MEDIUM AS METAPHOR

2011–2012 “CLAY IN CULTURE” EXHIBITION SERIES

EXHIBITIONS

Molly Hatch, October 20 – November 17, 2011
Michael Fujita, January 19 – February 16, 2012
David S. East, March 1 – March 29, 2012
Julia Haft-Candell & Benjamin DeMott, April 19 – May 17, 2012
Hope Rovelto, July 12 – August 9, 2012
Peter Gourfain, September 6 – October 4, 2012
Linda Sormin, October 26 – November 21, 2012

JANE HARTSOOK GALLERY AT GREENWICH HOUSE POTTERY
INTRODUCTION

The 2011-2012 “Clay in Culture” exhibition series had an exceptional and divergent lineup of artists—Molly Hatch, Michael Fujita, David S. East, Julia Haft-Candell, Benjamin Demott, Hope Rovelto, Peter Gourfain, Linda Sormin—sampling the wide-ranging facility of the ceramic sphere. Marking its 41st year presenting and promoting ceramics in New York City, today’s series examines the scope of material possibility rather than championing any methodology or artistic canon.

Four decades ago, then Pottery Director Jane Hartsook exhibited work of the likes of Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, two artists, though commonplace today, who were making works that offset preconceived ideas of ceramics. The artists in this series are making work that is, at times, equally offsetting to a field that has only recently subsumed the expressionist aesthetic and which remains apprehensive towards aspects of these contemporary artists’ works and ideas.

This series maintains the Jane Hartsook Gallery’s mission to bring to the artworld the diversity and complexity of ceramic practice while supporting emerging and underrepresented artists. With the exception of Peter Gourfain, who has shown in the Jane Hartsook Gallery before, these were the artist’s New York City solo exhibition debuts.

Maika Pollack, Art Critic for the New York Observer, has written a rather accurate outsider perspective of the works and artists in this series. Pollack’s essay, “Through This Field,” gets its title from the work of David East, and is the origin of the title for this catalogue “Medium as Metaphor,” a telling story of the nature and diversity of the wide-ranging aspect of ceramic practice. Particularly insightful is her commingling of these exhibitions along-side what she sees within the artworld.

Greenwich House Pottery’s unique history encompasses the evolution of American ceramics. Its earliest endeavor as a craft program in a Greenwich Village settlement house, during which time its mission was social welfare, then quickly became a hub of the post-war studio crafts movement. Today, with its diverse program of classes, workshops, lectures and exhibitions serving hundreds of students and tens of thousands of visitors each year, it is New York City’s center for ceramics.

Greenwich House Pottery would like to extend its appreciation to its members, the exhibiting artists and especially to the support from the Windgate Charitable Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, and from our parent organization, Greenwich House Inc. Without whom these exhibitions would not have been possible.

— Adam Welch, Director
THROUGH THIS FIELD

A series of solo and two-person exhibitions by eight emerging and established artists held during 2011–12 at the Jane Hartsook Gallery at Greenwich House Pottery served as a portrait of the current state of clay in new art. Despite being linked by medium, the sequence of shows resisted the proposition that clay has a single, essential quality. The participating artists all work with clay but are not necessarily ceramic artists. In the hands of artist and curator Adam Welch, who organized the series, clay proved a malleable metaphor—sometimes fragile, sometimes durable; democratic or aristocratic; infinitesimally articulated or vast and expansive. Taken as a whole, the exhibitions exemplify four directions in contemporary ceramic practice, harnessing the material to investigate the relationships between applied and fine art, using clay as a populist symbol, exploring historical influences on contemporary practice, and utilizing material fragility to render explicit the cultural networks often seen as ancillary to the fine-art object.

Medium as Metaphor

Baltimore-based David East works with a variety of sculptural mediums (MDF, Masonite, plywood, textiles, ceramics) to create installations that call attention to the often-invisible decorative vocabulary of the material world around us. East typically investigates the tacit utopian promise of suburban architectural embellishment. At the Jane Hartsook Gallery, he explored the symbolism of urban graciousness signaled by the ornamental cornices and capitals of Greenwich House’s neo-Georgian columned architecture. Low chrome-foot tables with ovoid tops echoing Eames chairs—or their Ikea equivalents—were set with red gingham cloths and lamps. Gray clay sculptures, such as Delano’s Foot and Aldrich’s Wedge (all works 2012), placed on the floor and on the tables served as fragmentary evocations of the building columns’ own capitals. The decor was both tasteful and a bit off. Did the copper-green ceramic lamps function? Were the tables plywood? Against a wall of blue tiles (Through This Field), a video of potted ferns and flowers played on a mini-DVD monitor (Florals: Come into the Garden). We are just as sated and contained in our own pretty prisons, the installation seemed to imply, as plants in pots; clay serves as a metaphor for both the pleasures and limitations of our aesthetic confinement.

