

■ reviews

CLAREMONT, CA

"Beyond the Object: The 72nd Scripps Ceramic Annual" at Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College

If you don't follow ceramics, you've probably never seen the Scripps Ceramic Annual. But to a fan, it's an engaging showcase, like an idiosyncratic ceramics version of an NBA All-Star Game: you get to watch known and less-known figures strut their stuff, as unlikely teammates playing off each other. However, the Annual is not about consensus, instead soliciting distinct subjective visions, from a roster of guest curators, while finding new angles into the practice of this ever-evolving medium. This year's version (through April 3), curated by Susan Beiner, associate professor of the Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts in Tempe, Arizona, explored the dialogue between three-dimensional objecthood and two-dimensional drawing. While that might seem to suggest traditional terrain, the selection was in fact bracingly contemporary, offering a gamut of approaches demonstrating not only ceramics' brazen promiscuity with other art forms, but also with new forms of technology and modes of expressing visual information. If one were to judge the show merely on the diversity of its aesthetic languages, on a scale of 1 to 10 it would probably rate an 11. Still, it felt like an anxious exhibition, in a savvy way: pushing boundaries physically, while also edging into jittery psychological territory. Veering from minuscule to monumental, from fragmentary to frenetic, it seemed aptly reflective of the seductive-yet-disjointed post-post-modern landscape in which we all uneasily reside.

The show's premise is particularly emphatic for those artists whose drawing and ceramic styles seem superficially at odds, like Andrew Casto (of Manhattan, Kansas). Casto's ceramic works merge organic and geometric forms to suggest fibrous coral stems or shards of mineral crystals, gilded with blobby golden nuggets, like cysts, and lush patches of sky blue or bubble-gum pink; his two-dimensional works, by contrast, are stark black smears of roofing tar and other materials on plywood, as if he were channeling both Adrian Saxe and Richard Serra, as his own private Jekyll and Hyde. But seen together, they reveal their raw, almost corrosive texture and reflective distressed state. Conversely, for Lauren Gallaspy (of Helena, Montana), both



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sculptures and drawings clearly flow from the same hand and mind. Her misshapen, headlike forms, adorned with delicate imagery and topped with gloppy shreds, evoke a similar unnerving mood as her allegorical, highly sculptural ink-on-vellum drawings. Both exude a palpable air of melancholy and mortality, drawing you into their mysterious narratives like dark, cryptic storybooks. LA-based Oona Gardner's ceramic wall units flirt with two-dimensional relief even as they mutate into found object medleys, while her drawings, derived from a similar fascination with abstraction (and, no doubt, 1970s design), mutate inward in swirling vivid colors. Meanwhile, LA artist Julia Haft-Candell (who curated last year's Ceramic Annual and is profiled in this issue) seems to meld the act of drawing and ceramic sculpture in her fragmentary, knot-like, wall-mounted work, which has been carved out to reveal its underglaze in a jauntily austere black-and-white grid pattern. Staking out the surface between two and three dimensions, it calls to mind an imperfect puzzle of a girl's bow, or a snake, or a pretzel (which is, in fact, its name).

Some of the most striking works flaunt the medium's adaptivity through the use of new technologies. The contributions by Eugene, Oregon artist Brian Gillis seem especially unlikely. His architectonic drawing of a "pirate radio antenna" of blue pencil and gold leaf on vellum is echoed by a 3D version of said antenna, mounted high up on the wall in geometric, diagonal mock-functionality. His biggest statement is his smallest: a miniature (white) portrait bust of abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, made of "nanomilled ceramic," standing all of .1875 inches tall. Social commentary aside, they're the sort of works that cause one to exclaim: "Ceramics can do *that*!?" Kingston, New York-based artist Bryan Czibesz likewise explicitly embraces technology, playing off his mediums' hand-made expectations via effigies of monumental columns and statues made of hand-built and 3D printed porcelain, that look like molded vermicelli. His scrawly 78-inch long drawing of hand-and-CNC-drawn primary colored ink on acetate is oddly unsettling: where does the hand end and the machine begin? By contrast, Amanda Small (of Toronto, Ontario) makes works that clearly reference science and technology while clinging to their crafted tactility, whether through spindly volumetric forms or organic pigmented abstractions set beneath illuminated domes. They feel like private cosmologies or biology displays, co-opting the rigid lexicon of science toward poetic effect.

Two of the more dramatic, and wryly subversive, participants also seem to draw from the placid terrain of still life, and the vessel. Del Harrow (Fort Collins, Colorado) works in a lexicon that neatly blends modularity and consumerism. His installation includes an entrance wall, complete with faux potted plant, and a tabletop gathering of egg-like spheres and vessels, as one wormlike cousin rises in phallic alertness on the floor nearby. At its center he sets a carved wooden column resembling a raised middle finger. Hailing from Deer Isle, Maine, Paul Sacaridiz creates colorful 3D armatures with odd groupings of cryptic vessels or linear starbursts and twisty little forms that evoke astrophysics diagrams assembled via Home Depot and De Stijl, integrating ceramics with such humdrum materials as plywood, plaster, powder-coated aluminum, and household clamps. Set out on their scaffolds, they suggest nifty DIY displays from some garage museum, mapped out fragments of Big Ideas that are only hinted at: a new genre of Atomic Still Life.

In all these works, the use of ceramic objects or materials as constituent parts of larger implied systems positions ceramics, not as a closed world with its own inbred set of traditions, but as a uniquely pliant, ductile element that can play a vital role a wide variety of formal interactions, amidst a spectrum of hybrid forms and practices. It is that very open-endedness, perhaps, that makes this eternally evolving medium so adaptable, and so appealing.

—GEORGE MELROD