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History and Its Marks: Kahlil Robert Irving's *Streets:Chains:Cocktails* by Amelia Rina

Smashing high and low.



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Streets:Chains:Cocktails*, installation view. Photography Sean Fader. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

Porcelain, like culture, emerges from a series of transformations. Different complementary and contrasting elements combine with changing environments to produce something that is wholly different from its original state, yet both versions are forever connected. Kahlil Robert Irving's porcelain sculptures blend the medium's lineage with Irving's inherited cultural history to reveal a contradiction of beauty, oppression, value, and waste.

In *Streets:Chains:Cocktails* at Callicoon Fine Arts, twenty-five-year-old Irving presents sculptures, monoprints, and a wall piece that demonstrate the artist's mastery of his materials and deep consideration of the works' broader cultural implications. The sculptures, made entirely of clay in various states—porcelain, stoneware, earthenware brick—and decorated with custom decals, look like they have been digested by an enormous citational gut. Styrofoam food containers



Kahlil Robert Irving, *City—County*, 2017. Glazed and unglazed porcelain and stoneware, gravel, glass, red earthenware brick, vintage and personally constructed decals, and black, blue, silver luster. 14 1/2 x 15 x 14 1/12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photography by Sean Fader.

and soda bottles smush together with chunks, blobs, and coils of clay. Newspaper headlines and clippings are collaged on shiny porcelain to create a chilling recount of recent and often deadly violence toward people of color. Phrases like “I am Mike,” “Killing Daily, Daily Killing” and “NO CHARGES FOR WILSON” recall the 2014 fatal shooting of African American teenager Michael Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, and the subsequent protests that were met with a militarized police response.

The clash of urban and rural, of “high” and “low” society, emanate from Irving’s sedimentary blocks of cultural artifacts. Embedded within the modern detritus, fragments of classic European porcelain motifs peak through. The iconic blue and white flowers popularized by Meissen—which opened in 1710 in Dresden as the first major European producer of hard-paste white porcelain that resembled the well-established Chinese versions—stands as a reminder of Western fetishization of “exotic” culture and the eighteenth-century image of Blackness. Inspired by conceptions of racial hierarchies, Meissen often included images and figurines of Africans, typically portrayed as servants. “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,” writes Hannah Klemm, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Saint Louis Art Museum, in her compelling exhibition [essay](#).

Irving demonstrates his understanding of his chosen material’s history while simultaneously challenging the assumed systems of value it represents. Irving titles his twelve sculptures, each roughly the size of a breadbox and sitting on either tables or pedestals, with enigmatic phrases that range from nostalgic to ominous abstractions. *Patchwork, SITE SECTION, THANK YOU GRANDMA*, 2017, features decals of kitschy pineapples and cherubs, easily associated with the treasures of an older generation. In *Street Section—After Death (Layered Mass Never Forgotten)*, 2017, layered newspaper clippings plaster two halved porcelain cylinders buried on opposite ends of a chaotic mass of rough, smooth, and shattered clay, illuminated in some parts with glistening metallic luster. On top of the newspaper images is a chain-link fence graphic, which repeats on one wall bisecting the gallery space, facing the gallery’s entrance. The monotonous



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Seven Pack—Memorial Edition, August 2014 (RIP)*, 2017. Glazed and unglazed porcelain and stoneware, blue slip, gravel, glass, personally constructed decals, and, black, blue, gold, silver luster. 15 x 14 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photography by Brea McAnally.



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Compact Mass—News; Nation Holds Breath for Death (Pride and Protest)—No Charges for Wilson*, 2017. Glazed and unglazed porcelain and stoneware, gravel, porcelain enamel, vintage and personally constructed decals, and blue, gold, silver luster. 16 1/2 x 8 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York. Photography by Sean Fader.

graphic produces an almost nauseating Op art effect and references the barriers commonly found in lower-income neighborhoods.

Waste and excess used to be markers of wealth and power. Now, with more inexpensive (and typically low-quality) products flooding urban and rural homes alike, wealth and power express themselves through another metric: visibility. The less wealth or power one has, the more waste one sees. Trash often fills the streets of lower-income neighborhoods while wealthy suburbs and urban areas enjoy a well-maintained environment. Irving collects vestiges from all levels of society—fine porcelain, cigarette butts, lotto tickets, soda bottles—and transforms them into an image of global capitalism, exploitation, and willful blindness. For decades people have ignored trash amassing in cities and nature just as people have ignored the social injustices on which modern society was built. Recently, however, we have begun to realize the devastating impact of destroying entire ecosystems and rendering invisible the oppression of a large percentage of the human population. Like an ignored kidney stone, these accumulations of social apathy will only become increasingly painful to expel. *Streets:Chains:Cocktails* offers a potent reminder of the need for radical change.

Streets:Chains:Cocktails is on view at Callicoon Fine Arts in New York City until October 29.

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