Michael Fujita’s ceramic-and-wood installations rely more on the principles of accumulation and chance than East’s ascetic and monumental sculptural interiors. In 2012’s Insulators, nine colorful red, orange, yellow, and blue resin-and-porcelain vases on a white wooden shelf call attention to the aesthetic properties of functional objects. Fujita’s zigzagging floor-to-ceiling diagonal of perforated multicolored porcelain rectangles crammed against wooden beams (Rise/Run, 2010) evokes a crowded cityscape, each tiny, drilled hole a small window. A ladderlike wooden intervention in the gallery window is echoed by a wooden structure elsewhere in the room that reconstructs that window. The works play with slight visual rhymes and scale shifts and feature clay as a mundane yet evocative material in a set of quotidian conjuring tricks both minor and successful.

The designer Molly Hatch’s references, derived from eighteenth-century French painting, drawing, and decorative-art imagery, celebrate visual pleasure. Her frequently functional works seem to double themselves, as if in drag: modern armchairs covered in white canvas on which Rococo chair patterns are printed (Baroque Chairs, 2011), forty-five painted porcelain plates hung on a wall in a large rectangle in a decorative display that echoes the rectangular, flat format of painting (Baroque Garden, 2011). The works are all surface: painted plates, furniture skins—even Hatch’s figures are silhouettes as flat as cutout paper dolls. Hatch’s work argues for the delights possible in a lack of depth and finds in porcelain a pristine and pretty surface for an amalgamation of historical imagery and contemporary function. The politics of her celebration of pre-Revolutionary style are as perverse as they are unapologetic.

Does clay have a politics? Hope Rovelto, in contrast to Hatch, links clay with mass production, pedagogy, and democratic thought. Her installation at the Hartsook Gallery featured five life-size children’s school chairs and desks made from clay (School Chairs with USA Map, 2012). In glaze on each student’s desk is a sentiment in childlike scrawl about future aspirations (for example, “When I grow up I want to be a doctor”) situated above...
CAMP RITUALS

Does clay have an essential quality as a medium? To judge from the work on view in 2011–12 at Greenwich House, the answer would have to be no. These artists are not using clay to critique clay. Their practices tend to be extroverted and metaphorical rather than introverted and literal, diverse and inclusive rather than interested in medium-specific "purity." In their work, clay is often a symbol for other things: fragility or multiculturalism, design or decoration and its function in architecture or domestic life, pedagogy and participatory political engagement. We can't even say that the shows display great commonality of technique. Some works have been fired, but many incorporate raw clay that has been molded by hand, or clay as a found commercial object; those pieces that have been fired have not necessarily been glazed.

A better question than if clay has a single quality as a medium is, Does medium matter anymore? The art historical evolution toward the postmedium is by now well established. In an essay entitled "Disco as Operating System," poet and essayist Tan Lin asks, "When exactly did the era of the medium dissolve?" and proposes the disco era, starting in 1973, as the moment the postmedium condition became a fact for the masses. To Lin, "Disco replaced the rock star with a mixing board and session musicians, transforming rock singers into a function of programmers and DJs who 'play' them." A medium might be paint or vocals, or a book or a sculpture, but its disintegration is central to Lin's assessment of contemporary life. By 2008 it is clear that however it happened, the dissolution of the medium has become his primary cultural practice, one that hinges on the idea of medium unspecificity and dissolution of an "art object," he writes.

What, then, are we left with when we link a group of shows based on their medium? It was critic Clement Greenberg who in 1965 famously proposed that Modernism's essence lay in the Kantian use of medium as a means to perform self-critique on a discipline, such that "each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects particular and exclusive to itself." Painting stripped of its "illusionism" might be comparable to clay stripped of its "functionalism." In this sense, all the artists involved in these exhibitions, with the possible exception of Hatch, make work that is beyond function, in which clay serves as a metaphor for itself. Others, contemporary artists' recent uses of clay—Stanley Ruby's exhibition of enormous, chunky pots at Metro Pictures (2008), Matt Hoyt's obsessively arranged shelves of smooth and mysterious ceramic objects at the 2012 Whitney Biennial, Alice Mackler's folksy glazed ceramic figures at James Fuentes (2013), all in New York—advance this notion of clay as an art medium whose very anti-functionalism has become an integral part of the experience of the work of art.

