

Tessa Eastman

Alchemical

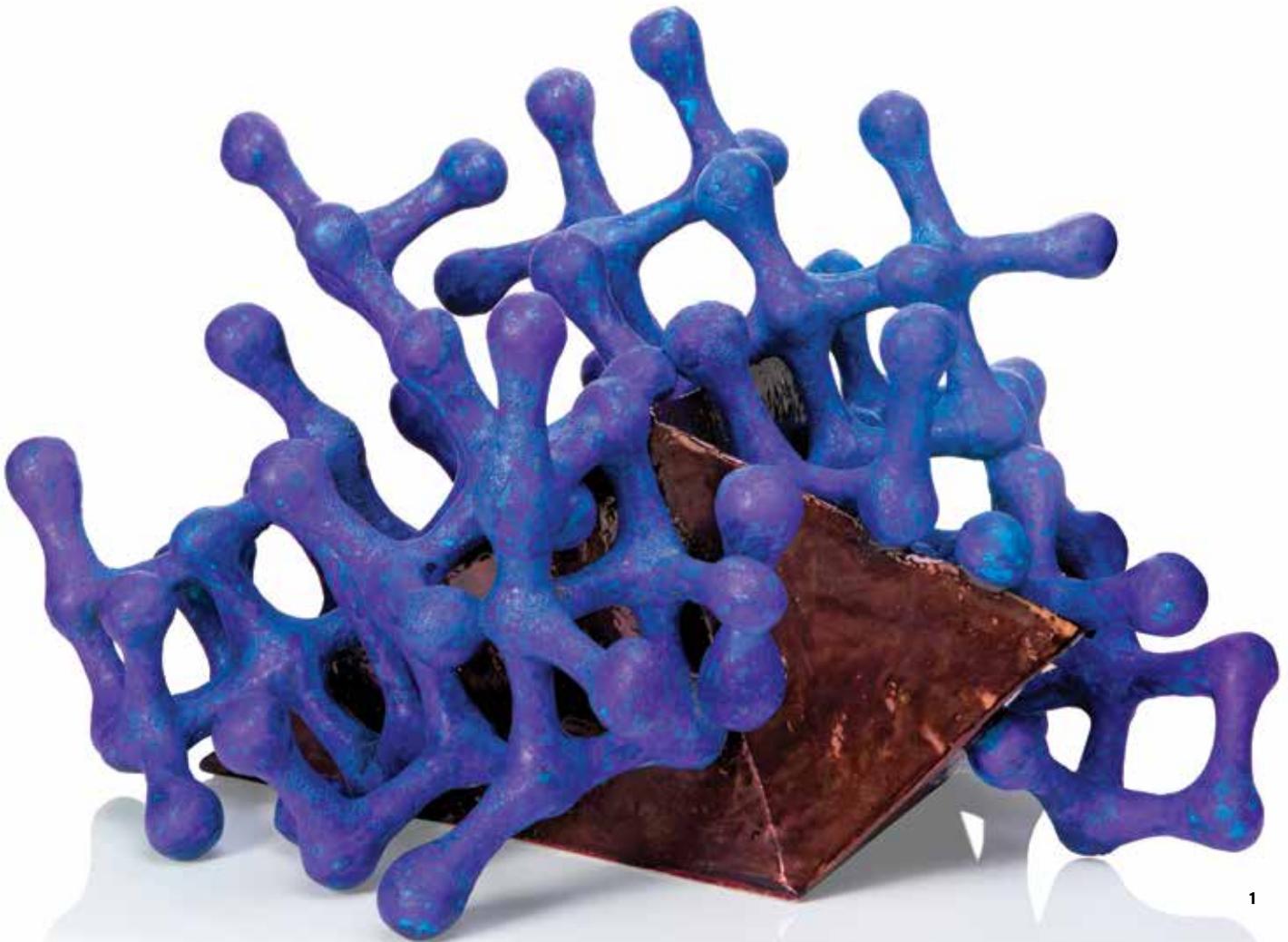
Aesthetics

by Kay Whitney

Victor Hugo referred to dreaming as “the aquarium of the night.” This quote came to mind the first time I saw Tessa Eastman’s strange, quasi-scientific constructions. They are dream-like forms, simultaneously real and imaginary. Within them swim odd biomorphic shapes, crystals, strangely visionary space forms that seem to allude to alchemical substances, clouds, arrangements of molecules, and non-Euclidean geometries.

Inspiration From the Natural World

The feat of making something imagined tangible, the ability to invent, is at the core of the artist’s job. The artist who never takes a risk and can’t tolerate randomness in their life never learns anything new and fails at that job. Tessa Eastman has taken the opposite path, basing her work on her ability to solicit the random, to develop a physics of impossible structures. Her work retains the traces of





2

a course in mathematical theories during which she was introduced to the Golden Section and Fibonacci series. She has been influenced by artists and scientists who approached their fields as much from the aesthetic standpoint as the scientific. The near-psychedelic paintings of the late-19th-century botanist/zoologist Ernst Haeckel have influenced the way Eastman perceives the natural world. Rob Kessler's electron microscopy of the intricate patterns within plant cells, leaf structures, pollen, and seed grains has provided her with a vocabulary of forms. Much as these systems of order have influenced her, she focuses her attention on the boundaries between fixed systems and system breakdown. It's the otherworldliness of nature that motivates her, an interest in fleeting, unfixed states such as cloud formations, crystal development, and living organisms' growth. What fascinates her most is mutation, instability, and the disruption of repetitive growth patterns.

