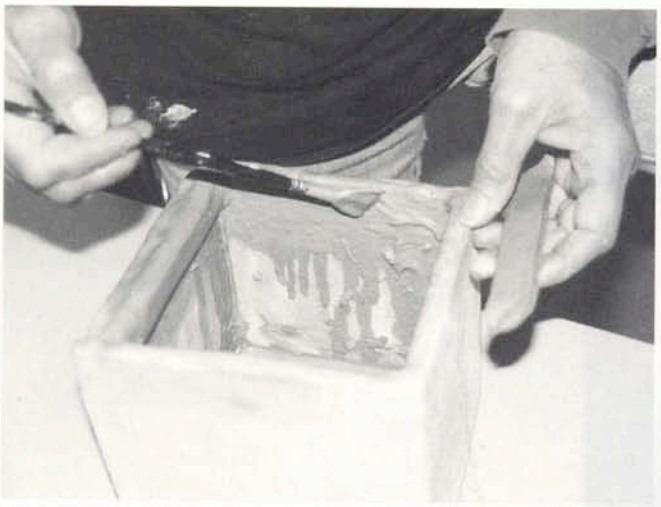
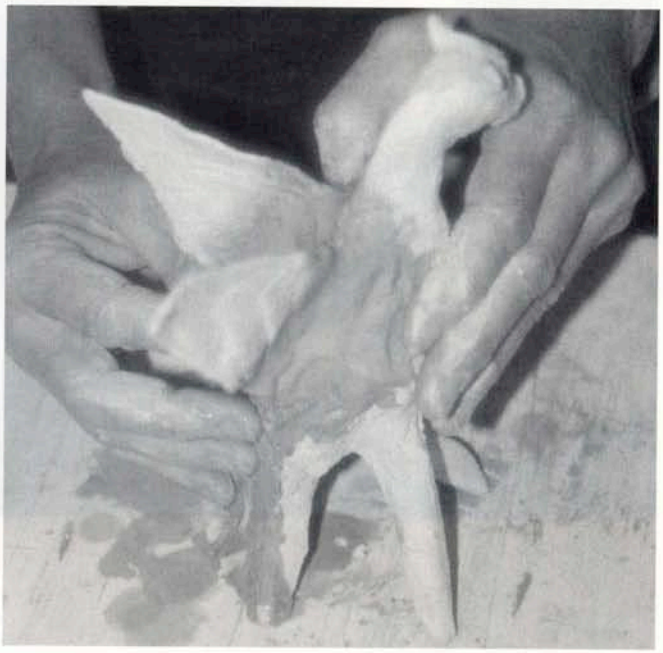
Rules, Rules, What Rules?

Sculptural Freedom with Paper Clay

by Rosette Gault



"Rules" are easily broken when working with paper clay: It's possible to construct a box from dry paper clay slabs, using paper clay slurry as an adhesive.

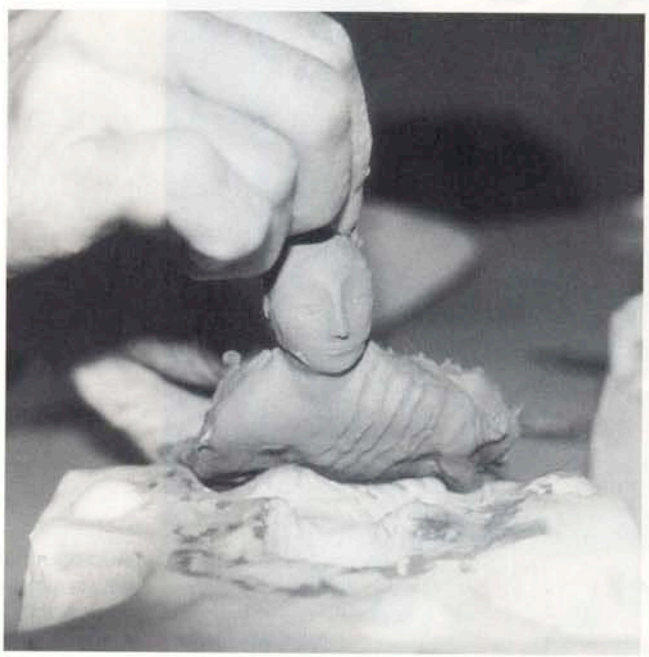


Or change the position of an appendage on a dry sculpture by breaking it off and reattaching with paper clay slurry.

