

Ebony, David. *Kahlil Robert Irving, New York, at Callicoon Fine Arts, Art in America, December 4, 2017, print.*

Art in America

REVIEWS DEC. 04, 2017

Kahlil Robert Irving

NEW YORK,
at Callicoon Fine Arts

by [David Ebony](#)



Kahlil Robert Irving: *Bricks, Concrete, Tubes (Mass Memorial)*, 2017, glazed and unglazed porcelain and stoneware, gravel, red earthenware brick, personally constructed decals, and blue, silver, and gold luster, 12 by 17 by 15 inches; at Callicoon Fine Arts.

Thematically poignant and technically dazzling, the eleven sculptures shown in Kahlil Robert Irving's first New York solo exhibition, "Streets: Chains: Cocktails," appear to be blocky assemblages of urban detritus—lyrical junk sculptures that bring to mind works by Arman, César, John Chamberlain, Noah Purifoy, and John Outterbridge. On closer inspection, however, the works prove to be ceramic objects—porcelain and stoneware—with embedded glass and stone elements. Precisely rendered soda bottles, paint cans, used fast-food containers, cigarette butts, crumpled newspaper pages, and other scraps of trash and gritty refuse appear mashed together with dirt and mortar in crude slabs or cubic shapes, as if the amalgamations had just emerged from a garbage compactor. Vinyl wallpaper designed by the artist to resemble a chain-link fence covered a partition in the gallery, the simple pattern establishing the urban context that the sculptures also evoke. On another wall hung *Street Block: Lost/Found/Chance* (all works 2017), a large, framed collograph in which impressions of flattened cans and other containers appear in white against a black field speckled with white dots. A selection of found objects, including a hair-braid extension, a piece of ribbon, and two playing cards, collaged onto the surface echoes the imagery in the sculptures and underscores the interplay of raw materiality and convincing illusionism that seems central to Irving's practice.

With the sculptures, Irving achieves a consistent and often astonishing level of virtuosity. *Seven Pack—Memorial Edition, August, 2014 (RIP)*, for instance, includes a row of Sprite soda bottles realized in porcelain and embedded in a ceramic quagmire: a seemingly impossible feat of craftsmanship. Unlike the realistic ceramic versions of everyday objects that one finds in kitsch galleries and gift shops, however, Irving's efforts are not merely in the service of technical bravado or novel effects. His works tell engaging stories and address important political issues.

The twenty-five-year-old San Diego-born, St. Louis-based artist focuses on issues related to the African-American community. Many works refer specifically to the turmoil surrounding the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, the eighteen-year-old black man killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri, and the civil upheaval that occurred in its aftermath. The theme is clearly evident in sculptures such as *Bricks, Concrete, Tubes (Mass Memorial)*, which features a headline torn from a newspaper (rendered in glaze on porcelain) that reads, NO CHARGES FOR WILSON. Another part of the piece bears a graffiti scrawl in blue, I AM MIKE, proclaimed, certainly, in solidarity with the victim. Touches of blood red near the base of the piece suggest the violence of Brown's death. Serving, like nearly all the works here, as an angry protest against unwarranted police aggression, the sculpture is also a solemn and moving tribute to Brown.