North American Ceramic Sculpture Now

Review by Adam Welch

Organised by independent curator and art critic Matthew Kangas, the North American Ceramic Sculpture Now Exhibition, made its US debut at the Hand Workshop Art Centre (HWAC) in Richmond, Virginia. This exhibition surveys a small but important representation of artists currently engaged in ceramic-based studio practice in the US and Canada. The exhibition has undergone some substitutions and additions under the direction of Ashley Kistler, curator for the HWAC. As one of 10 exhibitions, this was curated for the 2nd World Ceramic Biennale at the Icheon World Ceramic Centre in Korea, in 2003. Because this exhibition cannot and does not contain examples encompassing the entirety of ceramic sculptural practice, a critique of the art will double as a critique of Kangas' curatorial selection.

What has changed in the past two decades to warrant a re-consideration of ceramics in relationship to the art world? This issue, presumably of little significance to the art world, has been an issue Kangas has sought to articulate in his ceramic criticism. The 14 artists that are showcased represent, for Kangas, those who have transcended the ceramics/fine art dichotomy and entered the fine arts arena. It is instructive to examine what this accomplishes and what the status of sculpture means for these artists or the medium.

We are witnessing a paradigm shift in the art world. This phenomenon, ushered in around the institutional conception of postmodernity, is expected to bring a new definition of art. Modernists perceive the shift as a decline of the aesthetic, among other things, expunging the precedent of the art object—in a sense, 'cleaning' traditional notions and values of art. Post-modernism is not solely culpable for the current state of art; nonetheless, it receives the blame for heralding the paradigm shift.

Kangas perceives the shift to be more local in ceramics, saying: "Since the death of Peter Voulkos in 2002, an era has come to an end: the Age of Voulkos."
Kangas claims the current sculptural practice is beyond Voulkos; “Art of the Now” takes ceramic sculpture to a different place, an area where younger and older artists take Voulkos’ breakthrough to freedom as a given.” Kangas questions Voulkos’ legacy as the pantheon in ceramics, though he perpetuates the legacy by using Voulkos in his dialectics. In the catalogue essay, Kangas mentions Voulkos no less than 18 times.

If we look at the contemporary scene, we become aware of the clash between doctrines and reality. Theory proclaimed in art journals and through lectures presented at conferences are, in effect, at odds with reality. The reality is the opposite of the doctrine that art is closing in on our understanding of the human condition as it (art) navigates further into the ‘reality’ of the world. In truth, it is only attenuating our concept of art, formerly evaluated by how well it instilled in the viewer a state of contemplation, a sense of beauty, or an alternate view of the world. The work of Charles Krafft critically navigates these criticisms, ultimately privileging content over form.

Krafft is a political artist. Fragment Grenades are derivative of porcelain painting that grounds his work in ceramic tradition. Overly decorative, they bring to mind the universal fascination of the pageantry and regiment of military regalia. Krafft’s political content comes across as obvious precluding a sustained interest in the objects, which, for so important an issue, is disappointing. Although reminiscent of Dada and Futurism, Krafft’s irony makes the work more critical and engaging in contemporary discourse. Krafft has made beautiful what ultimately is ugly.

Another reality is that the institutions have become the intellectual centres. Of the 14 artists presented in this exhibition, almost all are faculty at universities or received high degrees from the nation’s premiere art schools, which, for better or worse, is a testament to the importance institutions play in the art world. Artists are drawn to these centres which have, in turn, increased the demand on the university. The implication for the artist is work that is more academic, less experimental, and less sincere development of human concern, more closely resembling rote imitation of traditional art. However, there are always exceptions. Krafft is one.

The practice of making art that resembles other art – art through association – bypasses the critical apparatus. This is a bi-product of the Abstract Expressionist era, whose proponents in the 1950s created art that had meaning, which is more than can be said for some of their contemporary counterparts that lack criticality and reproduce experiences incompatible in a contemporary context. The same holds true for the ceramic sculptors who produce work lacking criticality, precluding their existence in the art world, and associating them with that discourse. This is not always the case, Jim Leedy and Annabeth Rosen, though 27 years separate them in age, are in conversation with modernist notions of materiality. Leedy lived through Abstract Expressionism and Rosen is the beneficiary.

Kangas has gone to considerable lengths to ensure Leedy attains his proper place in the annals of ceramic history. Including his work in this exhibition begs the question of intentionality. Perhaps it is more a gesture to a hero than a genuine conviction for Leedy as a model of what is contemporary sculpture now. Leedy’s Tree Vessel is wood-fired – the obvious process gives it ‘chance’ and ability to record the process – stands as a monument that documents its own making in a truly expressionist work.

