

## Lynn Hughes / RANK BEGINNINGS

*Rank Beginnings, a major work by a beginning artist, was shown at the Vancouver Art Gallery in October/November 1976. Made through simple processes like raku and papier maché, the various components first took on the configuration shown in The Capilano Review, in the site where it was exhibited. Like the Shadbolt mural Coastal Indian Suite, the Hughes multipart piece projects an atavistic power.*

*The interview was conducted by Ann Rosenberg and Jim Roberts.*

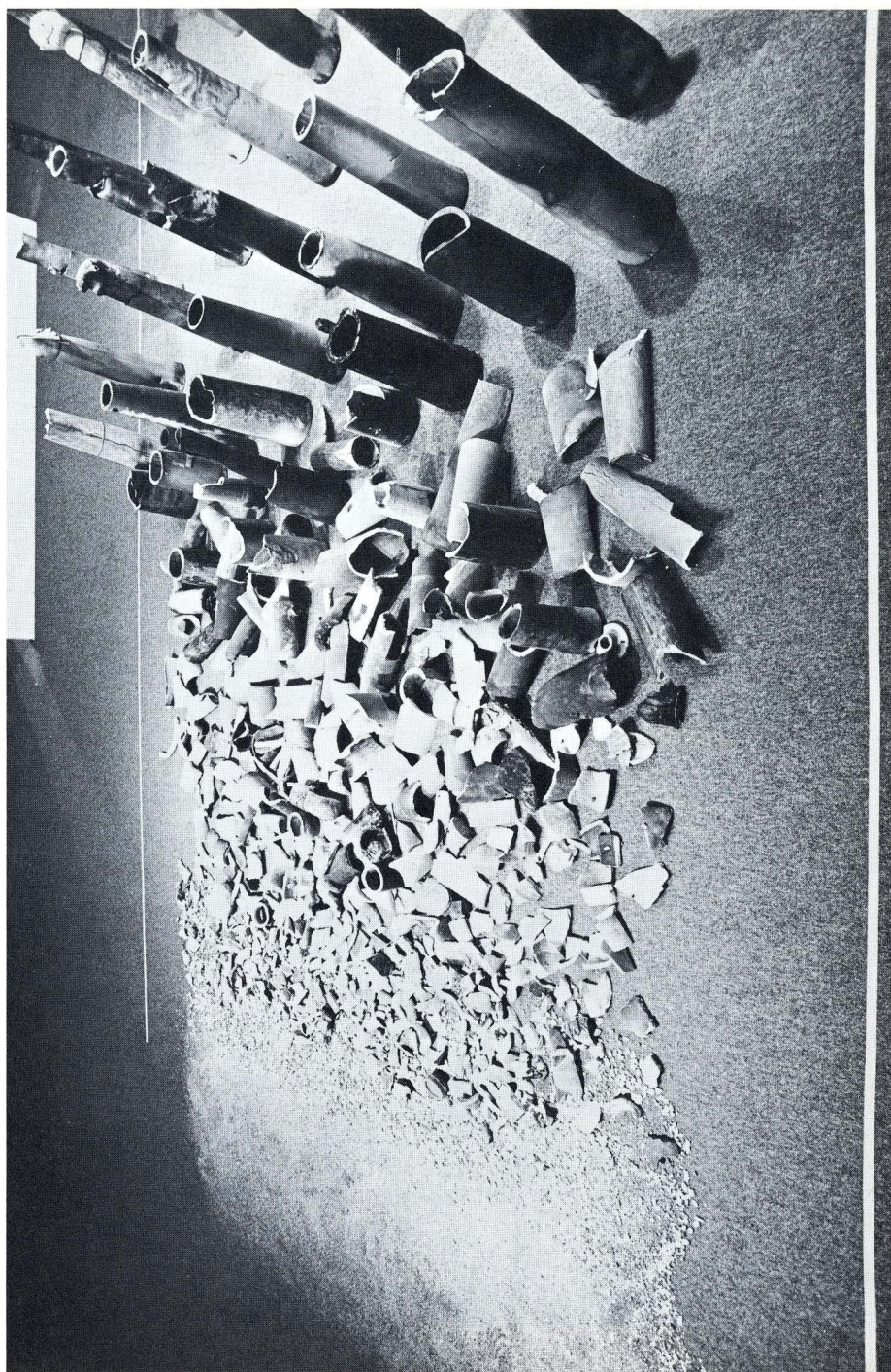
### IMAGES

*Rank Beginnings, 1975-6, raku pottery, papier maché, found objects, plan approximately 20' x 50', height ranges from about 5' down to shards.*

*Photography: Tod Greenaway*























## INTERVIEW

*AR* *Rank Beginnings* is the kind of piece that carries with it dozens of associations. Does the fact that you were brought up in Zambia have anything to do with its form?