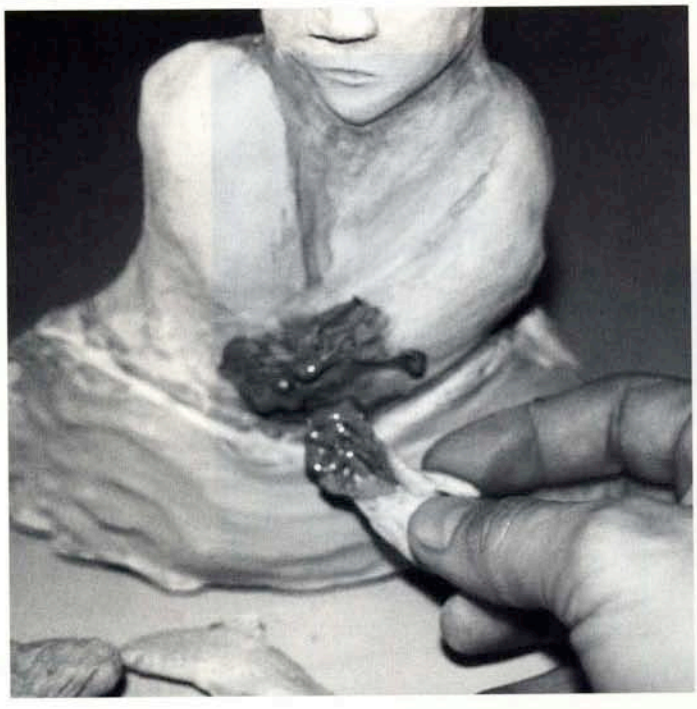
Those of you who are thinking of trying or have tried clay bodies mixed with recycled paper (see "Amazing Paperclay" in the June 1992 CM) may be interested in or have already discovered some of the remarkable sculptural possibilities of this mixture. Given a good foundation in basic clayworking techniques, such as coiling, pinching, slab building, press molding or even throwing, there's no need to be shy or too cautious with paper clay. Before the bisque firing, almost anything goes. After the bisque, you will need to consider the natural properties of the clay, such as its maturation temperature, because the paper will be gone.

When using paper clay, there is no need to cover your work with plastic to keep it moist. You can if you want to, but you can also let the piece dry out completely in the open air, then add wet clay over dry indefinitely. You can fix cracks, attach parts and so forth until it is time to fire. You can also assemble dry parts using paper clay slip as an adhesive. If you change your mind after a figure has dried, you can break or saw off an arm or leg and reattach it with paper clay slip. You can mix/attach different paper clay bodies (e.g., low-fire red and white paper clays) to each other, too.

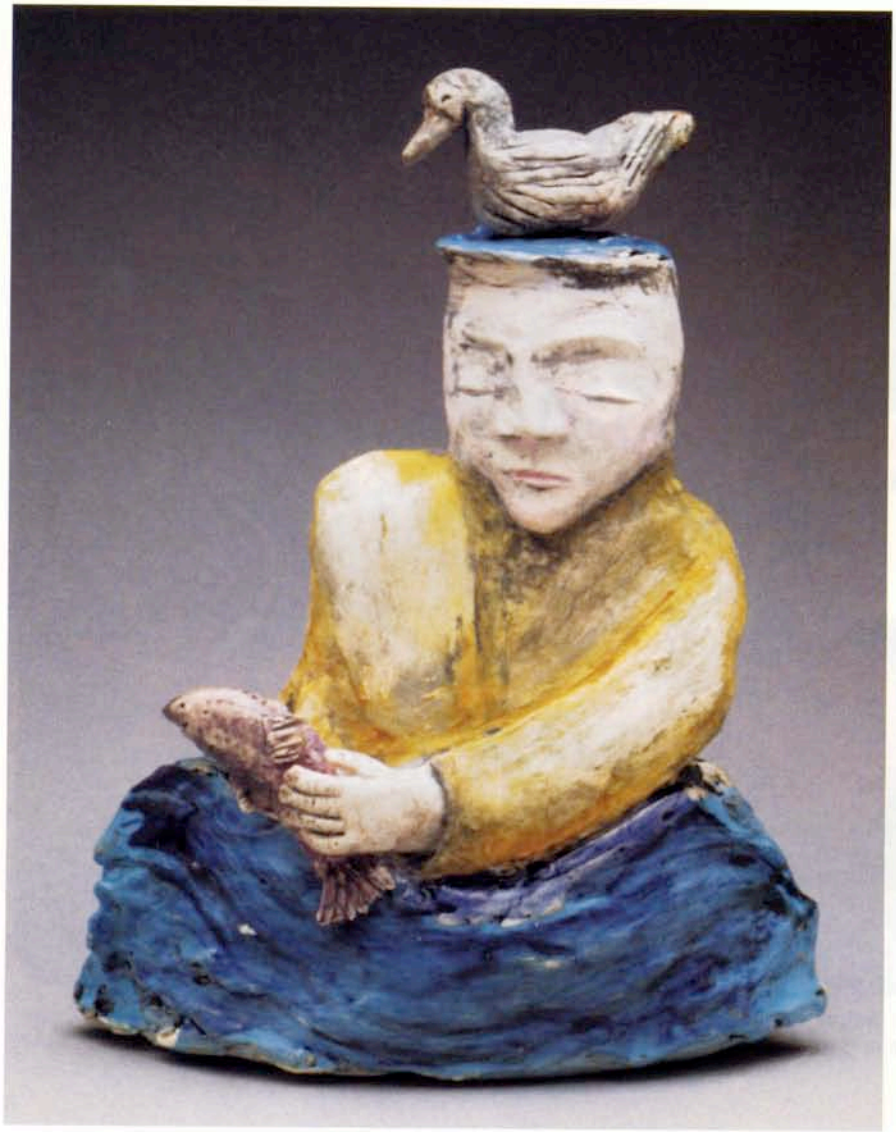
Green strength is noticeably improved with paper clay bodies, and so



