

RIOT MATERIAL

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Melting Point: Movements in Contemporary Clay

MAY 4, 2018 BY CHRISTOPHER MICHNO — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Figuratively shouldering the weight of the world in his performance *El Peso de la Tierra* (2017 – 2018), Armando Cortes dragged a piece of clay equal to his own weight a quarter of a mile along Wilshire Boulevard, from Chris Burden's *Urban Light* installation to the Craft and Folk Art Museum, during the opening this January of the CAFAM's inaugural clay biennial, "Melting Point: Movements in Contemporary Clay." Saddled with a hand-carved wooden yoke—an object that symbolically confers the role of beast of burden—in order to tow the pyramid-shaped black clay mass, the artist posited this gesture as an expansive reference to divisions of labor aligned with immigration status and cultural identity, and as an implication of systemic racism.

El Peso de la Tierra foregrounds one of the exhibition's major themes—sociopolitical meaning embedded in emerging works in clay—and introduces a significant underlying motif present in several of the exhibition's other works: the conflation of clay and the human figure. The relationship between earth and the body, made explicit in *El Peso* by the equivalent weights of Cortes' body and the clay block, finds resonance with Kahlil Robert Irving's *Protest: 1883 / United States vs. Harris* (2018), which also uses clay as a metaphorical stand-in for the human form. Though this relationship has long been established in the language used to describe ceramic vessels, which adopts terms such as belly, neck and lip, Cortes and others use it for social and political critique. Irving's *Protest: 1883*, a mass of black glazed stoneware that the St. Louis-based artist created following the Ferguson, Missouri uprising, similarly addresses systemic injustices. Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *Making Women* (2014 – 2017), a series of finely made porcelain and human hair powder puffs that reference the ritual of "making up" one's face, addresses the nexus of personal identity, race, femininity.

Yet Cortes' *Peso* expresses another aspect of the figure/clay relationship. The clay residue that streaked the sidewalks and the two flights of stairs to the third floor gallery of CAFAM, where Cortes removed the yoke, hung it on the wall and heaved the remaining clay onto a pedestal, speaks to impermanence. Walter McConnell's *A Florid Heap* (2018), a massive mound of unfired wet clay shaped into floral and fungal forms and sealed in plastic sheeting, is a closed system that begins—and ends—as a protean lump of clay. McConnell's process involves reusing clay from his installations in a continuous cycle.



Kahlil Robert Irving, *Protest: 1883 / United States vs. Harris*



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, *Making Women (series) – Wild Child*

Stanton Hunter's *Untitled Unvesseled II* (2018), consisting of a series of unfired vessels placed on top of fired platters filled with water, also engages with the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Audiences are encouraged to use water droppers to participate in the collapsing of the unfired vessels. And on CAFAM's third floor gallery, Cheryl Ann Thomas' hand-rolled, stacked coils, which deform and collapse into themselves when fired, exquisitely speak to chance, the frailty and imperfections of the human form, and reinforce the metaphoric link between the body and clay.

Curators Holly Jerger and Andres Payan organized the exhibition around three main themes: anti-disciplinary practices in contemporary clay that bypass traditional approaches to form and refinement, and instead engage in

process-oriented work that results in experimentation and "amorphous or imperfect forms"; ephemerality, as seen in objects made from moist, unfired clay; and a sociopolitical focus, in which artists examine ceramic objects as indicators of class and identity, and engage in critique. There are plenty of instances where an artist's work straddles "Melting Point's" categories, and this is one of strengths of the exhibition—it initiates an open-ended discourse on where clay is heading.

Trevor King's *Jub*, *Yellow Bowl*, *Bowl (Moonset after Noguchi)* and *U* (all 2017) are examples of an artist revisiting ceramic objects as indices of class and wealth, and they additionally point to questions of identity and art's value as a commodity. King was raised in a family of Pennsylvania steel workers, a stereotypically masculine vocation, and his grandfather was dubious of his ability to make a living as an artist. King's sculptures here are based on drawings his grandfather made after objects that were appraised for large sums of money on the television hit *Antiques Roadshow*. The drawings by his grandfather are exhibited alongside King's sculptures, and together they indicate an odd game of telephone. The absent television episodes and the actual objects represented here in reproduction remain traces of the market's subjectivity, and King's sculptures reflect the uncertainty and probing of trying to find a form.

King's work is juxtaposed with an installation of Kristen Morgin's *Spongebob Squarepants* (2016), *I Heart Rainbows* (2010), and *Heart & Soul or the Garden of Delights* (2015). Morgin's work also questions art's market value, in that she views her work as "painted dirt," which has no intrinsic value, yet it is also a deep dive into a set of personal memories, nostalgia and Americana. There is an interesting play between the trompe l'oeil of Morgin's sculptures and the amorphousness found in King's.



Ling Chun, *LOAF*

Both King's and Anthony Sonnenberg's sculptures find some resonance in Joel Otterson's (to clarify, Otterson's work is not exhibited in "Melting Point") wunderkammer-like collections of American pottery. Sonnenberg's sculptures, assemblages of a range of objects—figurines, flowers, fabric—dipped in liquid clay and fired and glazed, convey an opulent gorgeousness that belies their source materials.

In regularly focusing on developments in contemporary clay, CAFAM's biennial is a welcome addition to exhibitions and institutions in the Los Angeles area that already do so: the Scripps Ceramic Annual, which recently completed its 74th exhibition, and the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) in Pomona.



Anthony Sonnenberg *Vase (My Kind of Witches Cauldron)*



Cheryl Ann Thomas *Spring*

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