Perhaps we are nostalgic for the very notion of a medium. The most ambitious shows in the series—East, Gourfain, and Sormin, for example—employ a backward-looking thematic in which clay stands in for the hand-made. None of the artists have seemingly outsourced their own production (again possibly excepting Hatch, for example—employ a backward-looking thematic in which clay stands in for the hand-made). All, including our artists named above not included in the Hartford shows, could be said to be highlighting the physicality of their own works. Part of the kitchen, the dining room, the bathroom; part of a vocabulary of domesticity and design, clay is indifferent to its "liberation" through medium specificity. It calls us back to an aesthetic bound by craft, decor, nostalgia, and luxuriating in a materiality peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself.

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Statement

As a result of coming to ceramics via drawing and printmaking my use of the drawn line as representation of historical imagery becomes instrumental in understanding the work as reference to an aesthetic tradition.

For this new body of work I appropriated imagery from a found historic architectural engraving of a conceptual garden plan. Through cropping the original composition and enlarging the scale, the use of a more contemporary palette and through more developed narratives within the figures in the garden I have remixed and altered the work to bring a new experience to a familiar image.

In order to explore the relationship of painting to object in each figurative composition and to blur the line between two dimensions and three dimensions, I chose to highlight specific figurative narratives by rendering them in unglazed porcelain.

The large plate painting of the garden scene in its entirety encourages the viewer to regard functional objects as contemplative. By hanging 45 plates on the wall in the scale of a large format painting, I aim to push the current trend of hanging plates in the home one step further and claim the functional ceramic surface as a painting surface. It is in this way that I am examining the traditional perception of the role of the decorative arts in the fine art context.
MICHAEL FUJITA

1) "Rise/Run", Porcelain, Wood, Carpet Padding, Resin, 2010 *(photo page 31)
2) "Uprooted", Porcelain, Wood, Carpet Padding, Resin, 2010
3) "Panes", Resin, Glass, Wood, 2011 *(photo page 30)
4) "Panes", Resin, Glass, Wood, 2011
5) "Panes", Resin, Glass, Wood, 2011
7) "Mantle", Porcelain, Carpet Padding, Wood, 2011
9) "Insulators", Porcelain, Resin, 2011 *(photo page 29)

Statement:
Visual instances trigger personal interest and curiosity, which serves as beginnings of pieces. Through various processes, materials, and the element of time, those visual triggers take on new meaning and identity as objects. Color plays a critical role in my work transforming the assumed identity even further to a playful offering of my perception.
DAVID S. EAST

“Forehandedness”

1) Through This Field, Ceramic, Wood, DVD Player, Steel, Animation (12 minute loop), 2012
2) Delano’s Foot, Ceramic, MDF, 2012
3) Reak, Ceramic, 20”x16”x1”, 2011
4) Table, A Lamp, Ceramic, Steel, 2011 *(photo page 5)
5) Forehandedness, Ceramic, 2012 *(photo page 6)
6) Aldrich's Wedge, Ceramic, 2012
7) Floral: Come Into the Garden..., QuickTime animation (12.5 minute loop), Monitor/ DVD, 2011
8) Provisionally Registered Landscape, Ceramic, 2012 *(photo page 7)
9) Stack, Lamp and Gingham 2, MDF, Masonite, Plywood, Fabric, Steel, Ceramic, 24”x30”x15”, 2012
10) Gingham Palimpsest 1, Ceramic, 2011
11) Gingham Palimpsest 2, 2011
12) A New Feature of Unique Undertaking in which Mrs. Whitney is Interested, Ceramic, MDF, 2012

Statement
I am interested in the sources and by-products of invented utopian promise, exploring forms that reference the duality of this landscape. The suburbs have been of particular interest to me. They are a place typified by a balance between hope and fear. An invented plan, created mathematically, an idea before a phenomena; the suburbs have become a frame of mind rather than a geographic location.

