

Earth Forms: The Boundless Art of Lonnie Vigil and Ansel Adams

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Abstract

This paper examines Lonnie Vigil and Ansel Adams' "earth-formed artworks" within the shared context of The Mint Museum's permanent collection of American artworks. While Vigil's ceramic vessels are literally made of micaceous earth, Adams' landscape photographs and abstract earth patterns are formed in gelatin silver. Both artists use fundamentally different media to embody the earth's materiality; however, their processes similarly represent their reverent partnerships with the earth and rely on the earth's forms and textures to comprise their art's content. This research juxtaposes Vigil and Adams' spiritual relationships with the earth with the visual metaphors extant within their art, identifies the initial, critical moments of both artists' acceptance into the international art arena, and provides three formal comparisons between "earth-formed artworks" produced by both twentieth century, American artists.

Imagine yourself in a gallery surrounded by ceramic and photographic art that radiates the earth's sublimity. A shimmering, micaceous clay sphere robed in an undulating mass of cloud forms sits on a pedestal adjacent to a photograph filled with folding sand dunes and reflective planes of sky and desert. For contemporary artist, Lonnie Vigil, from Nambe Pueblo, New Mexico, sculpting traditional, micaceous clay ceramics infused with innovative, elemental abstractions embodies his spiritual partnership with Mother Earth. For modern artist, Ansel Adams, from San Francisco, California, transforming the traditional, transcendental landscape vista into a "straight photograph" of abstract, earth

patterns formed his reverent relationship with the earth. The shared context of Vigil's micaceous ceramics and Adams' straight photography in The Mint Museum's permanent collection of American artworks provides the foundation from which I have researched the artists' initial, critical moments of professional acceptance and performed three cross-media, formal comparisons. In addition, the artists share the following two qualities: their spiritual partnerships with the earth and the literal embodiment of the earth's materiality within their art. Vigil's elemental ceramics, made of micaceous earth, and Adams' earth-patterned photographs, formed in gelatin silver, metaphorically represent the earth's

transformative nature through abstract, formal properties. Moreover, despite the artists' use of fundamentally different media, they similarly utilize abstract textures from the earth's landscape to form their art's content and inherently honor their reverent partnerships with the earth through their creative processes.

Earth-formed art, a term I propose here, refers to artworks that embody the natural locations from which their compositional structures literally derive, and in effect, exist as progeny of physically extant earth sites. To test the rigor of this concept, I have conducted three, cross-cultural, formal comparisons of artworks by Native American Lonnie Vigil and American Ansel Adams. These works form their materiality from the land itself and encompass Vigil and Adams' physical relationships with the earth's landscape. As such, the term, earth-formed art, also serves to index the inspiration for both Vigil and Adams' creative processes, namely their spiritual bonds with the earth. Vigil's ceramic vessels, made of micaceous clay, formally and thematically correspond to Adams' gelatin silver prints of the earth's landscape. In addition, these earth-formed artworks encapsulate the artists' syntheses of three principles: their art's embodiment of the earth's materiality, their respectful relationships with nature, and their phenomenological relations with the earth. Thus, when collecting clay, Vigil honors the earth as the utmost, elemental entity from whom he asks permission to use "her" material to demonstrate the sacred clay's multitude of meaningful expressions. Through his art, Vigil gives viewers an opportunity to closely examine and experience the mica-flecked, lustrous clay. Moreover, he prefaces his public explanations of his creative process with a solemn gratitude for the earth's irreplaceable, transmutable energy as well as his ancestors' earth-based, artistic traditions. Likewise, Adams nurtured his reverent bond with the earth's landscape through an inspired relationship with Yosemite National Park; his honorific photographs

and conservationist work demonstrated his reverence for the earth and appreciation of the land's essential vitality. In addition, Adams, a proponent of the nineteenth century Romantic landscape tradition, publicly encouraged viewers to experience the vastness of the earth's formal properties through his compassionate lens while simultaneously promoting his message of the earth's transformative nature.

