

Kahlil Robert Irving
Streets: Chains: Cocktails

The politics of empire have been mapped onto cities and the power relations of colonialism continue to resonate throughout. Thus, urban spaces are produced such that cities become both a dialectical product and producer of power and inequities.

Jane Jacobs, *The Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*¹

Kahlil Irving's sculptures give the illusion of bricolage, objects that are made out of an assortment of materials and diverse items. At first glance, the sculptural forms appear to be a heterogeneous array of objects—from food boxes, to bricks and cement, items from the street melded together. Yet, upon closer inspection, these forms are made entirely of ceramic materials, displaying Irving's true mastery of a historic medium. The variegated surfaces do not come from a collage of items, but rather from the different clays, lusters, metallic glazes and decals utilized by the artist. These sculptures blur the distinction between art and design, intentionally mixing idioms and re-contextualizing forms commonly associated with both high culture and kitsch, actively contributing to the continually shifting perception of ceramics within a fine art discourse. Irving's work, while being materially complex, is also deeply thought-provoking. By using the singular medium of clay, these sculptures constitute a "cultural bricolage" of signs and references, rather than a material one, creating a commentary on social, racial, and cultural tensions, particularly those that emerge from the urban environments of America's cities.

Embedded within the dense, block-like sculptures are pieces molded to resemble everyday discarded items such as soda bottles and folded or crumpled fast food containers. Areas of crisp white porcelain are juxtaposed against seeming piles of architectural debris. Images of recognizable symbols and brands such as Sprite and Vess (a nod to the artist's Saint Louis roots), lottery tickets, cigarette butts and Newport boxes appear alongside traditional and highly recognizable decorative patterns from centuries of porcelain design, ranging from the traditional floral decorations of 18th-century German manufacturer Meissen, kitschy images of pineapples and bumblebees, to geometric patterns commonly used in American designs of the post-World War II era. Mixed in are newspaper clippings with legible headlines but bodies of text often too small to read, rendering them abstract. The newspaper clippings focus on the 2014 killing of Michael Brown – the Black American teenager from Ferguson, Missouri, who was shot and killed by a white police officer – as well as the militarized police response that met the local protests that followed and the lack of any indictment of Darren Wilson, the officer responsible for Brown's killing. On several sculptures headlines from local Saint Louis newspapers emerge from their porcelain backdrop with statements like: "Streets flare up: No Charges for Wilson."

These contemporary headlines compel us to reconsider preconceived notions of how the history of race in America deeply affects our present. The sculptures, as well as the prints from Irving's series *Street Prints*, made by gathering litter and objects from the street, become dense constellations of the

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 158.

American city itself and the ways that it is continually being re-made and re-inscribed over time, visually and aesthetically conveying the beauty and tragedy of urban ruin alongside all of its intimations of morality, mortality, and collective memory.

The social and cultural concerns represented in the newspaper clippings do not stop at the headlines. The lotto tickets, cigarette butts and fast food containers remind us that the concept of trash and urban decay itself is contingent and political. Waste is an adjunct of luxury and dependent on economic wealth and excess production. Detritus has ideological, social and political contexts. By association it becomes a signifier of urban alienation, a marker of what has been left behind by social rupture suspended in a state of disharmony with nature. The compressed forms of the sculptures expose diverse modalities of subordination and domination.

In “**COMPRESSED MASS** (*hidden decoration*)” brown rough surfaces blend with white porcelain covered in floral patterns and gold metallic trim in a manner that seems to merge tea cup shards and chunks of sidewalk cement. In “*Patchwork*, **SITE SECTION, THANK YOU GRANDMA**” porcelain “Styrofoam” take-out containers complete with decals of fried chicken and a pineapple are bent and crushed atop black bricks and brown lacquered areas of clay. Twenty-ounce soda bottles stick out of an array of rocks and concrete that look as if they come from a construction site, in “*Seven Pack – Memorial edition, August 2014 (RIP)*,” sitting atop broken and crushed porcelain fast food boxes. Walking around the sculpture there are four soda bottles in a row. Bright yellow, green and brown glazes drip down from the top of the bottles. Michael Brown’s face is partially visible adjacent to a Sprite logo on one, while almost abstract images of the protesters in Ferguson and the Saint Louis County prosecutor Robert McCulloch announcing the decision of the Grand Jury not to indict Wilson are on the other bottles. These objects all rest on a base covered in images of cigarette butts. This material dissolution can be seen as a metaphor for political states, signifying social upheaval and revolution, as decomposition and entropy signify a transition from unity to discord, disintegration and chaos. Within these works binaries mingle: rich/poor, center/periphery, industrial/artisanal, local/global.

While there is a true contemporaneity to the works, they still resonate with the long history of assemblage art that emerged in America and Europe in the Post-World War II era, which uniquely brought together place and past in the history of contemporary art.

Irving taps into the continuation of assemblage’s proliferation in art and popular culture in recent decades as re-using and reclaiming consumer objects has permeated popular culture and craft traditions. In the late 1950s with the rise of assemblage as a term, culminating in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*, the modern city of the post-war era became its backdrop—it’s slickness and deterioration, its planned state and squalor. This was especially true in Europe. As historical cities often lay in literal ruins, artists like Arman, César and Wolf Vostell responded to living in post-war European cities. Assemblage art utilized the ephemeral and discarded in a way that was disruptive and transgressive, engaging with narratives of social and political dissent. Assemblage provided a counter to the modernist painting so ubiquitous in the era. For example, Ed Kienholz, the American ex-pat living in West Berlin, created assemblages that represented a polemic on wealth inequality, war and social injustice. Like Irving, Kienholz showed how vectors of place and materiality are inexorably political.