Eastman's predilections, formidable ceramic skills, and interests have melded into handbuilt and cast sculptures inspired by a range of natural microscopic and macroscopic structures expressed in clustered arrangements. She explains that her aim is to express "ungraspable states such as fleeting clouds, which represent both the ideal and the perishable, doom and fantasy." Her ideas are presented through a range of agglomerated, contrasting opposites that define forms and surfaces: hard versus soft, geometric versus biomorphic forms, hot versus dulled color, and coarse versus smooth-skinned surfaces. She seems to reassess characteristics of the animal and mineral worlds, their patterns of growth and structure, and absorb these alterations into her visual vocabulary.



3

1 *Purple Crystal in Midnight Element*, 21½ in. (55 cm) in length, ceramic, glaze, 2018. 2 Tessa Eastman in her studio. Photo: Alun Callender. 3 *Crystalline Cloud Red Gold*, 13⅓ in. (34 cm) in width, ceramic, glaze, 2015.

Creating an Atmosphere

Eastman's work generally contrasts simple, heavy forms with a gridded crown of highly detailed, repetitive forms that rise above it. In her most recent series, these larger forms resemble stones, seed pods, clouds, or bones, and bear a halo of crowded and complex geometric elements. Eastman thinks of her series of smaller works as *Baby Cloud Bundles*. These almost jewel-like objects invite touch; they seem impossibly intricate and fragile. In reality they mirror the surprising sturdiness of what appear to be equally delicate small forms in nature—corals, crystalline forms, tiny stems, and branches. She refers to her series of larger works as *Cocoon Clouds*. She particularly likes installing her work in sculptural groups as she feels they create a dialog that generates a specific atmosphere. As she says, "The clash of two or more sculptural forms being positioned together assists in generating an awkward air where geometry and irregularity, order and chaos, soft and hard evoke awareness of the impermanence of human emotions."

Eastman's 2017 *Sprouting Limitless Cloud III* is one of her *Cocoon Clouds*. Nearly 2 feet long, the work is comprised of two conjoined sections, both of which demonstrate the endless possibilities inherent in copper-based glazes. The turquoise main section resembles a pile

of foam, frog eggs, a mud-daubers nest, or a cluster of grapes. It is simultaneously alien and familiar; a form that could be either spongy or rigid. It is crowned with a rust-colored halo of equally strange forms that could be marine organisms, magnified viral forms, or seed pods. While it does not add to our knowledge of the natural world, it makes that world somehow more seductive, allusive, and magical.

Creating Depth with Materials

Eastman is a passionate handbuilder. Contact with clay is important to her, not just as a means of fabrication, but as a way to meld with her material. Clay is crucial; it's the basis of her ideas and engagement as an artist. She combines her coiled or slab sections with molded forms when she uses multiple, repeating forms. The technical issues of clay are a constant challenge—to deal with them, she uses a very refractory white clay called T-Material that is excellent for handbuilding and famed for being used by Hans Coper. This clay stands up to multiple firings, retaining its shape without slumping or cracking. Because Eastman combines so many parts to make a single piece, she avoids cracking and breaking in the kiln by using Magic Water (a mixture of water, sodium silicate, and soda ash) when joining seams and sections together.





5



6



7



8

4 *Cloudscape Purple Ice*, 10½ in. (27 cm) in length, stoneware, glaze, 2018. 5 *Cocoon Cloud Blue Orange Fizz*, 17 in. (43 cm) in length, stoneware, glaze, 2019. Courtesy of Jason Jacques Gallery. 6 *High Density Snow Cloud I*, 10 in. (26 cm) in width, stoneware, glaze, 2017. 7 *Sprouting Limitless Cloud III*, 23½ in. (60 cm) in length, stoneware, glaze, 2017. 8 *Residing Cloud Blue Yellow*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, ceramic, glaze, 2017.

Eastman has to be particularly vigilant when making her larger pieces; she may spend a month or more letting them dry to avoid firing issues. Getting large pieces in the kiln often requires the help of two or three other people. If she can't fit the piece into her top-loading kiln, she rents out a friend's front loader. She fires larger pieces slowly, with holds between parts of the firing cycle.

Eastman is a master of glaze chemistry, and is highly skilled at pushing color and glazes to their potential extremes. After making numerous tests, she created high-fire stoneware glazes, seeing that using only low-fire, ready-made glazes limited her options. Her pieces are glaze fired up to four times to achieve the best possible richness of surface and color. These multiple firings start with the highest temperature glazes first and then work down to earthenware-temperature glazes. Her use of color creates distinct surface depth and textures made by contrasting warm and cool-colored glazes that may also have surfaces that are shiny, matte, coarse, or smooth.

As she has a small studio, she typically applies glazes using a brush so she can store her glazes in smaller amounts. Over time, she has learned to appreciate the variability and unexpected surprises that come with glazing; she often deliberately applies the glazes

too thickly, with too much water, or in layers in order to achieve unexpected results. Her intention is for her glazes to enhance the harmony and discord of the sculptural arrangements. As she says, "The arousing and soothing qualities of the glazed surfaces reflect the fluidity of human sensations. Through glaze, sculptures become animated and provide room for contemplation on impermanent states of existence."

Tessa Eastman is a British artist living in London, UK. Jean Jacques Gallery in New York City, New York, along with Cynthia Corbett Gallery and Alveston Fine Arts in London, represent her work. She teaches at a number of institutions, including the Heatherley School of Fine Art, London. In 2017, her work received an honorable mention at Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale in Icheon, South Korea. Her work is in several public collections, including the Korea Ceramic Foundation, Icheon, South Korea; Gresham Private Equity, London, UK; Abacus Group LLC, London, UK; and Bryanston Association, Dorset, UK.

the author Kay Whitney, a frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly, is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles, California.