My own cultural perspective necessarily frames my work, but it attempts to occupy and critique our broader prevalent systems of self-identification often looking into their cyclical patterns throughout recent history. Through architectural and design references my work has revolved around issues of urban planning, architectural ornament and design as signifiers of our cultural history. My work attempts to reveal the positive and negative by-products of our attempts to establish order. As Ebenezer Howard’s idealism gives way to white flight and Constance Spry is remade into Martha Stuart as a multinational, my work attempts to trace these cycles, juxtaposing images and forms that reference architecture and design. These combinations create systems of organization that make up the world under which we operate. The sources and images I have sought out: cheap Styrofoam knock-offs of classic decorative trim, the rosette, the mantle; become a mirror of the phenomena and peculiarities of an “American” point of view.

The approach I have taken attempts to reflect on the monumental within the mundane, and seeks to bore out the middle of modernism to see its split-level by-products. The work rotates around these axes operating as much a strategy of thinking as of making; one that takes ubiquitous, anonymous and mundane forms and presents them for what they are (a flat plane, a marketed mirage) as well as what they promise to be (a moral retreat, a ideal future).
JULIA HAFT-CANDELL

1) Beacon 1, Porcelain, glaze, epoxy, silk, thread, wire, wood, steel, rebar, cement, gouache, ink, acrylic, 2012
2) Cactus, Porcelain, glaze, epoxy, silk, nylon, thread, wire, steel, gouache, 2012
3) Morning, Porcelain, glaze, epoxy, silk, thread, steel, ink. 2012
4) Calibration, porcelain, glaze, epoxy, silk, thread, rebar, acrylic, graphite, 2012 *(photo page 18)

Statement

Through my work I am echoing the characteristics of a complex system. Seemingly disparate events align to form a whole that is not predictable from the characteristics of each part. Each element of the system is unique, yet needs the others in order to function, as small changes in a part can drastically alter the integrity of the entire structure. By creating a vocabulary comprised of cells that are repetitively constructed, added, subtracted and rearranged, I can speak of the phenomenal interconnectedness of all things.

Using small components to build larger forms allows me more freedom to continually invent, reassess and make endless decisions about how the work takes shape. The sculpture is a physical record of its making, and a reflection of its own history. Breaking is an essential part of this process. Often I will break apart pieces to reconfigure them, creating collages using three dimensional parts. Once a piece is composed I will put time into mending and drawing on the surface of the piece, reclaiming and giving value to what is broken or distressed. Ultimately the goal is to form a composition that most effectively speaks to the ambiguity of perception and the complexity of being.

BENJAMIN DEMOTT

5) “Radiator”, Porcelain, glaze, paint, glue, tape, pencil, paper, Sculpey, cardboard, styrofoam cup, plastic bag, wire, eyehook, dimensions variable, 2012 *(photo page 19)
6) “Trial Screen”, Radiator, porcelain, paper, glue, tape, wood, paint, stickers, bracket, Dimensions Variable, 2012 *(photo page 17)

Statement

Madcap desire, and a longing to crystallize a playful perspective amidst conditions of uncertainty, inspire my dialog with material. Underscoring impermanence, the contingent situational gestures configured through my practice challenge the duration and consequence of their order. Fragile, thread thin ceramic extrusions are teniously bound to one another by the use of tweezers, glues, props and a fisherman’s fly-tying vice. Psychologically compulsive, and meditatively pursued ceramic line, zigs, and zags, splintering into a complex network where familiarity of scale slips from that of the watchmaker to the astronomer. Accumulatively fashioned into handcraft geometries, sinuous three-dimensional line drawings form improvised fragments reconfigurable in spontaneous arrangement. Interspersed within these precarious structures are decorative debris and corporeal citations. Skins of paint, a wad of chewing gum, a torn corner of supermarket receipt, etc. demarcate space, hover and sag in the shifting operations of scale and composition. I consider these elements a foil and springboard for engaging in a cognitive relationship to the body and the perceptual parameters that govern it. Exploring the discrete workspace of the miniaturist and model maker afford the ripe conditions for a daydream. Gaston Bachelard poetically refers to the phenomena of such musing as “intimate immensity” where imagination challenges and expands the possibilities of perception. Allowing the mind to wander in such a non-objective, un-tethered reverie allows for new questions, revelations, and absurdist levity to surface where it wasn’t before. I aim to create a space for such possibilities.
HOPE ROVELTO

1) Political party cups, 2012
2) 2012 presidential party cups pyramid set, 10 cups, 2012 *(photo page 12)
3) Pill bottle wall piece, 2012 *(photo page 13)
4) USA puzzles maps, 2012
5) School chairs with USA map, 2012 *(photo page 11)
6) School chair in the corner, 2012

Statement
My work involves contemporary issues in my life as well as those in the world around me. The individual and social topics I choose to depict are global issues that not only serve as a method in which to deal with my own frustrations with my past, present and future, but also serve as a way for viewers to think about frustrations in their own experience.

