Clay: Traditions in Shards

Curated by Dale Fisher, Curator of Education
University of Iowa Museum of Art

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For much of the history of ceramics, the primary demand of the medium was functional ware that could be classified as pottery. While sculptural forms made of clay were plentiful, the works were classified as sculpture and not ceramic art, as it is currently defined. Once industrialization made mass production of functional ware possible and common, ceramic artists were free to explore the potential of the medium. This created a dialogue regarding the categorization of craft versus fine art; ceramic artists were able to choose a more traditional route and produce ceramic forms for everyday use or stretch the possibilities of clay as a media. Ranging from hand-built and wheel-thrown functional forms that work in concert with the considerations of painting and sculpture, the works in Clay: Traditions in Shards demonstrate a wide variety of forms and techniques by artists who happened to work in the ceramic media. As these aren’t mutually-exclusive categories by any means, ceramic artists move with ease throughout the broad range of the traditional, sculptural, and painterly aspects afforded by the materials and methods at hand.

Clay: Traditions in Shards spans two and a half millennia, three continents, three ancient cultures, and includes the works of over two dozen contemporary artists. The works are not organized chronologically or by geographic locations. The thematic layout of the exhibition considers how each work is categorized according to the degree where it arguably fits along traditional, sculptural or painterly objectives of the artist and is coded by primary colors noted on the left side of each label.

In his body of work, Graham Marks sculpts forms that suggest a monumentality and a broad range of physical characteristics; the works that welcome the guest to the exhibition have internal architectonic references as well as minimalist and weathered exterior surfaces.

Upholding the characteristic craftsmanship and the worldwide reputation of the University of Iowa Ceramics Program, the ceramic works of Benj Upchurch follow in the tradition of wood-fired ceramics established by his academic and aesthetic mentors, Charles “Chuck” Hindes, Bunny McBride, and Gerry Eskin. Upchurch
explores the inherent qualities of clay and other raw materials as they relate to natural forces; traditional ceramic forms—lidded vessels, plates, cups, bowls, tea pots—become vehicles for inquiry into processes such as weathering and erosion. The surface of his forms are deceptively rich in color and textural effects, and as powerfully evocative as the surface of the many varied geologic and organic structures found on and of the earth.

A yunomi is a traditional Japanese tea cup form, historically wood-fired in an anagama (or climbing) kiln. University of Iowa alumnus Bede Clarke and Chris Gusto alter the raw clay form in individual stylistic ways, yet the ash from the wood used to fire the works result in similar surfaces of infinite subtleties. Kurt Weiser uses the surface of the yunomi as a canvas for cobalt and white compositions based on traditional sixteenth-century Dutch Delftware.

Peter Voulkos almost single-handedly changed the direction of contemporary American ceramics in the late 1950s. Voulkos freed clay from its traditional, historical, and technical limitations by expanding the aesthetic possibilities to include gesture and sculpturally expressive forms. The artist’s influences included Zen philosophy, Asian ceramics, American jazz, Beat culture, and Abstract Expressionist painting. As Voulkos said, “I was terribly impressed with Jackson Pollock and with the mythical aspect of breaking through the old traditions of art.” Snowmoss is classic Peter Voulkos; the work is open at the top and has the vessel as a frame of reference; the artist’s intent was a sculptural, not functional, form. Although clearly a bottle form at the most basic level, his clay forms were vigorously thrown, cut, altered, and stacked. The asymmetrical piece, the fissures and cracks, the gestural strokes of the mark-making, and the markings that occurred during the firing process serve to disrupt the viewer’s concept of preconceived notions of a vessel, and to evoke the forces of improvisation and spontaneity in the creative process. Like a sketch in clay, a jazz improvisation, or a Beat poet’s verbal rhythm, this work is a visual record and metaphor of the primacy of the experience in the art-making process.

Dan Anderson infuses sushi trays with a pop culture sensibility, adding a humorous acknowledgment of their historical and cultural origins.