Rosen emerges from the era of Abstract Expressionism and is a response to that movement. Her work is a beacon for those practitioners who continue to seek value in the medium for its expressive and material characteristics. Rosen’s work lacks the characteristic machismo considered the paradigm of that genre. Despite Rosen’s company, whose baggage she carries well, Cinctus I is above all else a visually striking piece. Cinctus I has a subtle, exquisite intimacy that removes it from the banality of the everyday object, elevating it as an aesthetic object, an object for contemplation. Though the aesthetic experience by some standards is regarded as out-of-date, Rosen transcends temporality and makes it perpetually now.

The crisis in the ceramic arts was in part created in
the wake of 1950s ceramic sculpture. Voulkos himself bemoaned that the clay revolutionaries of the 1950s had opened the door and that no one was going through. Kangas calls it: “American ceramic sculpture in crisis” and has noted “that the retirements and deaths of senior university ceramics professors combined with an aggressive return to art pottery in the galleries... imperilled the advances of ceramic sculptors.”

Crisis, as a philosophical diagnosis of art, is relatively new within ceramic criticism. The 20th century brought about an understanding of ‘crisis’ known as ‘Crisis Theory.’ This maintains that through crises, systems make significant self-advancement. Crisis discourse is rooted in the Marxist notion that at some point in a system’s life, it reaches a stage where it experiences an internal contradiction, leading to a revolt of traditional modes of understanding.

This occurs when the movement’s work transforms from the avant-garde to the canon. A more subversive reaction comes from the shadow cast by leading art practice. The crisis in ceramics is protracted because the practice that formed in the shadows shared the ideology casting the shadow, creating a kind of quiescence. Revolutionary change or social alterations may only be distinguished from one another through rigorous examination. Artists Phillip Guston and Robert Arneson fall within this context. These artists worked in the wake of the Abstract Expressionist canon. Allan Rosenbaum is an artist who continues in the socio-political path these pioneers blazed. Rosenbaum is the culmination of the social and political content of Arneson paired with the nuts and bolts existentialism characteristic of Guston’s later work. Rosenbaum utilises humour and animated imagery as a devise to articulate his metaphoric agenda.

_Tale_ is a three-dimensional collage of sociological artifacts. A couch, flashlight, toaster oven, book, city-scape – these symbols represent our relationship to the domestic. Rosenbaum’s work is a conversation about the interactions we have with these manufactured objects – a perceived sense of security, how we identify the self. In a perfect marriage of scale and form, Rosenbaum unites concept with the visual representation of the materiality that is culture. _Tale_ presents humanity as a series of tangible relationships and experiences that ultimately defines the self.

In addition to Rosenbaum, Doug Jeck, Lee Stollar, and Akio Takamori are exploring the figure. Jeck uses the figure to visually realise psychological conditions. Dismantling the body becomes a metaphor for deconstructing the psyche. _Forced Study_ – the piece displayed in Korea – contains little quality of expression or aesthetic and lacks what we expect from so prominent a sculptor. Fortunately, Kistler added two busts. In _Self Portrait as Twins_ Jeck has created a collage on ceramic heads, whose overall gestalt is frightening, yet strangely compelling. These _Twins_ are the only
works that use another medium to so delicate and beautiful an effect.

Stolar has been working with the figure for years and her sculptures appear as a documentary of the life-world. Stolar makes the most exquisite relief sculptures and the three works exhibited here are no exception. The subtlety and delicate perfection of her work depicts everyday life infused with passion and eroticism, making the mundane a celebration of humanity.

Takamori’s works graft together a technical mastery with material where form and content are one. Having left the vessel in pursuit of the figure, Takamori reaches a more critical platform that elevates the critical potential of this work. General and Emperor is an inquiry into identity and cultural constructions. Husband and Wife Tea Set is a psychologically intriguing piece, two figures—one man, one woman—kneeling together in ceremony. In their hands are tea bowls fashioned in the likeness of Takamori’s own pots, in the Platonic sense, four times removed. Takamori, in a conceptual conceit, without making a self-portrait, places himself as the centre in this work about identity.

The most prominent, yet least philosophically investigated practice in contemporary ceramics is that of the installation. Though installations have been utilised for some time, it has yet to receive the critical acclaim its persistence demands. However, installation has been an important practice for many years in the art world, to the extent that its introduction in ceramics appears as a hand-me-down. Sadashi Inuzuka and Jennifer Lapham are exemplary installation artists. Their work shows how installation art has, and to some extent has yet, to fully realise its importance within ceramic discourse.

Lapham’s installation Migration was made specifically for this venue. Migration is an installation of numerous birds in a repeated pattern painted the same colour as the wall, an act to conceal them from sight. The pattern repeats like wallpaper. The work has obvious connotations toward issues of ecology and can be interpreted as a concern for animal rights and humanity’s destruction of nature. Lapham privileges the potency of the kitsch object, unapologetically indulging in its baseness.