Vigil's earth-based medium, micaceous clay, refers to mica-rich soil found in the decomposing minerals of northern New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo mountains. Native American ceramists from Northern New Mexican Pueblos ask permission from Mother Earth to collect the sacred clay from this section of the Rocky Mountains. Moreover, micaceous clay, a gift to contemporary Pueblo people from their ancestors and Clay Mother, is used to make art vessels as well as domestic, heat-resistant cooking pots and durable storage wares. The Pueblo tradition of hand-building micaceous culinary wares dates back to the fourteenth century.

Vigil, a self-taught artist, intuitively makes hand-built, micaceous vessels which exist as contemporary artworks that unequivocally blend traditional, storage ware forms with the artist's unique, sleek designs. Echoing the scale of large storage vessels, Vigil's works possess non-traditional, thin walls and asymmetrical openings that utilize the clay's plasticity to maintain their spatial positions. Vigil applies earth-inspired, abstract sensibilities to his contemporary sculptures; he relies on line, texture, light, and mass to communicate meaning within his works. To accentuate his vessels' formal aesthetics, the artist sands and polishes the clay bodies as well as layers shimmering, micaceous slip on the sculptures' walls. This process intensifies the vessels' luminosity, hue, and tonality and epitomizes the artist's signature, formal language. When the artworks are completely built and stylized, Vigil places them into a homemade bonfire. After Vigil gently wipes

the ashes from a fired vessel's walls, the artwork's transcendental, spiritual nature is revealed through its pertinent formal properties, namely its sleek design, lustrous surface, and undulating fire cloud patterns. These properties mimic the formal characteristics of desert, sun, and sky and represent the artist's spiritual connection to the earth and Nambe Pueblo, New Mexico.

In 1982, Vigil made his first steps towards his current career when he resigned from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. and returned home to Nambe Pueblo, New Mexico. Shortly after his return home, Vigil began studying clay. From his mother and sister, he learned about micaceous clay's plastic properties and its nearby location in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. He also relied on his ancestors and the sacred earth spirit, Clay Mother, for strength and guidance during this unpredictable journey. Vigil told me, "The process unraveled over about ten years." Since 1992, Vigil has been credited as the pioneering artist who established micaceous ceramics as legitimate art within the contemporary, international art arena.

The world-renowned Santa Fe Indian Market facilitates relationships for competing Native American ceramists like Vigil, serves as a professional springboard for all participating Native American artists, and holds an "art world authority" post in the eyes of the market's extensive community of curators and collectors. In the mid-1960s, the market experienced substantial growth in the facets of support and attendance and began facilitating direct communications and professional relationships between the market's participating artists, curators, and collectors. However, until 1992, competing micaceous ceramists were shunned from winning the market's awards; their artworks did not match the judges' traditional criteria and were deemed strictly utilitarian because of the medium's extant use for domestic, culinary wares. The judges also staved off the acceptance of micaceous ceramics as "art," because the vessels' surfaces lacked

hand-painted slip motifs and, in some cases, featured decorative fire cloud markings. The market's denigrated status of micaceous ceramics prevented these artworks from winning the required awards needed for candidacy for the market's top honor, best of show. In effect, it significantly hindered the market community's reception of micaceous ceramics as art.

At the 1992 Santa Fe Indian Market, the judges overturned the market's earlier perspectives of micaceous ceramics and awarded Lonnie Vigil's Rainbow Jar with the three necessary honors needed to qualify for best of show. In effect, the elevated status bestowed upon Vigil at the 1992 market positioned the artist's micaceous, sculptural vessel as a legitimate artwork in the eyes of the market's curators and collectors. Although Vigil did not win best of show, being a candidate for the award propelled the artist into a global arena of museums, galleries, and academia and provided the artist with international publicity. While the market's judges honored Vigil for many awards throughout the following years, it was not until 2001 that Vigil received the market's top honor, best of show. During a telephone interview with Vigil, he said, "I help my family and other people while sharing our [ancestors'] gift with the world. [Winning] the award had to be at the right time."