I am influenced by American culture, current media and politics, and what I view as the degradation of the human experience through social and environmental poisons which plague our world. I feel that it is my job as an artist to not only explore these ideas but also present them, provoking an awareness response.

Because I believe that art reflects the world in which it exists, politics and art often intersect. As we approach the 2012 presidential election, I want to create a show that depicts the ever-growing tension in our intense political climate.
PETER GOURFAIN

1) Nec Spec, linoprint, 1996
2) Block with Hook, wood and metal, 1995 *(photo page 41)
3) My Father Said ... , linoprint, Artist Proof, 1992
4) No Regrets, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1992
5) Black & Red, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1993
6) MJRM, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1993
7) Swift's Epitaph, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1993
8) Her Eys Thu He, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1993
9) NoHo Pecan, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1993
10) Original Lino Block for NoHo Pecan
11) The Man Who Played 2 Trumpets at Once, linoprint, Artist Proof
12) Drawing, cardboard, ballpoint pen, magic marker, 2009
13) Drawing, cardboard, ballpoint pen, magic marker, 2008
14) Drawing, cardboard, ballpoint pen, magic marker, 2007
15) Drawing, paper, ballpoint pen, magic marker, 2008
16) Finnegans Wake, linoprint, Artist Proof, 1990
17) Cree Prophecy, wood dolly, 2001
18) War is not the answer, wood block print on newspaper
19) New Orleans, wood block print on newspaper, 2005
20) Open and Shut, Triptych, cardboard, 1995
21) Manoprint, cardboard, 1995
22) Manoprint, cardboard, 1995
23) In the Dog Biscuit Factory, cardboard, 1995
24) California Lim, ceramic, 1998
25) Ave Atque Frater, bronze, 1997
26) Rhino, bronze
27) Pierce Penniless, Supplication to the Devil, ceramic, 2009
28) African Vessel, bronze, 2000
29) African Mortar, wood, 2005
30) She writes her memoir, ceramic and chair, 2008 *(photo page 42)
31) Anne Moody, ceramic, 2011 *(photo page 43) top
32) Seated Man, ceramic, 2011 *(photo page 43) right
33) Jack Wilton, The Unfortunate Traveler, ceramic, 2012 *(photo page 43) Left
34) Raftery, ceramic, 2007
35) Man with a raised fist, driftwood, 2006
36) Deer, wood plane, 2007
37) Loon, wood plane, 1995
38) Evolution, carpenter's joiner, 2011
39) Orso, carpenter's joiner, 2005
40) Otter, wood plane, 2005
41) Caribou, carpenter's joiner, 2008
42) Otter, silver
43) African Whistle, silver
44) African Whistle, silver
45) Belt Buckle, silver

“I learned three things in Zurich during the war. I wrote them down. Firstly, you’re either a revolutionary or you’re not; and if you’re not you might as well be an artist as anything else. Secondly, if you can’t be an artist, you might as well be a revolutionay. ... I forget the third thing.” — Tom Stoppard
"My voice changes when I speak your language"
1) Drama Queen, Glazed ceramic and raw clay, 2012
2) Continental Shift, Glazed ceramic and raw clay, 2012
3) My voice changes when I speak your language, Glazed ceramic, raw clay, painted wood, 2012
4) Ancestral Rift, Glazed ceramic and raw clay, 2012
5) Manifest Hostility, Glazed ceramic, mixed media, 2012 *(photo page 24)
7) Opposite Poles, Glazed ceramic, lally columns, mixed media, 2012

Statement
My voice changes when I speak your language invites an encounter with cultural and familial ghosts. I embroider raw clay through objects pulled and stretched into brittle lattices. Hollow volumes are pierced through with telescoping tension poles. Ceramic things (found and repurposed) indicate the lives of people who owned and handled them in the past. Forms lean in, draw upwards, flatten against the ceiling, press along the floor. This architecture is unreliable – walls angle away, the floor rises up. Stories from my ancestral Batak Indonesian past cluster and overlap with the experiences of an immigrant moving between cultures.

3 Ibid., pp. 95–96.