

Arabella Ark (formerly Gail Bakutis)

b.1946, Oakland, California, lives in Hana, Maui
exhibited in *Biennial II*

Shades I-V from the *Wall Tablets* series, 2011

hand-built, low-fired paper clay, slip

Intrigued by the willingness and courage we must have to enter new spaces I have been creating paper clay wall tablets, that often feature a variety of entry points such as, doors, thresholds, steps, and windows. Of late, coverings fascinate me as well — blinds, louvers, shades, screens, and veils. The subtle variations in color and shape, suggesting shades raised or lowered, convey what is personal and private and therefore kept covered. I hope what is hidden within captivates the viewer's curiosity.

GAIL BAKUTIS

Born 1946 in Oakland, California
Lives in Wai'anae, O'ahu

For Gail Bakutis being a ceramic artist wasn't her first choice as a career. In fact, she didn't even touch clay until she was in her late twenties. Bakutis' earlier training and work were in theater. Writing and acting were her creative first love, and Bakutis prepared herself for a professional career by attending the University of California, Berkeley, where she received a bachelor's degree in theater in 1968 and a master's degree in directing in 1971. Bakutis worked as an actress for the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and staged children's theater in Oakland before accepting an offer from film director William Friedkin to work as his script reader and assistant. Shortly thereafter, an opportunity to be a theater director at the American Cultural Center took her to Paris, where she and her company were invited to perform in Munich in conjunction with the 1972 Summer Olympics. The terrorist killings of Israeli athletes at the games resulted in the cancellation of the cultural programs and a change in the political climate. Concerned and frustrated by continuous bomb threats to American facilities and personnel in Paris, Bakutis sought to get away to a more peaceful place and came to Hawai'i in 1972, settling in Wai'anae on O'ahu.

Bakutis maintained her involvement with theater by working as drama critic for *The Honolulu Advertiser* and director of the Wai'anae Theater Workshop in the mid 1970s. She got involved with ceramics gradually while staying at home to raise the first of her three children. Since her then-husband worked in wheel-thrown pottery, Bakutis decided to take a different direction, trying her hand at slabrolling and handbuilding clay. Through experimentation she

learned techniques and glaze formulating on her own, with occasional advice from ceramic teachers Frank Beaver at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa and Vicky Chock at Leeward Community College. Mark Kadota, an artist also living in Wai'anae and working in porcelain at the time, helped her set up a secondhand kiln and showed her the techniques for raku glazing and firing. By 1974 Bakutis was running her own business, Bakutis' Pokai Pottery. Over the last 20 years she has established herself as one of Hawai'i's finest ceramic artists, well-known for her architecturally-inspired raku works which blur the distinction between vessel and sculpture. The richly-colored and organically-textured glaze surfaces of her works reflect her reverence for nature and the influence of her surroundings—the blues of the ocean, the greens of the forested mountains and valleys, the reds of the soil, and the blacks and grays of the volcanic coastline and cliffs.

In preparing for this exhibition, Bakutis felt a desire for change in her work and the need for renewal born of accepting the challenge to explore unfamiliar and uncharted territory. Bakutis also felt herself to be at an important and deep metaphysical juncture in her life. These yearnings and emotions have come together in a new body of work in which Bakutis has deliberately set aside much of what she has long been accustomed to in working with clay.

Bakutis has developed a series of new forms which serve as metaphors for the realms of the spirit, the unconscious and dreams. For Bakutis there is an analogy between the unseen, interior, empty or "negative" space that a pot holds and the spiritual life of human beings. We can't see the place where our psyches reside but it nevertheless exists, albeit in some invisible,

intangible circumstance. "In ceramics the surface deceives us a lot," Bakutis said in an interview, "and I think it is the same with human beings. We don't really know what is going on just by looking at someone or even talking superficially to them. We all have subtexts, and I began thinking about dreams, which represent our subtexts. Sometimes dreams will inform us better than experiences in the everyday world—who we are, where we are going and what we really feel." In her work Bakutis sought a means to enter that interior world in a symbolic way by creating forms to give tangible expression to ineffable conceits.