Although Vigil's professional accolades serve as testaments to his talent, technical proficiencies, and international acceptance in the art world, the Nambe Pueblo artist remains humble and continues to be inspired by his family, the clay, and the earth. Reflecting on the physical power of the earth, Vigil shared with me, "[The earth] begins all things, from the fuel to create to [all] natural and manufactured things." Moreover, the artist reaffirms his spiritual connection to nature by participating in seasonal, phenomenological rituals with the sacred land. For example, during each year's milder months, Vigil collects modest amounts of Mother Clay's gifts of cottonwood trees and micaceous soil. He

explained, “We gather only dead cottonwood trees near the river [for the bonfire] and ask Mother Earth for only as much clay as we need.” While the trees, clay, and artistic process are all gifts from the earth, Vigil’s ceramics also metaphorically represent his ancestors from the Pueblo of Nambe, whose village name translates to the words “earth’s roundness.”

Akin to Lonnie Vigil’s spiritual partnership with the earth, Ansel Adams’ reverence for the earth also embodied the content of his art and the inspiration for his photography. Adams saw the unity of all things in nature and believed that nature’s expressions could be manifested in art. As such, the essential materiality of Adams’ photographs resulted from the artist’s optical selections of physical sites, which translated into light marks within the negative and abstract earth patterns within the gelatin silver print. In essence, Adams fused three artistic principles into his mature photographic visualizations: the spiritual, Romanticist landscape or view tradition, modernist abstraction, and the straight photography tradition.

As a “Western School,” American photographer, Adams applied straight photography principles to his Romantic, yet modern portrayals of the lyrical planes and patterns of abstracted landscapes. By producing straight, un-manipulated photographs of transcendental landscape scenes from 1930 onwards, Adams’ practice most closely paralleled that of nineteenth century British photographer, Peter Henry Emerson. During the years 1882 to 1889, Emerson’s practice of straight photography was based on creating “truthful,” naturalistic photographs of rural landscapes, which rendered the intense formal details and spiritual qualities of the earth to viewers. Emerson’s work opened a space for twentieth century artists, like Adams, to re-present the mechanical medium as art in its own formal terms. After meeting American modernist photographer Paul Strand in 1930, Adams committed to producing “honest” straight photography which intuitively described both his sublime connection to the

earth as well as the extracted, textural details of the landscape. From 1932 to 1935 Adams took the straight photography tradition to new heights as a founder of the modernist photographers’ collective, “Group f/64.” The group’s pro-technology members used the camera’s smallest aperture to create un-manipulated, sharp-focused compositions of abstract patterns of the physical world. They also preferred the tactile practice of making contact prints from large-format negatives.

American art photographer Alfred Stieglitz, Adams’ most revered influence, began experimenting with straight photography as early as 1901. By 1907, Stieglitz hailed straight photography to be the most honest way of depicting life through an abstract art form. Interestingly, by concurrently championing straight photography and pushing for critical acceptance of the painterly photographs by his own “Photo-Secession” group, Stieglitz solidified his canonical authority and internationally elevated vernacular American photography to legitimate art status. Stieglitz’s solidification of photography’s “art” status also manifested in his magazine, *Camera Work*, where he showed Strand’s straight photography in 1916 and 1917. In essence, Stieglitz, Strand, and Adams shared the perspective that the purity of straight photography’s aesthetics revealed intense truth, meaning, and beauty through the formal properties of line, texture, and tonality.

Originally, Adams trained to be a concert pianist, and through his musical practice, he learned the abstract qualities of “architectural” depth and fineness. Adams’ acute understanding of musical aesthetics gave way to his lifelong career of creating transcendental landscape photographs which propped the tradition of portraying the sanctity of the earth, albeit with a modernist approach to detail. In 1927 prior to Adams’ straight photography practice, the artist’s first successful visualization, *Monolith, The Face of the Half Dome*, revealed the granite’s intricate texture and range of tonalities as a result of the artist’s use of sharp-focus and a red filter. This print was featured in Adams’ debut photo-book,

Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras, which was sponsored by the artist's first patron, Albert Bender. Proving to be a lifelong supporter of Adams and in an effort to expand the artist's career, Bender promoted Adams' creative photography to his wealthy friends and notably introduced the artist to Stieglitz's wife, American modernist painter Georgia O'Keefe, during a visit to Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Following meeting O'Keefe in the late 1920s, Adams persistently courted Stieglitz, whose legendary modern art gallery, "291," had exhibited vernacular photography alongside avant-garde painting and sculpture during the years 1908 to 1917. In 1933, Adams visited Stieglitz's An American Place gallery in New York City and presented his straight photography to the iconic owner, who granted him a solo exhibition three years later. Adams' exhibition at Stieglitz's gallery in 1936 marked the artist's official acceptance into the modern art arena and expanded his position to an international level. Beginning in 1937, Adams merged his "Group f/64" style with his mature mode of evocative, intimate landscape extractions. In 1938, Stieglitz dubbed Adams' photography as "perfect."

