver, Pugh obtained studio space which

she shared with five other artists in the Women's Inter-Art Society. This supportive environment was a revelation, compared with the competitive atmosphere at art school. Sharing the studio kept her abreast of art events in Vancouver and also helped her define herself as an artist.

She gathered courage to enter her work in various exhibits. One of these was *From This Point of View* — a show of British Columbian artists in 1977 at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Shocked that her work was accepted, she remembers thinking:

'This is the end. You can't show at the Vancouver Art Gallery and go downhill from there. What am I going to do?'

With this recognition, Pugh felt she was transformed from a struggling student into an 'instant artist.' In Vancouver, she continued to work in extreme detail but instead of having to defend her style, she found



other women artists understanding.

Pugh believes this support stems directly from their experience of growing up female. Most girls play with cookie dough and can relate to her hand-built technique. At an early age many girls are made to understand the importance of minutiae. We are taught an eye for appreciating details such as jewelry and barrettes.

This love of detail appears in all Pugh's most recent work shown at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in spring 1981. She literally spent 'an hour an inch' on pieces such as *St. Vincent de Paul* — for which she recreated all the junk displayed there.

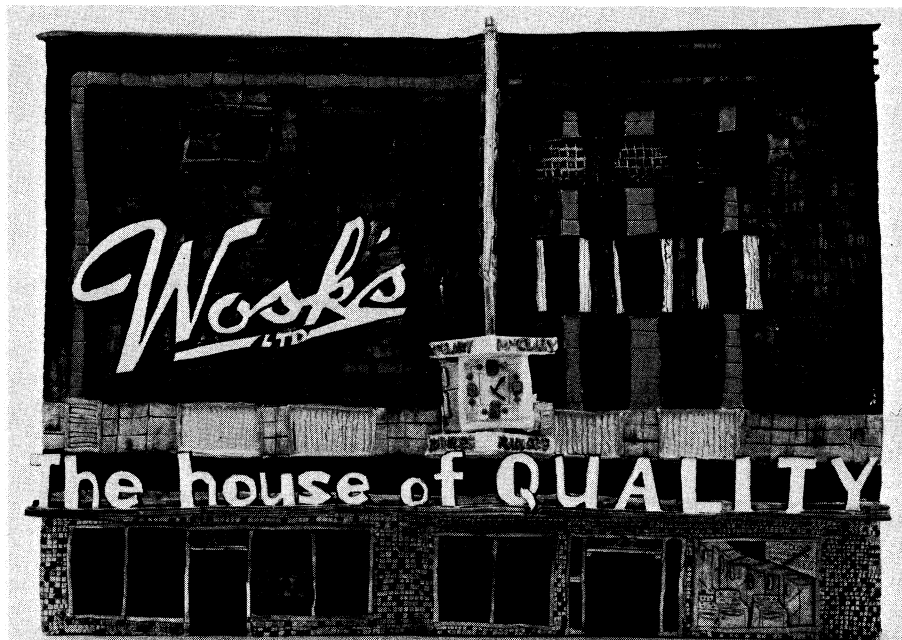
She identified two themes of this exhibit: architectural imagery in clay and textural painting. In keeping with her idea of painting in clay, Pugh is quick to point out that this show — the product of six months intensive work contains 'portraits' of buildings, not mere models.

Pugh's work commences with a careful study of a selected building, documented with a camera. Just as portrait artists study their subjects carefully, Pugh examines buildings she will sculpt.

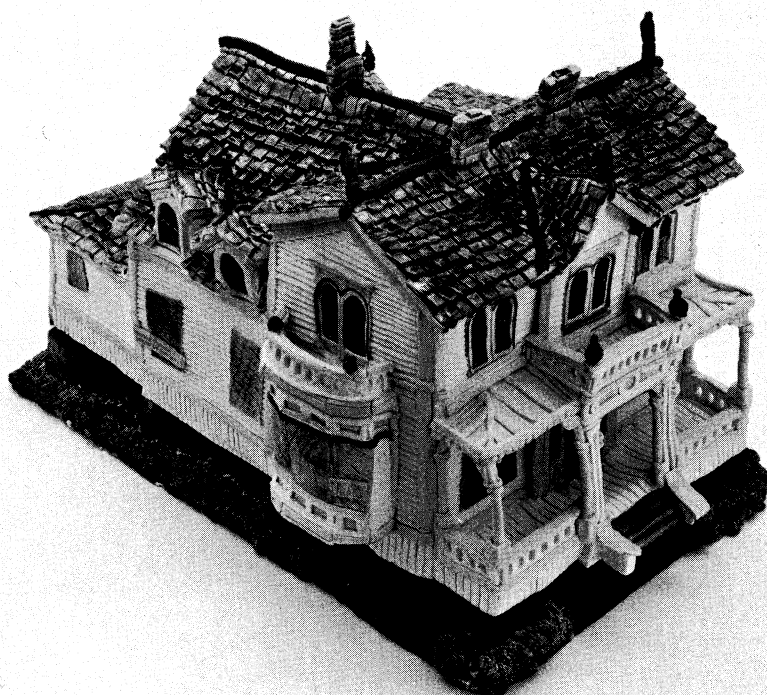
'So I went to Emily Carr's House and all the way there I was thinking — how trite, Emily Carr, the B.C. painter — do her house — ugh, I won't do it. I won't. I get there and it's up on stilts . . . Isn't that funny? They've footed her house just like you put a nice foot on a pot. Oh, I'll do a footed Emily Carr House.'