*LH* I have been interested on and off in all kinds of primitive art, but I am certainly not conscious that *Rank Beginnings* has African associations. One thing I'm conscious of about myself that makes me different from the circle of friends I have here, is that I never bump into anyone I know. My family and I moved around frequently all over the world and I have never gone back to the places that I've been. I have a really inaccessible background. Because I moved every two or three years, my whole life I've had to take from whatever was around and only recently have I been able to make *my own* choices.

I studied English at Liverpool University because it seemed the best thing to do at the time and read all of Shakespeare, even the things that he might not have written, and I don't resent that but I do protest the narrowness of the education I received on behalf of others. In England you tend to study one subject and nothing else. I found that finishing my degree in Canada was a broadening experience.

*AR* After you graduated from UVic you went to the art school here in Vancouver. When did you make the decision to become an artist?



*LH* Well, that happened rather unconsciously . . . It seems to have been the result of my seeing things or situations in a holistic way and yet when I went to art school people talked and taught very much in terms of individual pieces and yet I went there to work out ways of presenting myself through individual pieces that built into a complex, complete idea. As a matter of fact when I work I always start with an *idea*. What I do is different from a series which involves a number of variations on a theme presented together; I work towards a collectivity to build towards the idea I have in mind. *Rank Beginnings*, in its Vancouver Art Gallery form, is one possible result of my decision to let everything in my life and mental process connect with and become my art (and vice versa).

When I first went to the art school I learned technique and *thought up* ideas; now I use whatever is most immediate and most available to me in terms of manufacturing processes and image. I look around the room for a subject, and keep open to the possibilities for a subject in everything I do. The things that form the tops of the figures in *Rank Beginnings* come from every aspect of my life.

Some resulted directly from experience I had in the three jobs I held when I was working on the piece. Some objects collected during that period are incorporated into some of the figures — the grill on one of the heads, for example. I became conscious of the city at that time, of houses being wrecked. A huge old farm house across from us, in really great condition, one day gave out the sound of a window being cracked and I thought, oh maybe someone's replacing a back window and went off to school. When I came home there was nothing, nothing there and I couldn't believe it. Some of the other figures resulted directly from pictures and I would force myself to do them exactly; others would start off from an idea then completely change in the process.

*AR* In the work as it is assembled at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the scale ranges from about life-size down to fragments. At what point did you make this choice and at what moment was all of *Rank Beginnings* in your mind?



*LH* I definitely started off with a big idea in mind, that I was going to do something very simple, very basic that could be anything that I wanted it to be because all the pieces would be made with the same base form. I knew that in the end it would stand in rows and that because the bases would be uniform I could do anything that I wanted on the tops. I started with the familiar figures first and many of these came from drawings — the pieces became more and more multi-media as I went along — I became bigger and bolder as I went along and allowed things to grow and change as they would.

*Raku* pottery is very fragile and tends to break, and that is why I chose it. I wanted a very simple form that I could turn out fast and I wanted to break some of the pieces. But debris was not foremost in my mind. I saw that to make rows was a potential for a final organization, but when I was first making them they were not placed that way.

I just went with everything that happened to them. Around Christmas I had a number of them set up in a spare room. I really enjoyed them. I would sit in front of them. When I went away for Christmas someone was storing tools in the room and an old Volkswagen seat and forgot to shut the door. My cat went in and sat on the seat. It tipped over and the figures knocked over and broke into debris. When I came back I had to accept this change. I could no longer sit before them preoccupied with how they were. It was a good thing to happen, although it broke my heart. I was more free after that to just put things together as they would go. And in the end I managed to use just about everything I had made and all the shards and bits I had saved and everything supported everything.

As I look at it now, I think its impact is a little over-formal.



*AR* As it is now, the arrangement carries rich associations. Every viewer has something to bring to it. And yet its meaning is open. Is everything building up or falling down? Is it a procession of horror or magnificence?

*LH* Well, it also has some humor in it. There is a phrase that kept coming to my mind, and I almost wrote it down except that every time I did, it sounded corny. People keep saying that it's an army; they are caught by the severity of it. The rows had to be there because of all the looseness. So I wanted to say "an army is made up of men, some of them fierce but many of them funny," in order to remind everyone that in films about war there is often the clown figure who goes through the trenches making jokes. I really tried to put that idea *in*. At the very end, even while I was setting it up, I kept adding funny things like springs and toothpicks painted neon to the heads. And while I was adding the toothpicks I needed something to stick them in until they dried, so I stuck them into a carrot and it became a porcupine in gold and neon with stripes where the paint ran down, so I put the carrot in front with the shards where I suppose it has now shrivelled up.

I had no way of seeing the piece until it was up.

*AR* So then you could foresee arranging the components of the piece some other way, even in the same place?

*LH* Oh yes. I only saw some of them lined up when I set them up for my father to see when he came to town before the show. At the gallery they are arranged according to instinct, by trial and error.

NOTE: *On the second to last day of the exhibition, Lynn Hughes re-organized Rank Beginnings into a startlingly different grouping, a move in keeping with her sense of the flexible process that is her work. She believes (and so do some other witnesses) that the second order was even more successful than the first — A.R.*