From 1930 until the end of his life, Adams created transcendental expressions of the landscape's formal properties through the truth-telling lens of straight photography. Throughout his artistic journey, Adams continued to nourish his spiritual relationship with the earth through phenomenological rituals, namely his hiking pilgrimages into the mountains. Through these repeated, celebratory acts, he habitually experienced new views of the sacred landscape. Adams' physical engagements with the earth reinforced his practice of experiencing discovery and natural awe and infusing these feelings into his photographs. To encourage viewers to experience an intimate view of the earth, Adams compositionally eliminated the distance between the landscape and the viewer and offered a personalized, close-up view of the earth's materiality. Moreover, in an effort to

formally describe the earth's spiritual power in his artworks, Adams adopted Stieglitz's philosophy of "equivalents," where physical entities, like the earth, embodied such subjective qualities as emotions. This ideal was vital to Adams' mature style, and it manifested in 1940 in the artist's technical development of the "zone system." This system allowed Adams to predict the tonal values within each photograph while working on-site. Adams used this innovation, a significant technical contribution to the art of photography, to visually communicate the complexity of the landscape as well as his deep spirituality towards the earth.

Reflecting his deep love for the Yosemite Mountains and affinity for the American landscape, Adams' reverent connection to the earth visibly manifested in the content and materiality of his photographs. Likewise, Vigil grounds himself in a sacred, sublime relationship with the land by creating micaceous clay artworks that literally and spiritually embody the earth's materiality. Vigil told me, "It's more than a literal thought or action [to make art]; I go to a different place when I work." In essence, Vigil's abstract micaceous ceramics and Adams' photographic landscape extractions metaphorically evoke their transcendental relationships with the land and spiritualistic approach to making earth-formed art.

In a formal comparison of Lonnie Vigil's Neckless Jar with Fire Clouds (Fig. 1), made in the late 1980s, and Ansel Adams' Sand Dunes, Sunrise, Death Valley National Monument, California (Fig. 2), printed in 1948 and 1980, the properties of line, light, and mass visually correspond between the artists' compositions. In Neckless Jar with Fire Clouds, the sloping contours of the clay correspond to the contouring folds of Adams' sand dunes. Additionally, the curvilinear bands at Neckless Jar's base correspond to the ribbons of linear indentations in the foreground of Sand Dunes. In both works, linear contours and colonies guide the viewer and define the materiality, or formal structures, of the compositions. In terms of light, Vigil and

Adams employ a vast spectrum of tonalities to add depth and dimension to their works. The all-over radiance of Vigil's Jar offers senses of stability and vitality while the vessel's extending gray fire clouds evoke a sense of expansiveness. In a reverse mode, Adams' reflective planes of sky and sand dunes evoke vitality and stand in contrast to the dunes' dark planes and peaks which connote stability. Both artists' works offer viewers intimate experiences of nature's formal expressions in terms of elemental properties.

In a formal comparison between Vigil's Jar (Fig. 3), made in 1995, and Adams' Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming (Fig. 4), printed in 1981, the slanting fire clouds in Vigil's Jar echo the diagonal geyser stream of Adams' composition. These directional guides promote exploration through both works' earth-based forms. In Vigil's Jar, the contrast between the dark fire clouds and the bronze, micaceous clay connote the complexity of nature's moods. Likewise, in Adams' reverse use of light, the white condensation of the geyser juxtaposed with the dark earth and sky emulate the emotive moods of nature. Vigil's Jar embodies a vertical form made up of horizontal coils and a globular base. Similarly, Adams juxtaposes the horizontality and curvature of the landscape with the geyser's vertical stream. This embodiment of cardinal directionality reflects both artists' awareness and acceptance of the earth as their art's driving force. In terms of light, the imprinted triangles and all-over luminous clay of Vigil's Jar communicate infinite movement and vitality. Similarly, the angled peaks of glowing condensation in Adams' Old Faithful Geyser evoke senses of infinite motion and energy. These indicators of movement refer to the earth as the source of energy and existence.