In Jason Garcia’s Tewa Tales of Suspense series, the pervasive idea of the “westward movement” and “melting pot” paradigm is acknowledged as an uneasy accommodation, rather than a social order and linear chronology without conflict. Using traditional media, Garcia gives a painterly voice to his Tewa ancestral history and draws upon the influence of popular culture. Clay tiles, with their indigenous and colonial associations, are regarded as canvases on which Garcia tells the story of how the Tewa peoples shared lives, lands, and history with the Spanish by confronting the cultural hegemony that led to expansionism and resistance by the Tewa.

While first appearing as sculpture on an intimate scale, Raymond Elogza’s work evokes a sense of the industrial society in decline. The figurative and functional works of Viola Frey, Jack Earl, Rudy Autio, and Richard Notkin are a variety of lidded vessels in the ceramic tradition. Frey’s tea pot emphasizes a brightly-hued absurdity, while Notkin’s shows the co-existence of nature and urban realities in a detailed, mannered manner. Rudy Autio’s lidded vessel is an homage to Henri Matisse, using the irregularities in form to provide contour and volume to his sensual female figure. Sculptural and functional in equal measures, the “Colima Dog” served as an effigy figure as well as a piece of functional pottery in Pre-Columbian funerary practices. Bill Stewart’s Duck Tank is subversively whimsical, combining a child-like imagination with a scathing anti-war commentary.

Robert Arneson is perhaps best known as the most important ceramic sculptor in the field. He mixed a sense of humor and a strong, political point of view in his body of work. Minuteman is Arneson’s commentary on Ronald Reagan’s militaristic agenda during his presidential administration. Arneson gives a critical assessment of the enormous amounts of money being spent on military hardware at the expense of other social imperatives and obligations. He cleverly presents this message in patriotic symbols; the cross is reminiscent of the purity of the white cross grave markers in Arlington National Cemetery, but the burned appearance proclaims the very real consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. The title of the work refers to the soldiers during the Revolutionary War, but it was also the name of an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (which is represented on the cruciform). The cross has implications derived from Christianity regarding martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and the severed head on the cross recounts a very brutal tradition used to intimidate and demoralize the enemy throughout history and across cultures. A brief side note: Arneson’s studio was covered in mirrors and he often modeled for self-portraits, casting himself in the role of subject in his commentaries. While this work is actually a self-portrait, it is meant to stand for “every man” and the probable role of humankind as carnage created by Minuteman missiles or other nuclear armaments.

Michael Lucero appropriates the pose of the Pre-Columbian figure (seated female figure with chin on knee) and emphasizes the overlay and interplay of cultures, from the indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere through the Spanish and Latino influences to contemporary Californian aesthetics and fashion. No longer limited by the demands of functionality, many ceramic artists have used plate or platter forms as a painterly surface. Marc Chagall’s plate shares the same bright colors and imagery as his better-known masterworks. David Shanner and Peter Voulkos use the wood-fire aesthetic to different ends: Shanner’s work has more a sculptural quality with the expressive contours, while the Voulkos plate has a more traditional form, but is violently disrupted with forceful inclusions on a placid surface. Bede Clarke works in an introspective visual language inspired by the Sufi poets and mystics. Ron Myers creates recognizable imagery out of a limited range of colors and few calligraphic brushstrokes. The plates of Suzanne Stephenson are squarely in the realm of the “action painters” of the Abstract Expressionist Movement, yet her titles suggest a subject matter that may be somewhat visible or wholly intuitive to the artist. Jin Kaneko’s platter forms share the same characteristics of painting that his large-scale sculptures do, but on a two-dimensional form.

