

# The Language of Creation

New Work by Marvin Sweet

*Article by Julia A.  
and Tom Coash*



*Tree of Life series: Turtles All the Way  
Down. 2006. Clay, raku fired, glaze.  
35.5 x 20 x 20 cm.*



*Tree of Life series: Arrangement 2. 2006. Clay, raku-fired, low fire glaze. 44.5 x 28 x 21.5 cm.*

“ONLY THE WIND AND THE TREES CAN PRONOUNCE my name.” So says the faun, the title character in Mexican director, Guillermo del Toro’s recent award winning film *Pan’s Labyrinth*. The faun’s head is that of an ancient goat and his body is a contorted mammalian tree trunk. His hooves pull from the ground and then replant with each step. His subterranean voice creaks and sways with his body. His language is that of twisted limbs, night winds and ancient stones. His roots run deep.

The same might be said of ceramist Marvin Sweet’s *Tree of Life* series which draws upon many ancient myths and traditions and upon the creation stories of many cultures; upon deep roots, both symbolically and figuratively. “The Tree of Life has served as an icon to the reaffirmation of life for multiple cultures and generations,” says Sweet. “The Egyptians had their Holy Sycamore, the Mayans their Yache. In the Bhagavad-Gita there is the famous Banyan Tree. In

the Koran the Tooba Tree and in Jewish and Christian traditions it was the ‘Tree of Life’ that played a part in Adam and Eve being exiled from the Garden of Eden.”

With this evocative group of ceramic sculptures, Sweet adds to the millennia old tradition with his own iconography and references to multiple cultures and artistic traditions using personal, abstract, yet familiar imagery to recall their symbolic spirit and universally shared values. In considering these cultural antecedents, Sweet suggests with his raku-fired sculptures, a range of natural forms relating to the Tree of Life. Gnarled roots, swaying tree limbs, sea fans waving in tidal currents, embryonic spring shoots spiraling their way to the earth’s surface, emerging phalluses, buds, breasts, tendrils and turtles.

The base structure for many of Sweet’s forms is a turtle-like creature. Taken from a Hindu parable, Sweet employs the title *Turtles All The Way Down* for several pieces in this series. In myths of ancient India, the creator takes the form of a turtle in order to hold up the world. “A prominent guru was teaching his students the story of the giant turtle Chukwa,” explains Sweet, “who supports the elephant Maha-pudma on his back, who upholds the world. A student asks what supports the turtle and the guru responds ‘It is turtles all the way down,’ metaphorically suggesting that we can never get to the bottom of things.” Upon the carapace of Sweet’s turtles we find primordial seeming flora and stylised fauna swaying like the sinuous arms of Indian ritual dancers or the unfurling cobalt tentacles

of sea anemone, the tips a fiery red. One is also reminded of images of the mysterious other-worldly plants seen feeding at the mouths of hydrothermal undersea vents; the founts of life itself.

In *Acatlan Redux* the supporting creature is not a turtle but closer to the type of burro that supports the Tree of Life candelabras like those made in certain parts of Mexico. Sweet has an extensive collection of such ceramic Tree of Life candelabras from the Mexican regions of Acatlan and Metepec. A tree has the qualities of being both male (visibly phallic) and female (fruit bearing). In this instance the moss coloured form which supports the branches in *Acatlan Redux* has both feminine and masculine features with a phallus emerging from a stylised womb or breast. While the tree’s branches bear no leaves, flowers or fruit, they seem infused with vitality, like new growths responding to invigorating rhythms of wind and light. The bare tree, with its emergent radial



*Tree of Life Series. Acatlan Redux. 2006. Clay, low fire glazes. 54.5 x 30.5 x 24 cm.*



*Tree of Life series. Arrangement 9. 2006. Clay, raku-fired, glaze. 53 x 23 x 25.5 cm.*

direction, becomes emblematic of life cycles, a symbol of rebirth and resurrection.