Lastly, the isolated fire cloud at the waist of Vigil's Jar corresponds to the isolated cloud in the bottom left edge of Adams' Old Faithful Geyser. While these clouds evoke independence, they remain bound to the earth.

In a final comparison between another of Vigil's works entitled Jar (Fig. 5), made in the

1990s, and Adams' El Capitan Fall, Yosemite National Park, California (Fig. 6), printed in 1981, cloud masses are the predominant, visual characteristic in both works. In Jar, fire clouds accentuate the curvature of the vessel's neck and correspond to the clouds that rest atop the mountain peaks of El Capitan Fall. In both cases, the artists simultaneously reference the sky as a source of elemental energy and emphasize the angular earth forms that define the upper portions of their compositions. In addition, in Vigil's work the sporadic fire cloud markings parallel the mountains' erratic, linear fissures in Adams' work. These areas connote sensibilities of change and growth and allude to the eternal variance of earth's elementals. The overall roundness of Vigil's work also reflects the mountains' concave interior in Adams' work. These visual elements suggest the notions of circularity and reciprocity and reflect the artists' practices of earth-formed art. In addition, the presence of light in both works allows viewers to closely examine the physical materiality of Jar and El Capitan Fall. The luminescence in Vigil's work intrinsically exists within the mica-rich clay, while in Adams' work, the illumination of the mountains comes from sunlight. Through their compositional designs, both artists honor the earth as the ultimate source of energy and present viewers with visual embodiments of humanity's respectful co-existence and interconnectedness with the earth.

Through informed examinations of the artists' initial moments of professional acceptance, contemporary contexts, spiritual connections to the earth, and formal aesthetics, it is clear that Lonnie Vigil and Ansel Adams' artworks yield definitive positions under the boundless label of earth-formed art. Vigil's elemental ceramics, made of micaceous clay, and Adams' earth-patterned photographs, formed in gelatin silver, communicate multifarious visual metaphors referencing the earth's sacred landscape and honor their lifelong, reverent partnerships with the earth. Moreover, through gestural abstract designs and emotive formal properties, the

artists emphasize the strength and variability of the earth's elementals and offer homage and gratitude to the land for its eternal, life-giving energy. As earth-based artists, Vigil and Adams offer an expansive portal for the global arts community at large to intimately experience the earth's materiality through the artists' transmuted abstractions. In turn, these works characteristically ask viewers to form a bond with the earth's vital energy and transformative nature. Conclusively, the abstract

earth patterns and spiritual metaphors found in Vigil's micaceous ceramics and Adams' straight photography communicate both artists' transcendental approach to making art. Thus, these commonalities between the artists inspire a collective unity between their earth-formed artworks and invite a boundless, collegial dialogue of earth-formed art across culture, media, location, decade, and century.



Fig. 1 - Lonnie Vigil, Neckless Jar with Fire Clouds, micaceous earthenware, 13" x 15.5625" x 15.5625," ca. late 1980s. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Fig. 2 - Ansel Adams, Sand Dunes, Sunrise, Death Valley National Monument California, gelatin silver print, 18" x 14.25," 1948, 1980. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.



Fig. 3 - Lonnie Vigil, Jar, micaceous earthenware, 10.625" x 10.1875" x 9.625," 1995. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.



Fig. 4 - Ansel Adams, Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, gelatin silver print, 20.75" x 13.5," 1981. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.





Fig. 5 – Lonnie Vigil, Jar, micaceous earthenware, 8.25" x 10" x 33.8," ca. 1990s. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Fig. 6 - Ansel Adams, El Capitan Fall, Yosemite National Park, California, gelatin silver print, 10.75" x 13.75," 1981. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.



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