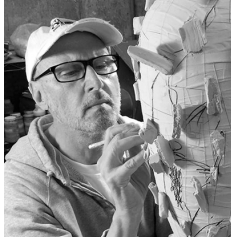


# Finding the Authentic Self



**Roy Strassberg**  
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I attended college in upstate NY after barely graduating from high school. I was fortunate to have a serendipitous meeting with a young professor of ceramics named Richard Zakin. He encouraged me, although I had not yet exhibited any particular skill or talent for the medium other than being able to throw a pot the first time I tried. My parents were disappointed that I had chosen to pursue a life in art, which included plans to own a pickup truck and a house in the woods. They had hoped I would become an accountant or follow my father into the fur business, surely a life of hell from my perspective.

I made pots, lots of them, none that were particularly good or personal, but good enough to allow me entrance into some good graduate programs. I think the best work I made was after Don Reitz had visited Oswego to conduct a workshop. He did things with clay I didn't think were possible i.e., dropping pots on the floor, cutting them up and reassembling them, adding/subtracting, working intuitively, etc. I proceeded to adjust the work but it wasn't my voice, although it did help to build a portfolio for my graduate school application. So, I headed off to Michigan where I was told, "we don't make pots at Michigan." I proceeded to make sculpture, hard edged, architecturally inspired work that drew upon my urban upbringing in NY, but I really had no personal stake in the work other than its aesthetic proximity to the visual pleasures I'd had while growing up: monuments, skyscrapers, bridges, tunnels... I still love those forms.

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I was fortunate to get a teaching job right after graduate school and moved to Memphis, a viscerally life changing cultural upheaval comparative to my life in Ann Arbor. The Chair at Memphis State told me I would have to have "a national reputation" if I expected to be tenured in the future. I loved art history, especially modern ceramic history, and I combined this curiosity with a highly evolved work ethic. Since there was no prohibition against making "vessels," I proceeded to make a series of raku vessels with architectural components in combination with softer animal forms, reminiscent of altars. I had had the misfortune of passing the Memphis stockyards while driving through the city.

Life was great. I won awards. Museums purchased my work. I saved money. I decided to move and applied to Mankato State University, which when I interviewed there seemed like a high school program, with one or two notable exceptions. James Tanner was the ceramics instructor and he needed a partner. He saved my life (and I think I saved his, too—at least he says I did). We became the "Minnesota Twins," or "twin sons of different mothers." My career expanded, I had work in galleries in almost every major city, I was included in private and institutional collections, I was invited to exhibit in good venues, I had a best friend, two beautiful children and a perfect wife...but I was unsatisfied. The work was "good," but I needed to make it "better" or worse, depending upon who was making a subjective determination of its quality or lack thereof.

I grew up in an environment that was palpably Jewish. Yiddish was the language of my grandparents and it was spoken at every family event. My father was educated in a Yeshiva in the Bronx, my grandfather was strictly orthodox; I didn't (and don't) believe in anything. I had relatives with numbers on their forearms. I was compelled to study religion and when I refused to attend Hebrew school, my father tutored me for the requisite Bar Mitzvah, where I read unceremoniously from the Torah. My grandparents and parents were mortified, but it was done. I was the renegade of the family, but also smart and tenacious... not a bad recipe for a life in the arts.

In 1992, I was awarded a Faculty Research Grant from Mankato to study the Holocaust as a subject for artistic interpretation. I had truly found the voice I had been seeking, career be damned, and it was. In the 1980's I made a group of guard towers after reading Steiner's book about Treblinka. I made an installation of standing figures in the form of "X" shapes with drawings. I then returned to making work that would advance my career and satisfy curators and dealers.

The work that became the Holocaust Bone Structures began in earnest when I was 42 years old. It has evolved like the proverbial wheel and spokes as it takes on many forms including fragment pots, tower vessels, canisters (not of the functional variety), wire/map/river pots, Black Houses, Angels, Enclosures, Trains, architectural sculptures based upon actual blueprints of killing centers, Bone Boxes, Wall Houses, etc. I'll add that every gallery dropped my work when I started making this work. I had made a conscious and irrevocable decision to pursue the work I was meant to make. As one mid-western dealer said to me, "Roy, send me something I can sell." I didn't. Ironically, many of the collectors who currently support my work now do so because of its content, not in spite of it. Someone has to make this work. It might as well be me. *Tikkun Olam*.