It is both interesting and informative to note that Sweet is an artist/collector much in the manner of traditional Chinese scholars who collected objects both for artistic inspiration and to elevate their spirits. "Exquisite objects such as scholar's rocks, teapots, root art and calligraphy held a prominent place in Chinese scholars' studios, reflecting their diverse ideas, ideals, and artistic theories," explains Sweet in his lovely and insightful book *The Yixing Effect: Echoes of the Chinese Scholar* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2006). In it he describes how "the relationship between objects and scholars, between nature and man, were not simply utilitarian, but suggest a spiritual self-identification." His trim house, set in woods and surrounded by Asian influenced stone paths and gardens, is filled with objects both artistic and utilitarian. In effect these

connections mirror the relationships found between his collections, physical environment and his own art work.

On one of his many trips to China, Sweet first encountered root art, an art form which dates back to the 3rd century BCE. Little known in the West, root art is based upon Taoist beliefs which consider the gnarled and twisted forms of ancient trees as nature's code of transformation. "Buddhists consider a withered tree to be an object worthy of contemplation, a vehicle that can lead to transcendence and spiritual enlightenment," says the artist. For centuries Chinese artists have given twisted and gnarled wood forms identifiable sculptural qualities. Particular roots were selected for their expressive natural qualities and a portion of the form might be carved to manipulate and accentuate its most evocative features. Knowing that the first root art was shaped like a four-legged animal with the head of a tiger, the





*Tree of Life series: Turtles All the Way Down. 2006. Clay, raku-fired glaze, low fire glaze. 66 x 29 x 28 cm.*

body of a dragon and the tail of a rabbit, helps us to appreciate Sweet's work more fully.

Sweet's ceramics, like root art, have the ability to suggest anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms, while, at the same time, their abstract qualities and evocative colours give them an enigmatic and mysterious character. According to his book, "In Chinese landscape painting, artists did not seek to reproduce objective reality in their subject matter, but rather express the subject's inherent nature and cosmic

vitality." Together, Sweet's choice of material and process become the embodiment of a conceptual and physical metamorphosis: as soft pliable clay is transformed with fire to become stone hard, the artist transforming ideas into solid form.

Inherent in the raku process some element of absolute control is intentionally forfeited and the guided accident and immediacy are welcomed. The physical ritual of raku glazing fully engages the artist. "As I pull work from the hot kiln, place it in the barrel and see it ignite, with flames shooting in the air, my movements around the heat and fire feel to me like a sort of ritual dance." And like Jackson Pollack who claimed, "When I am into my work, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. The work has a life of its own," Sweet, too, aims to become one with process and idea, immersed intuitively like nature and the process of creation. His working processes are revealed as fingerprints become memories made tangible. The viewer can sense the actions of kneading, tearing, twisting, and spiraling the chunks of clay – physical acts which energise and transform base matter into object, concept into substance. What makes the works dynamic is akin to what Chinese painters refer to as *qi* – the expressive energy imbued in the subject that gives it a vitality or life force.

Sweet's *Arrangement 2* and *Arrangement 9* seemingly anchor themselves into the earth. One can imagine their young roots burrowing into the dark soil as their gently writhing limbs reach skyward. In *Arrangement 2* the shiny silvery black colour and twisting tendrils give one the feel of luxuriantly exuded obsidian. The forms in *Arrangement 9* are reminiscent of vulnerable young shoots being wafted by a gentle breeze or perhaps an undersea form being carried by strong currents of desire.

As stylised abstractions, Marvin Sweet's *Tree of Life* series become vessels for meaning. The sculptures are suggestive of familiar shapes and forms yet their enigmatic qualities allow the viewer to bring his or her own interpretations to the works, thus inviting the viewer's imagination to take over and become a part of the work, playing an integral component in completing the creative cycle. One might see the sculptures take the shape of a child dancing with arms held high in the air. Shifting position might give one the feeling of a bundle of exposed gnarled roots and the surge of spring sap. Then by shifting perspective again the viewer may perhaps discover a faun who speaks the same language as the sculptures, that of the wind and the trees – the language of creation.

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