Jun Kaneko creates epic three-dimensional ceramic works that have a unique Eastern and Western sensibility. From his Japanese background, Kaneko draws on Shinto philosophy and it is this realm that his Eastern influences manifest themselves. Kaneko refers to a “spiritual scale” that works of art possess. This scale is not tied to form or function, but based on the idea that scale is relational interaction occurring between that work and the viewer. The Shinto concept of ma translates as spirit in English and Kaneko has emphasized an intuitive “attachment through space;” the interactive ma defines the relationship of the viewer to the work of art, as well as the space around a work and the integration of form and surface decoration. A kind of three-dimensional “canvas” in the round made out of clay, the dango form is simple (dango is the Japanese word for dumpling) and resembles the lingam of the Buddhist and Hindu religions. The drawing on and painterly handling of the surface is derived from Western non-objective painting. The static, monolithic form and the active surface reconciles two opposing aesthetics, also an Eastern philosophical concept.

Pablo Picasso is the quintessential modern artist and a master of many media. Primarily known as a painter whose body of work spans three-quarters of the twentieth century, Picasso moved easily between art styles and forms. From Expressionism to Cubism, on through Symbolism and Surrealism, he often creates recognizable imagery out of a limited range of colors and few calligraphic brushstrokes. The plates of Suzanne Stephenson are squarely in the realm of the “action painters” of the Abstract Expressionist Movement, yet her titles suggest a subject matter that may be somewhat visible or wholly intuitive to the artist. Jin Kaneko’s platter forms share the same characteristics of painting that his large-scale sculptures do, but on a two-dimensional form.

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combined aspects of each of these historical styles into something uniquely his own. Picasso’s work looks like that of no other artist...unless that was his intention. The Picasso vessel was done in the postwar period, when Picasso was in the south of France. He was in the autumn of his life and living under less turbulent circumstances than he had during the first half of the century; although always inventive, his work from this period reflects a playful lightheartedness that much of his earlier work lacked. It was during this period that Picasso worked with local craftsmen and ceramic studios on a series of works, ranging from functional forms to altered forms that emphasized their sculptural qualities. In these ceramic works, Picasso’s intent as a painter takes precedence, as it does on this vessel.

The ancient, traditional work of the Micali Painter is notable for many reasons, and perhaps the most important of these is the fact that we know who made the piece; this is rare when it comes to ancient ceramic works and is of great significance. The fact that it is an Etruscan copy of Greek aesthetic styles of form and surface decoration is also important. The Greeks were deemed the masters of the ceramic form in the classical world and even provided the medium with its name; ceramic, singular or plural, is derived from the Greek word *kerameikos*, and the Greeks were respected and emulated by their trading partners throughout the Mediterranean world. The Greeks were also among the first “production potters;” locations and studios produced standardized forms of measured scale, so that the ceramic works could be used for commercial trading and economic purposes. The work by the Micali Painter is a single-handled pitcher with a trefoil spout; this form is known as an *oinochoe*. In these workshops, there was a division of labor: the makers of the works were anonymous, while the artists who supplied the surface decoration, “the painters,” received credit as the artist of the work. On occasion, archaeologists and art historians are able to identify the personal stylistic characteristics of the artist, as with the Micali Painter. While the biographical information of the Micali Painter is unknown, his known body of work has been identified as consisting of 181 to 200 existing works.

Kurt Weiser’s *Nightshade* is a work of powerful indirect implications. The otherworldly landscape suggests mysterious or long-lost places. Weiser originally wanted to be a painter, but became fascinated by the art of making ceramics. Continuing to paint, the two media merged into his classic style. Starting with porcelain form, which he may or may not alter, Weiser creates a painting on the surface using traditional china paints. The oil-based media can take Weiser up to two weeks to apply, without including the intermittent firing time needed to complete the work. The imagery of his work makes trying to impose narratives impossible, but this is intentional on Weiser’s part; he says “it just happens when you have imagery. I try not to be too clear about it because it gets boring, like a sermon.” Equally influenced by Asian and European porcelain, the Cubist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist movements, botanical illustrations, and the works of John James Audubon, the traditional and contemporary merge into an intriguing new visual experience. The simple concept of the human figure placed in a lush ecosystem becomes a source of engagement and reflection as Weiser asks the viewer to build a story that is lyrical, classical, and timeless.