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From the Ragged to the Glazed, the Distilled to the Distressed: A Survey of Ceramics in LA

by George Melrod

"Melting Point: Movements in Contemporary Clay" at the Craft & Folk Art Museum (CAFAM)

January 28 – May 6, 2018

2814 Wilshire Boulevard, between Stanley and Curson Avenues

Los Angeles, cafam.org



Installation shot of the exhibition under review showing Cheryl Ann Thomas, *Spring*, colored porcelain, 2015, left, and Kahlil Robert Irving, *Protest: 1883 / United States vs. Harris*, glazed stoneware, wood, 2018

That old dog, clay, seems to be pulling off an impressive array of surprising new tricks. While ceramics remains among the most venerable – and stubbornly tactile – of mediums, that doesn't mean that it has been resistant to the conceptual upheavals within the ceramics world of recent decades. If anything, this ambitious survey exhibition suggests, the current moment seems to be a highly fruitful one for practitioners pushing the medium in all sorts of new directions, through promiscuous hybrid forms involving installation, mixed media, technology, and even time-based performance.

Intended as the first iteration of a ceramic biennial, "Melting Point" is at its best in examining the overlap between the medium's allegorical impulses and its roots in functional form. Featuring 22 artists from around the country, ranging from established figures to recent graduates, the show sprawls insouciantly across the museum's three levels, flaunting a panoply of stances, scales and sensibilities, from the ragged to the glazed, the distilled to the distressed, to whatever unlikely unions of the above.

The interrogative tone for the show was set at the opening, with a performance work by 28-year-old Armando Cortes, who laboriously dragged his own weight in raw clay several long blocks from the sidewalk in front of LACMA, finally hauling it up the museum's stairs as it scuffed the floor: literally lugging the burden of the medium's complex legacy. Titled *El Peso de La Tierra* (2017-18), the work melds references to Chris Burden's infamous ordeal-performances of the 1970s and the medium's proletarian roots, through the muscular immediacy of manual labor. The show's curators identified a trio of themes that link the works: "Anti-Disciplinary Approaches," "Ephemerality," and "New Sociopolitical Interpretations." But these groups were considered loosely and many works, like Cortes's performance, embraced more than one category.

Stanton Hunter's works overtly invite audience participation. In his series *Untitled Unvesselled II* (2018), he asks viewers to drip water onto vessels of unfired clay, allowing them to crumple over time. Wayne Perry courts viewer reaction through placement; setting out sagging clumps and clusters of small pots along the museum's staircase, and other peripheral spaces, interspersing white and black vessels among groups of terra cotta, he employs his notably imperfect vessels as a loose form of social allegory. The dramatic works of Cheryl Ann Thomas also revel in their formal imperfection; made by firing large, thin columns of clay to the point of collapse, and evoking giant swathes of gauze, they derive poignant form and purpose from their surrender to gravity.

Emphatically allowing his process to mold his forms, Walter McConnell, a professor at Alfred University and one of the show's elder statesmen, presented a quixotic meditation on nature and culture. Set off by the plastic curtain enclosing it, his pillar of flowery forms, called *A Florid Heap* (2018), remains perpetually moist and unfinished, in a self-contained terrarium of sorts. To anyone still expecting ceramics to be prim and neatly allusive, McConnell offers a sharp theatrical rebuke. The show does include its share of LA-



Walter McConnell, *A Florid Heap*, moist clay in plastic enclosure, polystyrene, plywood, halogen lamp, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Cross Mackenzie Gallery, Washington D.C.

based ceramic hotshots. Among them: Matt Wedel, with his monumental rocklike desert blooms; Julia Haft-Candell, whose twisty infinity forms interweave references to sketches, knots and bows; and Kristen Morigin, whose remarkable *trompe l'oeil* tableaux of paint cans and ragged toys and tattered old paperbacks and record albums conjure the detritus of family attics or basements, the flotsam and jetsam of childhood memory.

Patsy Cox, who also curated this year's Scripps Ceramic Annual, merges technological and formal innovation. Her concoctions of tiny top-like shapes, multiplied via 3-D printing, suggest at once loopy baskets of plastic toy flowers, blow-ups of cellular organisms, and fractal abstractions. In terms of sheer diversity of surface and technique, the show offers a startling range, from the giddily baroque fixtures of Anthony Sonnenberg to the vividly colorful, oozily distressed cups of Brian Rochefort. Despite their roots in traditional functional forms, the subversive intent of these works is intoxicating—though you surely wouldn't want to drink from them.

The more banal implications of ceramic as a vehicle for mass-market serving ware or tchotchkes are addressed adroitly through the works of Jonathan Mess, who offered cross-sections of found ceramics, like geological samples; and Emily Sudd, whose bisected vases were stuffed with diverse ceramic gleanings and then fired to their melting points. Adding hints of narrative to the mix, Susannah Biondo-Gemmell's halved porcelain figures in chunks of lava, laid carefully on their sides, oscillated between blobby hollow abstractions and elegiac reliquaries.



Kristen Morigin, *Heart & Soul or the Garden of Delights*, unfired clay, wood, chair, metal can, paint, ink, graphite, crayon, 2015. Courtesy of the artist

Ling Chun abstractly invokes the subject of gender in teasingly organic wall reliefs cheerfully adorned with spattered pastel colors, enigmatic orifices and plaits of colored hair. The diminutive works of Jennifer Ling Datchuk, meanwhile, from her *Making Women* series, wryly incorporate tiny wigs of real human hair in varied hues into dainty porcelain discs suggesting hand-wrought make-up brushes, cookies, wafers or nipples—willfully feminine confections for consumption.

Jami Porter Lara's stately, black-glazed jugs of pit-fired foraged clay are particularly notable in the way they conjure a spectrum of unexpected references, from a uterus to a pair of fists clutching a pipe, to, what exactly: an alien vacuum cleaner? Claiming a space between the sacred and the mundane, she melds the banality of soda bottles with the solemnity of funeral urns, all the while flaunting prominent screwhead nozzles. Her works project sculptural stature without ever minimizing their identity as vessels.



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, *Making Women* (series), *Wild Child*, 2014-2017. Porcelain, human hair. Courtesy of the artist.

The allegorical possibilities of ceramic were perhaps most potently interpreted by Saint Louis-based artist Kahlil Robert Irving, whose installation, titled *Protest: 1883 / United States vs. Harris (Part of the series Undocumented)* (2018), formed the centerpiece of the museum's third floor. At once so subtle it could be breezed over, and physically expansive, at five by five by 12 feet, the work offered an array of hundreds of black glazed stoneware vessels of diverse shapes, set out on a raised wooden platform at roughly eye level where they can't all be taken in at once. (The scaffold brings its own allusions, from viewing platform to gallows). I took the work to be a prose poem to blackness and a striking allegory of individuality and collectivity. Unpretentious in its language and almost hiding in plain sight, Irving's silent, querying multitude proves haunting. At once traditional and provocative, nuanced and declarative, it attests to the durability of ceramics as a vehicle for contemporary sociopolitical commentary, even while parading its all-too eloquent fragility.