Once in the studio, Pugh drafts her design on paper. Her work in clay begins in two-dimensions and her love for detail and texture takes over. Sources for texture are gathered from her garage-cum-studio and from her kitchen. For example, sandpaper provides the perfect texture for bricks.

Facades are sculpted separately and kept moist until they can be assembled. When the clay is firm, but not stiff, the buildings are constructed. Then she steps back to allow the clay to warp gently, creating soft, undulating forms which do not resemble stiff harsh facades of actual buildings. Pugh allows the clay to make its own con-



2



3

tribution to the appearance of the final form.

This process is beautifully exemplified in *Emily Carr's House*, where the eye is attracted to the flowing line of the roof. The walls are not perfectly vertical and the porch columns are distinctly tipsy. Pugh has transformed stiff architecture into gently swaying sculpture.

Once a portrait has been constructed in clay and bisqued, Pugh reverts to her original love: painting. In fact, she views her work as 'paintings in clay.' Colour sup-

plements forms and textures. Glazes are chosen with the skill of a colourist. Pugh, the sculptor, reverts to Pugh, the painter.

She creates paintings within her sculptures, as in the window of *Junction Tailors*, or a reflection of activity in the street as in the window of *Aristocratic Restaurant*. Some of these paintings allow us to peer right into the building as in the window of *Wosk's Furniture*.

Pugh's love of painting and whimsy continues on the back of her wall-mounted pieces — where it is



4

known only to the artist and to a few gallery workers. The back of *Royal Theater* sports a trapeze artist, while the back of *Junction Tailors* has a figure climbing up a ladder to look into a hole meant for hanging the piece.

Some of her sculptures are to be hung on the wall while others are free-standing. Pugh's choice is directly related to the buildings. Many are constructed for exhibit from a single point of view just as they are squeezed between other buildings on a city block in reality. They are literally facades. If she chooses to portray the entire building this is because it has visual impact.

The architecture depicted in her work is recognizable to most Victoria and Vancouver inhabitants, so why has she bothered to recreate it in such detail for display in a gallery? This work is an exercise in perception.

Pugh portrays buildings we pass, work in, or visit regularly, yet rarely bother to examine. She touches on the basic problem of architecture; because it is functional, we do not often subject it to the scrutiny accorded other 'art' objects.

Pugh also addresses a more fundamental issue. We look, yet we do not see. Nearly every aspect of our lives involves architecture, yet few of us every bother to examine it. How accurately could we draw a building where we have worked for several years?

But the careful study of architecture is a difficult task since the human figure is overwhelmed by the scale of most buildings. Pugh reduces that scale, noting oft-ignored idiosyncrasies and bringing them into the gallery. Thus, the artist aids us in seeing what has always been there. The elaborate Italianate decoration and intricate brick patterning of Victoria's Royal

Theatre becomes accessible because Pugh created its portrait.

Pugh best summarizes this aspect of her work: 'I like detail. I like the small scale because people have to refocus. That concentrated focusing alters their perspective, their daily view.'

Knowing that she is helping others to relate to their environment through her use of fantasy and 'fanatical detail,' Pugh, at 28, is thriving on the recognition her work is now receiving.

Photos by R.J. Pazdro

- 1 *St. Vincent de Paul, Vancouver*, Pugh
- 2 *Wosks' Furniture, Vancouver*, Pugh
- 3 *Emily Carr's House, Victoria*, Pugh
- 4 *Wosk's Furniture, Vancouver (detail)*, Pugh