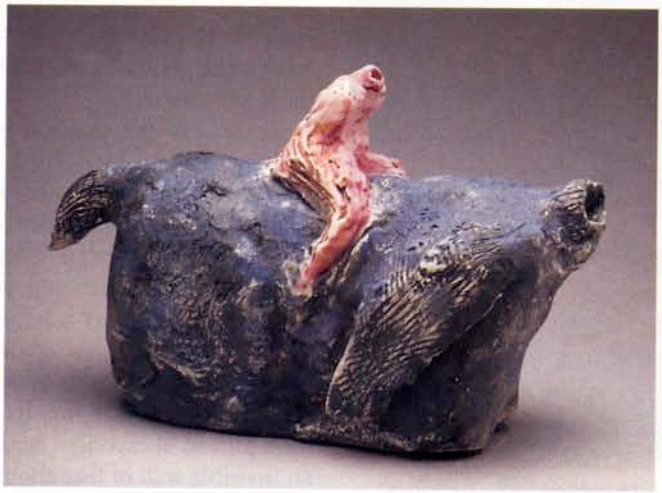
Or pull a casting out of a plaster mold.



Adding a hand to a bone-dry sculpture was a simple matter of temporarily removing a fish and applying paper clay slurry to moisten the surfaces to be joined.



"The Catch," 8 inches in height, whiteware paper clay, with engobes and glazes, fired to Cone 1.



"The Ride," approximately 8 inches in height; this piece was made by applying additional paper clay to a bisqued form that had been soaked in water.

most unfired dry pieces can take some bumping and shocks; even a car ride to a kiln for firing is usually no problem. And if a break does occur, it can easily be repaired.

While it may be tempting to make superthin or ultra-outrageous shapes, remember, as soon as the piece is bisqued, it behaves just like the regular clay body. Be careful not to fire it beyond its maturation temperature, or the form may slump. You may have to reinforce thin or unsupported areas with interior structures of paper clay.

If you want flat slabs, the best approach is to pour a layer of paper clay slip over a plaster slab; lift the "leather" just once off the plaster surface as soon as you can without tearing it, then put it back down. Additional layers may then be poured over top to achieve the desired thickness. Let the slab dry out completely on the plaster.

To cut a slab after it is totally dry, simply score and gently snap apart like glass or drywall. Some people prefer to use a saw or jigsaw.

If you want to carve detail on dry surfaces, but find it too difficult, try firing to 1000°F. The slab will carve beautifully after that because the paper fibers will be gone, but the clay will still be immature. This burning-out process works particularly well for low-fire talc bodies and porcelains.

You can also use plaster or latex molds with paper clay, and will find it releases sooner and is stronger to handle. For latex, simply peel the mold off the *totally* dry paper clay. No need to worry about minor undercuts. Paper clay greenware is usually strong enough to survive intact as you peel the latex off.

Do not try to use paper clay slip in bisqued molds, however; it will *not* release. Use this property to your advantage to repair bisqueware. You should be able to repair minor bisque cracks (the larger the crack, the greater the risk) with fresh paper clay slip, or even build anew onto wet bisqueware. Rebisque repaired/altered pieces, then glaze and fire as usual.

"Music," 30 inches in length, paper clay slab poured onto a plaster bat, with brushed engobe and glaze imagery, fired to Cone 1.

Paper clay bodies are also suitable for raku/pit-fire work; most (even some porcelains or low-fire talc bodies) exhibit improved thermal-shock capability if they have been bisque fired. Before the bisque, surfaces can be burnished smooth (at the soft-leather-hard stage) with a flexible rubber rib or textured with tools.

Paper clay is an excellent choice for large-scale projects, including wall pieces, because the finished weight is noticeably less than a conventional clay body. You can also mix/attach different concentrations of paper clay to itself. Try a super-lightweight (high ratio of paper pulp) interior armature with a more dense (lower paper concentration) mixture for the outer shell surface.

If your paper clay is cracking too much when drying, add more pulp to your batch. The more pulp, the less the cracking in general. I add more pulp for the larger works.

"To Listen," 15 inches high, handbuilt paper clay, by Rosette Gault, Seattle.

Be sure to fire paper clays only in well-ventilated kilns. Never use cellulose fibers with fire retardants in them (such as building insulation). Expect a smoking period during the first two to three hours of the firing, depending on how much paper clay is in the load.

These are but a few of the available options for those who want to work with paper clay. For me, its properties have proved liberating. I no longer face an invisible wall of fear about cracking. And, I hear tell, quite a few installation artists these days don't even fire the paper clay; they just recycle it when they are done! ▲