Bakutis began with a simple straightforward shape—a pillow—as a symbol for sleep and the unconscious, liking it also as an image of comfort and rest. To create a passage or entryway to the dreamworld the artist began adding thresholds or portals to the pillows, a vestige of the architectural forms she has often used. Bakutis continues the architectural theme in her series of *Entry Scrolls*, in which she delineates delicate relief maps to hidden interiors by way of torn stairs, footprints, fragments of roofs, window frames and door jambs. Bakutis has observed that in her earlier windowless, doorless temple pieces she was creating fortresses, reflecting perhaps her need for self-protection and being a refuge for safety for her family. Now Bakutis feels she wants things in her life to be more relaxed, comforting, open and accessible.

Another of Bakutis' recent forms is called *Dreamer*, a horizontal roll of clay in the shape of a garment, evoking the human body. It is empty, with openings where the head would be and over the place for the heart as well, as if to lay bare and make accessible the spiritual essence. Held up by

four small hidden supports, the form seems to hover in midair as if suspended in the dream state.

A series of rectangular *Dream Tablets* makes up a third component in Bakutis' dream cycle works. These the artist makes out of paper clay (a mixture of recycled paper pulp and dry porcelain clay), rolling it out, tearing, gouging, impressing the surface to create abstract forms that are suggestive rather than specific. They are fired stacked flat in the kiln with torn bits of masonite between. In the process the paper fiber embedded in the clay and the masonite burn away, creating a carbon-laden smoke in the reduced-oxygen atmosphere. The smoke swirls over the forms, depositing veils of gray and black which combine with applied colorants (stains and underglazes) and bits of clay grog and iron that fall from the kiln and fuse to the clay. The process is spontaneous and can't be predetermined or regulated, so the artist surrenders control and relies to a great extent on the serendipitous marks of the fire and the gifts of the kiln. For Bakutis these richly nuanced tablets are emblems of the stuff of dreams. The muted, nebulous shapes which seem to float on the surfaces are like the amorphous visages in a dream that emerge from the subconscious and slowly coalesce in the mind's eye over time into meaning.



GAIL BAKUTIS

Dimensions are listed in inches, height x width x depth.

***Dream Guardian I*, 1995**

porcelain
40 x 17 x 11

***Dream Guardian II*, 1995**

porcelain
23 x 20 x 11

***Dreamer I*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
5 x 27 x 10

***Dreamer II*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
5 x 30 x 10

***Dreamer III*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
5 x 30 x 10

***Pillow I*, 1995**

porcelain
8 x 8 x 3

***Pillow II*, 1995**

porcelain
8 x 8 x 3

***Pillowed Threshold I*, 1995**

paper clay
21 x 21 x 6

***Pillowed Threshold II*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
21 x 21 x 6

***Pillowed Threshold III*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
19 x 16 x 3

***Entry Scroll I*, 1995**

paper clay
45 x 21 x 2

***Entry Scroll II*, 1995**

paper clay
45 x 21 x 2

***Entry Scroll III*, 1995**

paper clay
45 x 21 x 2

***Entry Scroll IV*, 1995**

paper clay
45 x 21 x 2

***Talmudic Passage I*, 1995**

paper clay
25 x 14 x 5

***Talmudic Passage II*, 1995**

paper clay
25 x 21 x 4

***Talmudic Passage III*, 1995**

raku-fired porcelain
25 x 21 x 4

***Dream Tablet I*, 1995**

paper clay
26 x 21 x 1

***Dream Tablet II*, 1995**

paper clay
26 x 21 x 1

***Dream Tablet III*, 1995**

paper clay
26 x 21 x 1

***Dream Tablet IV*, 1995**

paper clay
26 x 21 x 1

***Dream Tablet V*, 1995**

paper clay
26 x 21 x 1