Inuzuka’s works are aesthetic objects and are intriguing in their beauty. However, the two installations included in this exhibition lack the critical presence of his other works. As individual objects, though ambiguous, they are precious and perfectly articulated. Sensuous and intricate, they read best as individual objects exhibited together, precluding them from being read as an installation. Nancy Blum’s piece Lotus Pond is a depiction of flowers. The scale makes its metaphorical quality potent. Displayed floating on a blue wall, the flowers bring to mind a religious experience and references female anatomy; nonetheless, they are a glimpse of hope and beauty in an era seemingly devoid of possibility.

Leopold Foulem and Michael Lucero draw attention to their intellectual interests. Foulem and Lucero are no strangers to the ceramics world and are important contributors to the contemporary ceramic dialogue.

Foulem is the king of kitsch, displaying Santa Claus as an artefact, in the likeness of different cultures. The American likeness is a coin bank, the Peruvian a stirrup vessel and the Hindu an erotic statue. These works critique Westernisation and cultural constructions, manifested in a kitsch object. However, the criticism can be lost, relinquishing its critical potency when it becomes the stereotype it seeks to critique.

Lucero presents us with an enormous representation of an ordinary garden statue. Covered in a thin maze of coloured yarn, the sculpture is a surface for drawing, privileging that to form. This piece is a departure from Lucero’s more surreal beginnings; it can be read as a critique of ceramic preconceptions and fears of material autonomy. These works bring to mind an interesting philosophical problem that presented itself in the metaphysics of Heidegger and the negative dialectics of Adorno brought under critical inquiry by Habermas. That is, the totalising critique of a subject gets caught in a contradiction when it attempts self-criticism utilising the tools it attempts to critique. Ceramics that attempts to criticise its own practice utilising that practice is caught in this type of contradiction.

If Lucero is considered critical of ceramic processes as such, then Juan Granados and Jeffry Mitchell are the antithesis. Granados and Mitchell hold an ambiguous place in the exhibition. Their work reflects nostalgic ceramic practice, an interest in clay
because it is clay, not a removal from expressionist urgency or contempt for that practice. In the end, it comes off as ceramics. Regardless of contemporary trends, this practice is prevalent in ceramic discourse; therefore, I suspect Kangas feels it merits an appearance in the exhibition.

Mitchell's work borders on kitsch, though ultimately does not revel in the mundane. Some Aspects of Landscape contains numerous representations of animals in baroque flare bringing to mind Octavio Paz's, The Monkey Grammarian. Granados raises issues of health and happiness in a time of environmental turmoil though the work's strength is in its formal rather than conceptual qualities. These organic abstractions use the monochromatic to conceal deliracy of form while simultaneously begging further investigation.

Gadamer once wrote, "Through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalise it away." We are told that art has realised its philosophic identity, but has the artist or the public realised this? As the concept of art changes, it is arguably a reflection of societal changes. If, as Gadamer argues, art is important because it tells us a truth about existence, then we have, in a sense, an understanding of the concept of art. This definition is not limited to paint on a canvas or a fired ceramic sculpture, but it extends that responsibility further, to the artist.

We are certainly witness to a paradigm shift, whether it was brought on by the most recent predominating doctrine or not makes no difference. What is important is being cognisant of the times, aware of human needs and wants, and how such needs relate to human nature. The essence of ceramic art presupposes clay will be a vehicle for expressing abstract ideas of form and representations of the artist's subjective experiences of truth — one person's opinion about the human condition. The viewer is the beneficiary of the artist's truth-claim: "Learning something new about the world, and about ourselves as beings in the world, changes the content of our self-understanding." A concern not merely for the sculptor but to the human experience of the world.

This exhibition has been the catalyst for what is a long overdue issue within ceramic discourse. It calls attention to the fact that it is time ceramics engages in a more critical and ultimately more responsible dialogue surrounding its contemporary sculptural practice. Throughout the 1980s, ceramic journals in general and Matthew Kangas specifically, dealt with the issue of ceramic theory and ceramic artists' lack of prestige within the art world. While this issue remains debatable, it has taught us that ceramics is only as serious as its practitioners and those dedicated to mediating between the work of art and the public.

Kangas, Kistler and these 14 artists come forward in a new critical light and represent a small but pivotal sampling of the contemporary and the future of ceramic sculpture.

REFERENCES:
2. Ibid. 19.
3. For an insightful argument on the contemporary notion of beauty, see Arthur C. Danto, The Abuse of Beauty.
4. Whether this was seen as an artistic practice is certainly up for debate.
6. Kangas attacks Garth Clark, on more than one occasion, for his hand in hindering ceramics attempts at attaining which it most seeks. However, at least five have shown and three of the 14 artists are represented by Clark.
7. Brown, Glen. "Multiplicity, Ambivalence & Ceramic Installation Art" Ceramics: Art and Perception No. 54, 2003, 4-8. Brown contends that the practice of ceramic-based installation is connected with the vessel; it is a practice that sculptural practitioners have just begun to explore.

Adam Welch is an artist and writer. Photos by David Stover, courtesy of Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond, VA, USA.