This connection between the socio-political and the material emerges in part through the work's depictions of "everydayness" that exposes the agency of daily life. As Henri Lefebvre discussed in his seminal work *Critique of Everyday Life*, daily life is not merely trivial and routine. Instead, Lefebvre identified it as a source of renewal and human enrichment that held revolutionary potential.² For Lefebvre, daily life is a space that is inherently tied to political complexities and external forces.² Irving's inclusion of representations of the remnants of daily life can be viewed as indexical of collective memory or as serving an imagined community. As the acclaimed geographer Doreen Massey reminds us, we must be mindful of the politics of location and not forget to politicize the spatial.³ Irving's work draws attention to the fact that while there is much discussion of the gentrification of American cities with soaring rents and fancy coffee shops, areas not far away from such intense development are still swamped by physical and social insecurity: marginalized communities not only suffer from desolation, racial segregation and social deprivation, but they are also treated as enemies of the state.

In addition to addressing urban, socio-political and spatial concerns, Irving deftly brings in the more broadly historical through the cultural and social history of porcelain. In the sculptural forms Irving has embedded pieces of porcelain that resemble potsherds, or remnants found at archeological sites, alluding to the history of porcelain itself. Originating in China, proto-porcelain wares were produced as early as the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), while true hard-paste porcelain was made in China in the 9th century. With the expansion of trade routes in the 15th and 16th centuries, blue and white porcelain entered the global market, quickly becoming an important Chinese export.

In the 1700's with newly fashionable beverages such as tea and coffee becoming the rage, people were in need of lightweight vessels that retained warmth and didn't adulterate the taste of the beverage. Porcelain became the vessel of choice and ubiquitous in middle and upper class homes across Europe and its expansive colonial territories, acquiring many of the associations that have followed the material into the modern world.

In 1710 the Meissen manufactory opened in Dresden, the seat of Saxony. It was the first major European producer of hard-paste white porcelain that approximated the popular Chinese version. It became a trendsetter in design in the 18th century and continues to be held up as one of the most important European historical manufacturers. While porcelain from the famous Meissen, or the French producer Sevres, continues to remain highly sought after, cheaply produced porcelain became ubiquitous and porcelain lost much of its indication of high society and its elusive appeal.

Irving, by embedding Meissen's iconic blue and white flowers into the melted and compressed sculptural forms, erodes distinctions between "high" and "low" culture and opens interpretation into the larger social and political issues present in the history of material culture. The floral patterns designed by Meissen manufacturing were themselves an indication of the globalization of the porcelain trade. Meissen designs began as copies from Chinese porcelain, while those designs

² Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, (New York: Verso, 1994). See also Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 66.

³ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 121.

continue, as porcelain items became prolific across Europe, Meissen added specifically European designs to their repertoire, Europeanizing the now normalized Chinese blue and white motif.

In addition to the “Orientalizing” motifs in porcelain, 18th-century porcelain designs were often explicit in their references to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Black African figures, predominantly portrayed as servants, were often used in Meissen porcelain from sugar bowls to figurines, as the nature of Blackness was fetishized in the 18th century as a perceived extreme alterity to European identity.⁴ These representations of Black figures in European porcelain indexed the complex, contradictory and problematic understanding of race being negotiated at the time, one that perpetuated African slavery well into the 19th century. These objects were not simply benign or frivolous but were evidence of a culture that marginalized and dominated ethnic groups in pursuit of grand economic gain. While Irving’s sculptures don’t illustrate these Meissen designs explicitly, they utilize a juxtaposition of recognizable signs and abstraction to allow for a nuanced reading that incorporates the contested history of the medium.

Irving’s placement of broken and melted porcelain alongside cement and gravel creates a juxtaposition of recognizable signs and abstract forms--connecting the history of material culture with how objects indicate lived experience. Through his manipulation of text on the porcelain surface Irving’s sculptures and prints also astutely question the relationship of abstraction to language, politics and identity. The powerful words and phrases like “I am Mike,” “Killing Daily, Daily Killing,” and “ARSON RIOTING ERUPT,” drawn from the critical social and political moment that came out of Ferguson, Missouri, emerge as a repeated poetics, paired with a systematic accumulation of recognizable forms that materialize from otherwise abstract areas of clay, luster, and glazes. By tearing fragments of words and images out of their context, Irving’s works necessitate the viewer to put the pieces back together.

Irving has offered us a body of work that allows for a new way of examining the present as well as the past, both our current political moment and the social and political history that presaged it. The works in this exhibition are tied up with historical and contemporary practices of how we live together in the world, how we understand what is left behind—the detritus of global capitalism and its impact on local communities and on everyday life. The end product proffers a lyrical and elegiac sense of both belonging and loss.

— Hannah Klemm, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Written on the occasion of Kahlil Robert Irving’s 2017 exhibition at Callicoon Fine Arts.

⁴ See, Adrienne L. Childs, “Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain,” in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan, eds., (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 159-177.